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1/2 January 2005
Sacred Heart Parish, Effingham, Illinois
The Epiphany of the Lord (A)

What gift will you bring to the king?

There is a Christmas carol that is very fitting for this feast we celebrate today, the Epiphany of the Lord Jesus Christ, when he was made known to the nations through the magi. It is a carol that most school children know very well. The tune is easy to learn and is remembered without any great difficulty. It is, perhaps, a song best suited for children and simpletons, for it seems quaint and maybe even trite, but the message rings true nonetheless. It is the story of a simple boy brought before the king.

In days gone by when kings and queens were more common and easy to come by than they are today, it was expected that when somebody received an audience with the monarch that a gift would be brought. And so it is that these three magi whom we celebrate today journeyed to Jerusalem in search of the newborn king with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These three men knew the protocol and the etiquette of visiting royalty and this custom, to some extent, remains true today.

Not too long ago we celebrated the Feast of Christ the King who is in our midst each day. We enter the presence of the king on a daily basis, often without consciously realizing it. What

gift have you brought for the king in the past? What gift will you bring for the king today?

Now, of course, few of us today have access to gold, frankincense, or even myrrh. Other more customary gifts for royalty are likewise out of our reach: precious china, a navy, a castle, a princess, an estate, a hand-woven tapestry. What, then, will you - will I - bring for the king?

The carol that I referenced earlier is one of my favorites. Katherine K. Davis wrote it in the 1940s and gave it the title, "The Carol of the Drum;" today we know it as "The Little Drummer Boy." The carol begins,

Come, they told me,
a newborn king to see
Our finest gifts we bring
to lay before the king
so to honor him
when we come.

The three magi from the east, on their journey to Bethlehem, come across the little boy with his drum and tell him to come with them to see this newborn king of the Jews.

Upon reaching Bethlehem and finding the child Jesus and Mary, his mother, the little drummer boy says to the infant,

Little baby
I am a poor boy, too.
I have no gift to bring
that's fit to give our king.
Shall I play for you
on my drum?

This innocent child does not pretend to be anything he is not; nor does he fully recognize who Jesus is. He sees before him a helpless baby and although he knows him to be the king he does not seem to recognize that Jesus is God. In his birth in Bethlehem Jesus lays aside his power, his glory, and his might so to be born as one of us. The little boy with his drum knows that he does not have a gift like the gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought by the others. He really has nothing to offer to a king, but what little he does have he offers: he has his drum.

It is such a simple gift, a humble gift. The playing of his drum is in one sense a worthless gift, but in another sense his gift is truly priceless and precious. His gift does not come so much from what he has but from whom he is. It is a gift of himself, a gift of his skills, a gift of his love, a gift of his personality. Because of this his gift is priceless; it is a gift of his very self.

Only a few days ago we gathered around our Christmas trees, trees that symbolize the cross of Christ and the gift hung for us upon that tree on the hill of Calvary. We gave and opened presents to and from our family and friends and surely those gifts that were made by hand or found with great love are the ones we cherish most. These special gifts mean so much to us because they are, in some way, a gift of the person who gave them to us.

In his beautiful, childlike manner, having nothing else to give, the boy offered to play his drum for the king.

Mary nodded.
The ox and lamb kept time.
I played my drum for him.
I played my best for him.

This little boy did not simply play his drum; he put his very heart and soul into his rhythmic beating and tapping. He put all that he had into his effort and his gift and it is his love and devotion that makes his seemingly worthless gift priceless.

We have no gift that is truly fitting to offer to our king. As we heard from the Gospel of John on Christmas day, without our King nothing came to be. This little child born of Mary already gives all that we can offer. Nothing that we have is truly ours to give for it is already given as a gift. Each of us, though, does have a drum of some sort that we can play with love and devotion for our king. What gift will you bring for the king?

Saint Therese of Lisieux says, "the smallest acts done with love are immense in the sight of God." How true this is! It is not so much what we give that matters but how we give it. If we gift others, if we gift our God, looking for something in return, looking for another gift, looking for money, looking for gratitude, looking for a favor, then we have missed the point

and purpose of our gift giving. In doing so we have mocked what it is to give.

Today we celebrate the epiphany of the Lord, the manifestation of the Lord. We have a tendency to celebrate this feast as though it merely happened nearly two thousand years ago and no more. Truly, though, the Lord manifests himself to us each day if we have the eyes to see him and the heart to love him. The three magi knew what to look for. Once they arrived in Jerusalem they asked of Herod, *Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.* They saw the star in the sky and they followed it. We would be foolish to believe that they were the only three to whom the star appeared. Rather, they were the three - there may have been more - who recognized what the star foretold and so they followed it to the newborn king in Judah.

What star shines in our lives signaling to us the presence of the Messiah? Do we look for the presence of the Lord? The priests and the scribes knew where the Messiah was to be born and still they did not know of his birth; they ignored the message of the star. When we encounter the Lord, the king, in our lives, let us play our drum for him, whatever sort it might be, for it is pleasing to him to do so.

Then he smiled at me
Me and my drum
What gift will you bring to the King?