

GRACE CHURCH
Feast of the Epiphany, observed

Honesdale, PA
5 January 2020

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2: 1-1

SIGNS & SYMBOLS

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[for the Saturday service, I give a brief synopsis of the Children's Sermon on crutches as an introduction. The reference to "Amahl" is Gian-Carlo Menotti's operetta "Amahl and the Night Visitors." A personal note, (3 degrees of separation) - the original Amahl was the son of my college choral professor.]

Today has a question hanging in the air
like the Star of Bethlehem beckoning us:
What offering does one place before the Altar of the Christ-Child?
At the end of the nineteenth century, poet Christina Rossetti
penned this meditation which we often sing
in Gustav Holst's familiar setting of *In the Bleak Midwinter*:
"What can I give him, poor that I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a wise man, I would do my part;
but what I can, I give him - give my heart."

Hymn #112

What *would* I give to Jesus?
Do I offer him my heart?

A poor crippled Arab boy named Amahl
is moved to take his own hand-hewn crutch to the baby Jesus.
The only thing he owned.
Amahl, in Gian Carlo Menotti's libretto to *The Night Visitors*
begs his Mother,
"Let me go with the kings - I will take him my crutch.
Who knows, he may need one, and this I made myself."
The carol we sang at the Procession suggests those three travelers,
and each describing their gifts and their theological intent.
Though perhaps Amahl gives more.

Who in their right mind would offer a baby myrrh and incense?
The gold would be welcomed by that teenaged mother
and her unwed carpenter husband
especially with more travel on their horizon
as they escape from Herod's ire to Egypt.
Gold would always come in handy.

Yet incense?

They were in a barn, after all, smelly cows, a tired donkey,
old dank hay, even droppings from the doves in the eves.
and room refresher may not be a bad idea!

I discovered when I visited the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem
as a young archæology student,
and we descended the stairs to the cavernous Rock
where Av'ram would have sacrificed Itzak
and from where Mohammed ascended to heave

I realized that hundreds of years of stockinged feet
smell less than desirable in that confined space -
imagine the worst locker-room stench.

I ask the Acolytes in training them,
Why are there candles on the Altar?
So I can read the Book.

Why do we use incense?

Because the faithful didn't always bathe as we do now.
And it is a remembrance of that gift which Melchior brings.
Additionally, the Psalmist used the image of the smoke of incense
as a visual of our prayers ascending to the Almighty:
"Let my prayers rise before you as incense.
The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."

Psalm 141:2

(Trivia for you: the rubrics for The Order of Worship for the Evening
is the only place in the Prayer Book where incense is mentioned.)

So we can justify Biblically the gift of incense:
it signifies Christ's eternal priesthood.

But why would a wise person bring Myrrh as a gift to the Christ-Child?
King Balthazar reminds us of the mortality of this God-made-Mortal.
Myrrh as an embalming ointment for those who will die,
foretelling Jesus' own death.

Gold for the Rich, the Royal;
Incense for the Godly, the Divine;
and Myrrh for the One who would die.

And a crutch.

Maybe Amahl gave more than the Kings,
rather like the poor widow's mite
being more valuable than the wealthy persons gift.

The three gifts, well, maybe all four,
are symbols of Christ's life
and our own.

Gold for royalty:

Jesus as the King of Heaven,

We as daughters and sons, sisters and brothers of the King.

Frankincense which indicates our holiness

as the faithful who have been baptized into Christ's salvation,
the priesthood of all-believers, as St. Paul suggests.

And myrrh - as Jesus will die,

as we each will die.

We can't sidestep our mortality.

And maybe that's where Amahl's crutch comes in play.

A crutch?

What crutch in my life should I lay before the Christ-child.

What crutch would Jesus come to earth to take away from me?

What can I bring Him, poor as I am?

"What I can I give him," poet Christina suggests,

"What I can I give him poor as I am?

Give my heart."

And that is a gift more precious than any gold

and more meaningful than any incense or myrrh.

Lay down your crutches,

and offer your heart.

For as Amahl discovered,

when he did so,

"Look, Ma,

I can walk,

I can sing,

I can dance."

Without any crutches.

Praise be to God!

AMEN.

CHILDREN'S SERMON *Crutches*

a set of crutches

You know last year I had to use these for several months
after I fell on a mountain.

Sometime you may need to have crutches, too,
though I hope and pray not.

Always be careful when you're having fun!

The sad part, though, is that many people
have different kinds of crutches - and not good ones -
that they lean on in their lives.

Can you think of anything like that,
bad things people use
that they think will help them get through life?

[*drugs, alcohol, gambling...*]

It's a terrible thing to have to live with crutches like that.

And yet, you know, there are people children and older folk,
who live with crutches and wheel-chairs and walkers,
and they live joyous lives.

But those are good crutches.

Just like the ones I needed last summer.

Let's pray:

Dear Jesus, you are the one we want to lean on; you carry us through life. We want to lean on you in all the times when we have trouble and when we are in pain.