

# Advent 2023 Bible Study Notes

By Chaplain/MCF Chair Steve Neuhaus



## Introduction

### Pilgrimage

As we journey to the cradle/manger let us embark on a pilgrimage – a pilgrimage involves moving slowly deliberately and purposely from where you are to the chosen sacred destination. Whatever challenges and trials appear, these have to be overcome through prayer and meditation as well as physical effort. The essence of pilgrimage is faith, faith overcoming uncertainty to the pathway ahead. John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress* gives a classical example of a life pilgrimage.

As Basil Hume stated "Life is a pilgrimage" he goes on to state the following – *We are on the march and sooner or later we shall reach our destination. That destination we call heaven. There we shall see God as he is and that experience will be the cause of happiness which will be complete and have no end. We are made for that.*

While on the road we cannot help wondering about God. What is He like? What does He want from us? What does He expect of us? There are times when we seem to respond to what we know is expected of us. There are times when we falter badly. We get tied up with all kinds of things that distract us from thinking about the end of the Journey, or delay us on the way, indeed entice us to go in the wrong direction altogether. Moreover, there is a great deal of pain and suffering. That can slow the pace. Many simply cannot cope and some, indeed suffer so much that they cannot believe that there is Someone who loves them and wants them to reach the destination where all things will be well.

To engage in a pilgrimage, we need to develop a spiritual life, without a spiritual life and an acknowledgement that there is some higher purpose and a higher being that we are answerable to, then our life is impoverished and our mental health becomes fragile. Life itself becomes purposeless, pointless and there is no future and nothing to answer to. We stand on the slippery slope of hedonism and atheism which leads to the attitude of selfishness and that humanity is the crown of evolution rather than a special creation by God. God, however, created us with a purpose – to worship Him and to tend His Creation.

To know God, to love and serve Him in this world; and to be happy with Him forever in the next, is the point of pilgrimage.

As we enter this Advent season let us focus on the true meaning of Christmas – to celebrate the birth of Christ. Christ is no longer a baby in swaddling clothes in a manger as each one of us is no longer a baby in nappies. In Christ we are connected with a spiritual way of life that originates at Creation – you could say we are part of the oldest religion in existence.

Our Advent Pilgrimage will end at the Manger however we need to look forward to the Cross, realising that the next part of the Pilgrimage is to the foot of the Cross – something we will explore in Lent. And the final part of the Pilgrimage is our own life pilgrimage as we journey from the foot of the Cross to the Heaven Kingdom.

This series has four parts matching the Four Weeks of Advent – First we look back to see how people were looking forward in anticipation; Second, we will explore who Mary and Joseph were; Third, Zechariah and Elizabeth and finally the witnesses to Jesus' birth.

It is my prayer that this will enhance and deepen your faith in Jesus and encourage you on your pilgrimage through life.

## Study One

### Prophecy – *The Foretold Messiah*

This short video gives a fairly clear and succinct summary of the prophecies of Christ's coming.

YouTube Intro Video

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=prophecy+of+jesus+in+old+testament&docid=603495359536898050&mid=A858E6F6B47769DB48DDA858E6F6B47769DB48DD&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>

There are over 300 prophecies about Jesus and what he would achieve in the Old Testament. We will look only at some of those relating to his birth and only a few of them.

Prophecy	Fulfillment
<i>Born of the seed of woman</i> Genesis 3:15	Galatians 4:4 & Matthew 1:20
<i>Born of a Virgin</i> Isaiah 7:14	Matthew 1:18, 24, 25 Luke 1:26-35
<i>Seed of Abraham</i> Genesis 22:18, Gen 12:2,3	Matthew 1:1 Galatians 3:16
<i>House of David</i> Jeremiah 23:5	Luke 3:23:31 Matt 1:1, 9:27, 15:22. 20:30, 31. 21:9, 15; 22:41-46, Mark 9:10, 10:47, 48; Luke 18:38. 39; Acts 13:22,23; Rev 22:16.
<i>Born at Bethlehem</i> Micah 5:2	Matthew 2:1 Matthew 2:4, Luke 2:4-7; John 7:42
<i>Presented with Gifts</i> Psalm 72:10, Isaiah 60:6	Matthew 2:1, 11
<i>Herod kills the Children</i> Jeremiah 31:15	Matthew 2:16
<i>Shall Be Immanuel (God with Us)</i> Isaiah 7:14	Matthew 1:23, Luke 7:16

### Discussion points.

Why is it important that Jesus' birth was prophesied? .....

Genealogies – why are they important to the Jews? .....

Are they important to us today? .....

What Does Bethlehem mean? ..... How does this relate to Jesus?

.....

What was a revelation in today's Study? .....

How can I apply today's study to my life? .....

