

This is a trick question, so be on your toes. How many kings came to worship Jesus in Bethlehem? It's a trick question because the story doesn't talk about kings at all; it talks about magi, or as our translation calls them, "astrologers". Why then do we have a song called "We Three Kings"? It's because of today's responsorial psalm, which predicts a day when God would become so famous that kings from the East would come worship him. The Church saw the fulfillment of that prophecy in the birth of Jesus, and simply called the magi kings.

Now, even if you change my question to "How many magi came to worship Jesus in Bethlehem," the correct answer is, "We don't know." The Gospel doesn't tell us how many there were, it only says there were three gifts, and the traditional presumption is that there was one person carrying each. But, to be precise, we don't know how many magi there were.

Since the Scriptures don't tell us very much, our tradition has expanded the story of the magi. We gave them names: Melchior was the one who brought gold, Caspar who brought frankincense, and Balthasar who brought myrrh.

The Church also reflected on the meaning of the gifts. Since gold is the most precious metal, it was reserved for royalty. Melchior's gift, then, signified that Christ is King. Incense was burned in the temple to give a visual sign of prayers lifted up to God. Caspar's gift of frankincense acknowledged that Jesus is God. Myrrh is the strangest of the gifts. It was a spice used for burial. When Balthasar gave Jesus myrrh, it was like giving a newborn infant its own flask of embalming fluid. Myrrh was a sign that Jesus is human, a mortal, he will die. Traditionally the Church recognizes in the three gifts that Jesus is both God and human, and that He is our King.

Now it is our turn. As the star guided the magi, so Christmas has led us to our redeemer. We come into the presence of Christ this Epiphany Sunday. Instead of gold, frankincense, and myrrh we bring bread and wine, to be transformed into the greatest gift of all, and we bring another gift, we bring ourselves.

Like Caspar, we bring a gift to Jesus who is God. Can we turn away from our false gods? The desire for riches, selfishness? Then let us offer to Jesus the frankincense of hearts turned to God alone.

Like Balthasar, we bring a gift to Jesus who is human. Can we truly love humanity? The homeless, beggars, those who have disappointed us? Then let us offer to Jesus the myrrh of self-denial, charity for others.

Like Melchior, we bring a gift to Jesus who is King. Can we be loyal to the one who is royal? Through prayer, obedience, and humility? Then let us offer to Jesus the gold of our thoughts, words, and actions, for Jesus is our King.