

Last week I shared my New Year's resolutions with you, the third one being to present Jesus with a precious gift, just as the Magi did in our gospel reading, and I ended by challenging you to do the same.

The gift I had in mind was revealed in the carol we sang immediately after my talk - 'In the bleak mid-winter'. The gift of our heart. 500 years ago, Martin Luther famously linked faith and heart together when he said that faith is found under the left nipple. His biology might be a little vague, but he was spot on as far as heart and faith are concerned.

The Dictionary of Contemporary English defines 'giving one's heart' as 'starting to love someone very much'. And yes, it is. But in terms of our faith journey, it entails so much more. It involves commitment in terms of time and energy to initially sustain then deepen our faith through all our life seasons. It encompasses seeking God's help through the challenging decisions to be made and overcoming distractions and difficulties along the way. Such transformation is God's gift to us, but it requires perseverance on our part.

There's an old Chinese proverb which says, "to get through the hardest journey we need take only one step at a time, but we must keep on stepping". We must persevere. And sometimes taking those steps means we will make ourselves vulnerable and open to new discoveries not only about ourselves but about others too. But above all else, it takes determination and perseverance so that eventually instead of thinking about what to say or do, our words and actions are instinctively informed.

Friday was Epiphany, the celebration of the Magi reaching their journey's end and discovering the infant Jesus.

At school, for my A Level English I studied R C Sheriff's play *Journey's End*. Set in a frontline dugout shortly before the end of the first world war, it is the story of a group of British officers struggling with their personal fears, doubts, and collective uncertainty of what would happen next.

I'm sure that Magi would have experienced similar fear, doubt and uncertainty at some point in their journey but despite this they saw things through to their journey's end. They persevered, and that is key to travelling our own faith journey.

My faith journey began a long time ago with a personal epiphany regarding the Christmas story, when I realised that if you take Christ out of Christmas, then all you're left with is M & S. Or to put it the other way round, if you take M & S out then all you are left with is Christ and the true meaning of Christmas is revealed just as it was to the Magi.

But the truth of the matter is that much of the story regarding the Magi is not contained in the gospel narrative; it has been expanded upon through tradition and folklore. For example, Matthew does not say how many Magi visited Jesus and it is unlikely that there were just three as their entourage would need to have included many servants to ensure their personal comfort and to care for their camels or horses as well as guards to provide protection against robber bands which commonly roamed the territories and countries they would have travelled through.

However, the fact that Matthew names three gifts contributes to the tradition that there were three Magi, each bearing a gift. Similarly, tradition has speculated that the nature of the gifts was significant: Gold was given as a gift symbolising Jesus's kingship on earth. Frankincense symbolised his deity because it was the only incense allowed to be used on the temple altar and Myrrh, a rare and expensive spice used in embalming, symbolised his death to come.

But in my personal epiphany I discovered only two gifts to offer, and they are quite different. As I've already suggested, the most precious gift I can offer Jesus is not gold, but my heart. Simultaneously, I can also acknowledge Christ's divinity by offering the gift of persistent prayer and worship.

As for the third gift. Well, I see that as Christ's gift to me. It is Christ's Easter suffering and sacrifice which enables me to be in the position to offer my gifts, poor as I am, to quote from the carol. And in this respect, I can take my lead from the Magi because the very first thing they do is fall down and worship Jesus. It is only after they have worshipped Jesus that they offer their gifts.

And after the trials and tribulations of their journey, surely, they must have experienced something extraordinary when they arrived at the home of Mary and Joseph and finally meet Jesus. I cannot but think that their meeting with Jesus would have been thrilling, exciting and amazing in equal measure so that it made all their struggles through the tough times worthwhile.

That's how, so often, it is with Jesus, certainly that's what I experienced in my personal epiphany. But maybe with with one significant difference. My encounter with Jesus was not just a one-off like the Magi but has been ongoing right through to this very day.

Every day I make the choice to spend time with Jesus, to reflect on him, to think about who I am and what my purpose and future is. How can I serve him best? How best can I focus on his ways, even if it is only moments here and there? In other words, I prioritise Jesus in the busyness of my daily life.

That's what giving your heart to Jesus means; that's what my New Year resolution is all about. If you'd like to join me on that journey – well, I'd be delighted and thrilled.

**Revd. Terry Ward Hall, 8 Jan 2023**