## **Advent 2022 Bible Study Notes**

### **Study Two**

*Mary the Chosen & Joseph the confused*

#### **Mary (Virgin) Mother of Christ**

Luke 1:27, 29, 34, 38, 39, 41, 46-56; 2:5, 16, 19, 22, 27, 33 - 35, 39, 41-51

Much has been written about Mary in books and commentaries. All the Gospels mention her though Luke the most. Mark mentions her once by name and refers to her in another episode, Matthew in his Gospel five times by name and once not by name. Luke on the other hand mentions her name thirteen times in five episodes and three times without mentioning her name. Thus Luke has influenced the most the traditions that have arisen around Mary

There are numerous parallels that can be developed between Mary, the annunciation of Christ's birth and her responses to Old Testament patterns. Hannah's prayer at the dedication of Samuel bears some similarities. This as well as the rhythm and balance with Zechariah's prophecy deserve further study.

Mary (mother of Jesus) Luke 8:19-21, come to see him and take him home for a rest.

Acts 1:14 Mary is recorded as being with the rest of the "Christians."

When we first meet Mary she is described as a virgin or young woman. Women traditionally married between 15-18 years old in Jewish society in Jesus's time. Men a bit later between 18-30 years old. If Mary had Jesus around 18 years old she would have been 51 years old when he was crucified.

Mary's response to the angel's announcement was submission, faith and when greeting Elizabeth her cousin was the Magnificat (Song of Mary). This resonates with Hannah's song in Samuel. How would you respond to an unexpected pregnancy? Think about the options talked about today – abortion, keep the child, adopt out. This is a real and difficult issue even today.

#### **The Magnificat**

This used to be said every week at church and I believe we are poorer for not saying it today. Page 31

The text of the canticle is taken from the Gospel of Luke (1:46–55) where it is spoken by Mary upon the occasion of her Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth.<sup>[2]</sup> In the narrative, after Mary greets Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist, the latter moves within Elizabeth's womb. Elizabeth praises Mary for her faith and Mary responds with what is now known as the Magnificat. Book of Common Prayer 1662

*My soul doth magnify the Lord.  
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.  
For he hath regarded: the lowliness of his handmaiden: For behold, from  
henceforth: all generations shall call me blessed.*

*For he that is mighty hath magnified me: and holy is his Name.  
And his mercy is on them that fear him: throughout all generations.  
He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the  
imagination of their hearts.  
He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and  
meek.  
He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty  
away.  
He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel:  
As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever.*

*The Gloria Patri is appended to the canticle, but  
is not part of Luke's Gospel.*

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son: and to the Holy Ghost;  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end.  
Amen.*

**Joseph** in the meantime has been having problems – he has found out his betrothed is pregnant. This is a grave offence and punishable by stoning to death. He moves to divorce Mary quietly as he is an honourable man. We find Joseph in Matt 1: 16-25 (spoken to by an angel), no relations with Mary until after Jesus' birth (Matt 1:25) then fathers Jesus' half brothers and sisters. Joseph was present at Jesus' birth and dedication (Luke 2:4-38), in the role of protector of Mary and Jesus when they flee to Egypt (Matt 2:13-22) then returns with family to Nazareth and sets up his carpentry business and provides for the growing family. We assume that Joseph has died prior to Jesus starting His ministry potentially aged in his late 40s or early 50s

Why do you think is Mary not overly prominent in the Gospels and beyond?

Mary's journey of faith has peaks and troughs? Can you identify some. Just because she was chosen did not mean she was perfect or a follower of Jesus from the start however she certainly was by Acts 1:14.

Mary is a model of humble obedient submission to God's will. How do you respond to God's will?

What is something about Joseph you admire?

## Info bite

### House of Virgin Mary near Ephesus

[House of Virgin Mary - Ephesus Turkey](#)



The common Christian belief is that Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, came to Ephesus with St. John after the Crucifixion of Christ and the two lived the rest of their lives near the city.

The House of Virgin Mary was discovered in 1812 in the visions of a bedridden German nun with stigmata

wounds on her wrist. The nun was able to describe the house of Mother Mary in great detail. She mentioned the domes on top of the house and the fireplace and apse on the rear wall.

The German nun told the story of how Mother Mary and John the Apostle came to Ephesus where St. John built her a house. When Mary died at the age of 64 she was buried in a cave near her house and when the tomb was opened it was found empty. After this miracle the House of Mother Mary was converted to a small chapel.

The nun told her visions to a man named Brentano who wrote them in a book. A French clergyman named Gouyet read the book and came to Ephesus where he found a house matching the nun's descriptions. The clergyman sent word to Rome. On June 27, 1891 two Lazarist priests and two Catholic found the small stone house among ruins with a statue of Mother Mary.

The House of Mother Mary has been a Catholic pilgrimage site since 1896 when the first Pilgrimage was made. Popes such as Paul VI and John Paul II visited the House of Mother Mary, and Pope Benedict XVI held mass there on November 29, 2006. The House of Mother Mary is a sacred site for both Christians and Muslims. Lazarist Fathers hold a mass at the house every day.

The spring flowing nearby the House of Mother Mary is believed to have healing properties. Miracles have been reported there and in the house are crutches and canes said to have been left by the healed. A liturgical ceremony is carried out by Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim clergymen every year on August 15 commemorate the Assumption of Mary.

## Study Three

### Elizabeth *the mentor* & Zechariah/Zacharias *the doubter*

Luke 1:5-25	Zechariah and the angel
Luke 1:39-45	Mary visits Elizabeth
Luke 1:57-66	The birth of John the Baptist
Luke 1:67-80	The Benedictus

### Questions

How old do you think that Elizabeth and Zechariah would have been?

