

FRANKINCENSE

Who is the greatest man who ever lived? I will give you a hint. He was given many wondrous titles: Prince of peace; King of kings, and Lord of lords; Savior. Though appearing as a man, after his death he was officially declared a god. I speak, of course, of Gaius Octavius – Caesar Augustus. In the early first century (as we count), nearly everybody knew that Octavius had earned these titles. He had brought peace and prosperity to the whole known world. Life wasn't perfect, but the Roman Empire was far-flung, and opportunity was far greater than it had ever been before. Who had brought such a miracle to the world? Octavius Caesar! No ethereal Savior was he. His legacy was written in temples, cities, armies, and ships from Briton to the Caspian Sea – from the entire north shore of Africa to the Syrian desert.

I quote: “He was bringer of peace and prosperity to the inhabited world.... The birthday of the god [Augustus, born on September 23, 63 B.C.] was the beginning of the GOOD NEWS [gospel] to the world on his account.”

Augustus reigned forty-four years. Jesus was somewhere around twenty years old when Augustus died (at age seventy-seven) and Tiberius Caesar took over in one of the smoothest transitions in history (14 B.C.). Augustus had engineered this also. Truly he was admirable: A great moral reformer. He had no interest in personal luxury. His domestic life was simple and homespun. His devotion to his wife, Livia Drusilla, remained constant. He restored temples and built new ones all over the Empire. And of course, a few years later, in the world of the early Christians, there were temples built in his honor in nearly every city of the Empire.

Why am I telling you this? This was the world in which Jesus died, and in which Paul preached, and into which the Christian church was born. I ponder that sometimes. A tiny group (at least tiny at first) of very unimpressive, essentially powerless people began saying here and there: “Folks, we have it wrong. Augustus is not the greatest man who ever lived. In fact, all those titles and greatness really belong to a Galilean carpenter that we crucified – without hardly noticing it – one spring day in an out-of-the-way corner of the Empire. But Jesus was and IS the true King – the rightful owner of our world, our worship, our adoration,

our allegiance. It is not Caesar Augustus who can save us. It is Jesus, the peasant from Galilee.”

Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?! Augustus had sixty Roman legions at his beck and call. No one anywhere would have dreamed of taking on his navy. He had more wealth and power than the world had ever seen before. They said he found Rome in brick, and left it in marble. Great cities across the known world were blessed because of him, and would have done anything to please him. When he died, the whole Empire went into deep and extended mourning. Who would compare a Galilean spinner of parables to the might and glory of the greatest Emperor the world had ever known? And who in their right mind would try to claim that Jesus *did more for people* than Augustus Caesar?

It has always been our dilemma, has it not? We try to measure success by the measurable. “If it seems to be working in the outer world at the moment, it must be right.” I even know some rich people who so worship money that they think money is what poor people need the most. (Not opportunity, or training, or jobs, or confidence, or respect, or faith, or love. Or, God forbid, a Savior.) Money will save them. And some church organizations are so far from their own faith that they agree with this.

So God keeps sending us Jesus. But more than a few of us say, “Thanks, but we would actually prefer the cash.” Hence, modern Christmas.

When a story gets loved well enough by enough people, it carries such power that everybody wants to tack on their own agenda. That way, they hope the power of the story will carry their agenda along with it. It’s kind of like being good friends with a very famous person. We hope a little of the aura will spill over onto us. So we name the three kings, and say they are from different races. Then we can turn Christmas into a story against racial prejudice. Or we make up “the other” wise man or do *Amahl and The Night Visitors*, so it can be a story about helping the poor. Or we try to change it from the miracle of Incarnation into a miracle of generosity. Or it’s about playing on your drum; or about jingle bells; or about a drunken reindeer who nevertheless leads us through the night, so it’s okay to get soused on Christmas Eve. Anything to distract us from Jesus – to distract us from the coming of the Savior.

