



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Epiphany (6th January) 2025

A while ago, whilst embroiled in the apparently infinite task of sorting out my late aunt's effects, I came across her Christening cup. I am guessing that since the Baptism, it has spent nearly ninety years sitting in one display cabinet or another - or even, perhaps, at the bottom of a drawer from time to time.

I was uncertain what to do with it. I contemplated adding it to a consignment of stuff I took to the auctioneers: after all, there must be people who collect these sorts of things; and, if not, it will have some silver value; but I hesitated. Unlike the other things, it felt to have something of my aunt about it, speaking of her faith, as opposed to her interest in things ecclesiastical: a faith, which was not more apparent than in her last somewhat torturous months. So, I have kept it: though what will happen to it in due course - and, indeed, my own, which has also sat quietly in display cabinets for decades - who can say?

Most people have things, which are in some sense part of their identity rather than simply items they possess. None of us would consider our washing machine as linked to the people we are - well, not many of us anyway; but there are objects, which are interwoven with the important events or experiences of our lives.

Perhaps, we might view the gifts of the Magi - the gold, frankincense and myrrh - laid at the feet of the infant Christ in this sort of way. We are all familiar with their proposed associations with His kingship, divinity and coming awful Death; and we might construe them as tokens of what was already written into history - into His story - even as He was born. Like the Christening cup speaks of a Christian person, these presents referred to His identity: both, in their different ways, of a place within the divine Will and Purpose.

At the same time, we need to realise that these things are not Sauron's ring. In Tolkein's great narrative, the evil lord actually poured his character into the ring and it was in the ring that his being was preserved - supposedly waiting for the moment when he could be reunited with it; and so recover his full powers once more. Jesus' kingship, divinity and Death did not inhere in the gifts of the Magi, anymore than my aunt's Christian character was in any way contained in the cup.

The association of things with events and people exist only in our minds: other people might look at them and see nothing but the objects, which they are: a silver cup, an ingot of gold or whatever. Even some preserved explanation of their significance will give them only a curiosity value rather than provoke the psychological investment, which the original owner made in them. Sometimes, the significance can subtly shift as they pass from the ownership of one person to another.

Equally, objects can change or lose their significance for us. Some of the things, which once carried great meaning for me, have waned in importance: now they languish in cupboards or have been given away.

For Christians, the gold, frankincense and myrrh laid at the feet of the infant Christ are now possessed of a subtler association: the Kingship of Christ is not palaces, wealth, but simplicity and embraced authority over the heart and mind; His divinity is not one of great power, but of humility and Self-Sacrifice; His Death is transformed by His Resurrection and continuing Presence with us.

We never hear of the gifts again after the visit of the Magi. As people began to encounter the Life of Jesus and reflect on it, they could so easily have got in the way, being merely a starting point for those who would appreciate His identity and character.