

The People's Bible



“... they presented unto him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh”

Matthew 2.11

Questions: Can you remember where in the overall narrative of the Christmas story that this phrase comes?

What makes something a gift?

Do you know what frankincense and myrrh actually are?

Look at the pictures.



Questions: Which one(s), for you, best illustrate the phrase, ‘and they offered unto him gifts’?

Is there a picture that is not here that would illustrate the saying better?

Read Matthew 2.1-12, both in the King James and in another translation.

Questions: What do you like about the reading?

Is there anything you don't like?

What don't you understand?

Is there anything you wish was put differently or wasn't there? Why?

Do you prefer the King James version or the modern one you are using?

Giving gifts at Christmas has a long history and sometimes this tradition is traced back to this story of the magi offering gifts to the infant Christ. The story of the visit of the magi, and their gifts, is distinctive to Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. What is interesting to notice is that according to Matthew, while there are three gifts, the Bible doesn't record how many mysterious visitors there were.

The gifts that Jesus is recorded as receiving are symbolic of his life and ministry. We remember some of this symbolism in the well-known carol 'We three kings of orient are'. Gold represents Jesus' kingship. Frankincense was used in worship in the Temple so recognises Jesus' divinity. Myrrh was used to anoint the remains of the dead so points to Jesus' death.

The gifts that we give and receive at Christmas probably don't carry the same symbolism as the gold, frankincense and myrrh that the magi offered to Jesus. When we broaden our understanding of what constitutes a gift we might detect more nuance and connotation.

Questions: Do you enjoy receiving gifts? What is the best gift you've ever received?

Do you enjoy choosing gifts for loved ones? Is it hard or easy?

How does one go about choosing a gift for someone who has everything?

How important is the cost of a gift?

In these austere times, many people are having to cut back on their Christmas spending. Different people will have their own views, depending on their own circumstances, on how this might be done. What is becoming popular in some quarters are gifts that are low cost in financial terms but are higher cost in terms of time and effort.

Questions: If you were to make a Christmas list made up of items that cost no money, what might you include?

What gifts could you offer that cost nothing?

When we receive gifts, there is always the possibility that we will be given something that we don't actually want! When purchasing items in many high street shops, it is now common to be offered a gift receipt alongside the usual one that can be given to a gift's recipient so that they can return or exchange their present without initially knowing how much it cost.

Questions: What do you do with unwanted gifts?

Is it right to gently discourage people who you know will give you something you don't want?

If we broaden out our definition of gifts away from actual presents, we might think of talents we or others have or of suddenly discovering we have some spare time we weren't expecting. Sometimes, and usually with hindsight, people describe some surprising things as gifts, for example an accident or serious illness or being made redundant or the end of a relationship. Occasionally, gifts come wrapped in barbed wire.

Questions: Can you think of any of these broader gifts that you have experienced in your life?

What do you make of the possibility that an accident or illness or other traumatic event can be a gift?

How do you respond to the metaphor of 'gift wrapped in barbed wire'?