Matthew loves Jesus the Christ with all his heart. He is not writing a computer manual, or a diary of events. He is writing a love-tribute to Jesus – to the One he names Savior, and Son of God, and the greatest person who ever lived. Chief rivals to these titles, in his world: Moses from the past, and the reputation of Caesar Augustus in the present. Most of you know the parallels with Moses: Pharaoh kills the babies; the flight into Egypt, that Jesus may come out of Egypt. Moses frees from Pharaoh’s bondage; Jesus frees from Satan’s far greater bondage. Moses leads us into the Promised Land; Jesus leads us into the Kingdom of God, a far greater “Promised Land,” which is forever. Jesus is the new Moses, and far greater than Moses. Clearly that is what Matthew’s Gospel proclaims from start to finish.

But Matthew also takes on Augustus Caesar – Prince of peace, King of kings, Lord of lords – who was proclaimed a god by the Roman Senate on September 19, 14 A.D. No coins were being minted with a likeness of Jesus on them, but the very heavens have proclaimed Him. That is the whole point of Matthew’s special star. “*We have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.*” (Matthew 2:2) The magi were in the East, and the star was in the West, of course. “Westward leading, still proceeding.” The magi were tracking a special star that “*went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.*” (Matthew 2:9) This is a first-century-A.D. story. If you think it is history instead of myth, you will try to make it match twenty-first-century reality. A star by any definition that you know, if it tried to behave this way, would blow the entire solar system into smithereens in a nanosecond – at least according to any of the laws of physics as we know them. Then we miss what Matthew’s star was trying to announce: that Jesus was great beyond imagination or duplication.

By the way, the special star was a stranger and more poignant miracle, in the first century A.D., than the part about the virgin. The ancient world knew lots of virgin births. (The Zoroastrian version was the best.) But the star claims power and uniqueness for this child beyond all other signs and portents. Sometimes I am called “Scrooge” because I keep trying to trade a false Christmas for the real one. The star as fact is silly. But the *meaning* of the star? That I believe with all my being. God forgive me, but I keep hoping that more and more people will come to believe its meaning as much as I do.

Anyway, the people told stories of the greatness of Augustus and what a propitious birth he had. To which Matthew replies: God created a special star just for Jesus' birth, so that no other earthly horoscope ever can or ever will be able to match it. Top that, Augustus lovers! What is Jesus' sign? Well, God made a new sky for His birth, and no known sign can describe or contain it. *That* is what Matthew is proclaiming.

So we come to the gifts. That is, we come to the part about our response. Matthew tells this story to proclaim who Jesus really is, and to tell us about the appropriate response for anybody who recognizes who He is.

Some of you have not been Christians for very long, and big words like "incarnation" don't seem friendly or helpful yet. "Incarnation" is *very* friendly. You have heard of *chile con carne*? Yes, of course: chili with meat. See? "Incarnation" is simple: God comes in the meat – in human flesh – in Jesus of Nazareth.

What are we trying to understand this Advent season? You don't have to agree with anything I tell you; this is a Congregational church. I just like it to be clear. It causes a lot more trouble that way; it also has more of a chance to change and redeem us.

Let's assume, for the moment, that Christmas is for Christians – for those who *already* believe. Nobody has ever believed in the Christian Faith because of Christmas. We believe because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and because of the encounters we still have with His Holy Spirit. Christmas celebrates what we *already* believe. For those who do not believe, Christmas is a secular holiday with no connection to the Christian Path or WAY. Is that not obvious wherever you look around you?

Christmas is SYMBOL AND CELEBRATION. Go with the symbols ... go with the meaning ... sing your heart out ... give gifts with great love ... ponder the mystery ... let the Christ into your heart more deeply and more truly than ever before.

But you cannot play with SYMBOL AND FACT at the same time. Christmas is SYMBOL AND CELEBRATION. Enjoy it! Glory in the symbols. Rejoice in that which points to what Jesus means to us. Christmas is poetry, not math. It is truth, not science. By the way, science does not seek truth; it seeks facts. And a million facts can never

add up to a single truth. The fact is that Jesus was born and did live in this world for about thirty years. Lots of people know that fact, yet it carries no meaning for them. You want some Christmas facts? I have lots of them. Here are a few:

The first celebration of Christmas on December 25th was in Rome in the year 325 A.D. That means the first eight or nine generations of Christians survived just fine without Christmas. They also formed the church and converted the Roman Empire without Christmas. Christmas is not essential to Christendom in any way. It is symbol and celebration. It is after the fact.

By the way, Eastern Orthodox Christians still celebrate Christmas on January 9th, and Armenians celebrate on January 19th. Does that sound like precision? Matthew thinks Jesus was born in 4 B.C. or earlier. (Herod died in 4 B.C.) Luke thinks Jesus was born in 6 A.D. or after. (Quirinius became Governor of Syria in 6 A.D.) We know all about the factual details of Jesus' birth, yet we cannot even get within ten years of when He was born? (How old are you? "I don't know, somewhere between thirty and forty. Nobody paid any attention at the time.")

However, if we have shifted from fact to full celebration, then the symbols matter. That is, the images and the stories and the way we celebrate are all supposed to reflect the meaning of what we celebrate. Just because we move from fact to symbol doesn't mean we get careless – quite the reverse. If you give a gift that has no meaning, you ruin the message. You went back to fact. The fact is, there are thirty-five people on my Christmas list, and I gotta get 'em all something. A book for this name, a shirt for that name, and so on. "There – thirty-five presents for thirty-five people and I'm finished. Whee!" What is the celebration? "I did my duty, so nobody can fault me"? That's terrific. Jesus would be so proud. Well, it *is* part of our kind of Christmas, just not the meaning part.

So some of us pay more attention than ever to the stories and symbols. Is poetry less thoughtful or more thoughtful than prose? If the story says three gifts and we think it says three kings, we are going to miss the meaning of the story. So we are thoughtful and alert. That is part of the fun of the celebration. If Luke tells about a Christmas where the Great Prince of the Universe is born and nobody knows it, is there not truth to that? The angel choirs are turning cartwheels and singing until the heavens ring, but earth is oblivious. And the angels

tell only a few shepherds – only the humblest folk they can find. Nobody else is really very interested anyway. Yes, it is still that way. Hell, they couldn't even find a place to stop and give birth, except out in the barn behind the inn – a manger, for Christ's sake! But no time for Luke's story right now.

Matthew tells a story where everybody knows – King Herod and all Jerusalem with him – and they are all troubled because they might lose their power and position, might lose their vested interests, might have to change some things. God is always a terrible threat to who we are and how we do things here, and many of us would rather kill God than get to know him. Yes, it is still that way.

Symbol and meaning can be a lot tougher than fact. One year I heard some of our church decorators complaining about the fact that the red of Christmas fights a little with the purple of Advent. They couldn't think of any color alternatives, so they just left it. Sometimes the only alternative is to leave it and learn. Often the symbols speak whether or not we are ready to hear them. The red of His bloodshed is incongruous with the purple of His royalty? And without a word, the symbols can break our hearts.

Back to the gifts: The second gift is frankincense. Remember, all of us are supposed to bring all three gifts. There are not three wise men; there are three gifts. At least that is the point of Matthew's story. All people who recognize and love Jesus bring all three gifts. It is the true celebration of Christmas.

Frankincense is a clear, yellow resin exuded from trees belonging to a certain species of the genus *Boswellia* (related to the terebinth), which is native to India and Arabia. In other words, frankincense is tree sap. It is harvested in much the same way as maple syrup, except the milk-like juice hardens when it comes into contact with air. So if you bought it unprocessed, it would come in teardrops or irregular lumps of solid gum resin. It is used in perfumes, as medicine, of course as incense, and especially in sacred religious rites. In Luke's Christmas story, you remember that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was chosen to offer the incense in the Most Holy Place in the temple, and that was when the angel visited him. Well, he would have been burning frankincense in the Holy Place, as one of the most special and pleasing things they could think of to do for God.

Now, before the literalists among you book passage to India so you can find some frankincense for Christmas, let's suppose that, like gold, the gift of frankincense carries a symbolic meaning. Frankincense, as we mentioned, was burned as incense in the Most Holy Place of the temple, and it was often mixed with the sacrifice. But (and this is interesting) it was forbidden to use frankincense with any sin offering. (Leviticus 5:11; Numbers 5:15) Why? Because **frankincense was for joy**, for pleasure, for pleasing God. You see? Do not try to make God happy about your sins – do not try to butter him up, distract him, bribe him, or hide the sin under a smiling face. Deal with it straight and get forgiveness. Afterwards, you can come to God for joy and pleasure – and then is the time for frankincense.

FRANKINCENSE DECLARES JESUS OUR HIGH PRIEST. Only, He is Priest of joy and celebration – of pleasure, and wonderful conversations, and all the most beautiful aspects of relationship. Some of us have a somber notion of priesthood. We keep forgetting that the temple was the great, sacred restaurant of ancient times. The priests were holy cooks. The sacrifice was cooked on the altar of God – made sacred – so that people could share a sacred meal (a feast, a banquet, a party) with God. Judaism was never a somber religion by nature. The priests were in charge of celebration. The big guilt-thing at the meal is a Christian invention.

The gift of frankincense is the offer of real joy – joy in God's presence, and enjoyment of each other's company because God is with us: laughter, and games, and unaffected hugs; and "have some more wine"; and "did you hear about what happened last Thursday"; and "I can't think of anyplace I'd rather be, or anybody I'd rather be with – especially with you, God."

We are three-dimensional creatures, and we are supposed to be three-dimensional with God. Somber and serious has its place, but it is only one-third; it cannot make it alone. The Pilgrims wore three-cornered hats to remind them to be three-dimensional, and they weren't nearly as somber as some of you think. How many times does Jesus talk about banquets in the coming Kingdom? Some of us have things all out of proportion: Hell is only mentioned 13 times in the entire New Testament. The Kingdom – where people share and love and eat and rejoice together – is mentioned 154 times. Perhaps we should try to emulate that same ratio in our own thinking and attitudes.

I know many people who get surprised when they finally realize that this is a broken world, alienated from God. They get surprised that joy is still part of our Path – our WAY. We get more and more joy the longer we walk our Path, only we attach it less and less to this world, and more and more to the Kingdom that is here and coming.

Some of us have been withholding frankincense in our gifts to Jesus for years. We neither enjoy His company nor let Him lead us into true joy. We are too busy with guilt, duty, obligation, responsibility. And besides, Jesus is only Savior Emeritus – it's up to us now to save the world.

We light the Advent candle of joy, but who would ever guess we mean it, by the looks on our faces or the way we sing and celebrate? And when we do cut loose to have fun, we often tell Jesus to wait for us outside and we'll get back to Him later.

Jesus is our joy! His Kingdom is our hope and life! How do we know Jesus' Empire still exists? That's real simple: We know because we are among its citizens. We know because we bring Him the gold of our allegiance, and declare Him our true and only King. (Last week's sermon.) But if our souls are comforted and satisfied with small and temporary assurances, we do not yet bring frankincense to Jesus. We go looking for our own joy. And we know from past experience that it is a counterfeit joy – a pretense we try to keep up.

So now we seek a true Savior, and a much greater and deeper joy. And so we bring frankincense. Because we read the Gospels, we know that Jesus loves to party. And some of us are finding, more and more, that He IS the party! He is so mixed up with everything that lights our lives, we cannot imagine where we found joy before we knew Him. And so we bring frankincense.