How would you have reacted if you were in Zechariah's shoes?

What would you have done if in Elizabeth's position? Particularly when Mary turns up.

What is a feature of Elizabeth and Zechariah's characters that stick out to you?

What is a key point about the Benedictus?

## Study 3 Notes

Zechariah and Elizabeth were known for their holiness – they were devoted and religious, not in the negative manner it is used in modern times but in the true and important manner in which their love and devotion to God was the total fabric of their lives. They were also people of prayer. There is much to pause and meditate on with them.

*Luke 1:6 They were both righteous (upright) before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances (regulations) of the Lord blamelessly.*

Offering Incense was a symbol of prayers going up to the Lord. Exodus 30:1-10

### Zechariah

#### *Strengths & accomplishments*

- Known as a righteous man.
- Was a priest before God
- One of the few people to be directly addressed by an angel
- accepted his punishment and got on with life – did not lose faith.
- Fathered John the Baptist

#### *Weakness*

- Doubted the angel because of what he was told,
- Limited God

#### *Lessons for us*

- Physical limitations are irrelevant to God
- God will accomplish what He wants to and sometimes in unexpected ways.

### Elizabeth

In Hebraic society the worth of a woman was measured by her ability to bear children, this was also the old age / retirement plan as the children were required to support their parent when they were old and could no longer work. No nursing homes, in house support, etc. This would have been very painful for Elizabeth and lonely however she remained faithful and righteous not losing faith. She didn't waste her time asking "why" she got on with life knowing that God was in control. She was faithful. She would have been most likely in her 50s. We know that Sarah was 99 when she became pregnant.

#### *Strengths*

- Known as a deeply spiritual woman
- Showed no doubts about God's ability to fulfil His promise
- Was the mother of John the Baptist
- Recognised the coming Saviour before he was born.

#### *Lessons for us*

- God does not forget those who have been faithful to Him
- God's timetable does not conform to ours

## ***Benedictus***

The Song of Zechariah also Called the Benedictus falls into two parts.

The first (verses 68–75) is a song of thanksgiving for the realization of the Messianic hopes of the Jewish nation; but to such realization is given a characteristically Christian tone. As of old, in the family of David, there was power to defend the nation against their enemies, now again that of which they had been so long deprived, and for which they had been yearning, was to be restored to them, but in a higher and spiritual sense. The horn is a sign of power, and the "horn of salvation" signified the power of delivering or "a mighty deliverance". While the Jews had impatiently borne the yoke of the Romans, they had continually looked for the time when the House of David was to be their deliverer. The deliverance was now at hand, and was pointed to by Zechariah as the fulfilment of God's oath to Abraham; but the fulfilment is described as a deliverance not for the sake of worldly power, but that "we may serve him without fear, in holiness and justice all our days". (Bernard Ward)

The second part of the canticle is an address by Zechariah to his own son, who was to take so important a part in the scheme of the Redemption; for he was to be a prophet, and to preach the remission of sins before the coming of the Redeemer from on high. The prophecy that he was to "go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways" (v. 76) was of course an allusion to the well-known words of Isaiah 40:3 which John himself afterwards applied to his own mission (John 1:23), and which all three Synoptic Gospels adopt (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2; Luke 3:4).<sup>[1]</sup>

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;  
he has come to his people and set them free.  
He has raised up for us a mighty saviour,  
born of the house of his servant David.  
Through his holy prophets he promised of old  
that he would save us from our enemies,  
from the hands of all who hate us.  
He promised to show mercy to our fathers  
and to remember his holy covenant.  
This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham:  
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,  
free to worship him without fear,  
holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.  
You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,  
to give his people knowledge of salvation  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
In the tender compassion of our God  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,  
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*



## Study Four

### The witnesses – *from Shepherds to Kings*

1. **At Birth**     *Joseph & Mary*

Matthew 1:18-25

Luke 2:1-7

2. **That Night**     *The Shepherds*     Luke 2:8-20

Why do you think the shepherds told everyone what they had seen?

What are your thoughts on this statement? “*An encounter with Jesus does not leave you unchanged*”.

Has this been your experience?

3. **33 days later** *Jesus presented in the Temple (Simeon & Anna)* Luke 2:22-38

*Purification* – verse 22 (Leviticus 12:2-8)

On what day is the male child to be circumcised?

How long before the mother can come to the Temple?

Why a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons? Leviticus 12:6

What does this show us about Joseph and Mary financially?

*Simeon*

What does Simeon say? V.29-32

What is his commonly called?

What is the significance of the prophecy from Simeon? V.34-35

*Anna*

How old was Anna?

What do you think the significance of her prophecy was? V.38

#### 4. **Up to 2 years later - The Wise Men/Magi/Kings**

Matthew 2:1-12

Psalm 72:10                prophecies kings of Tarshish (north of Gibraltar to west), of the Isles (of Mediterranean), Sheba (southern Arabia, area of modern Yemen) and Seba (same as Sheba)

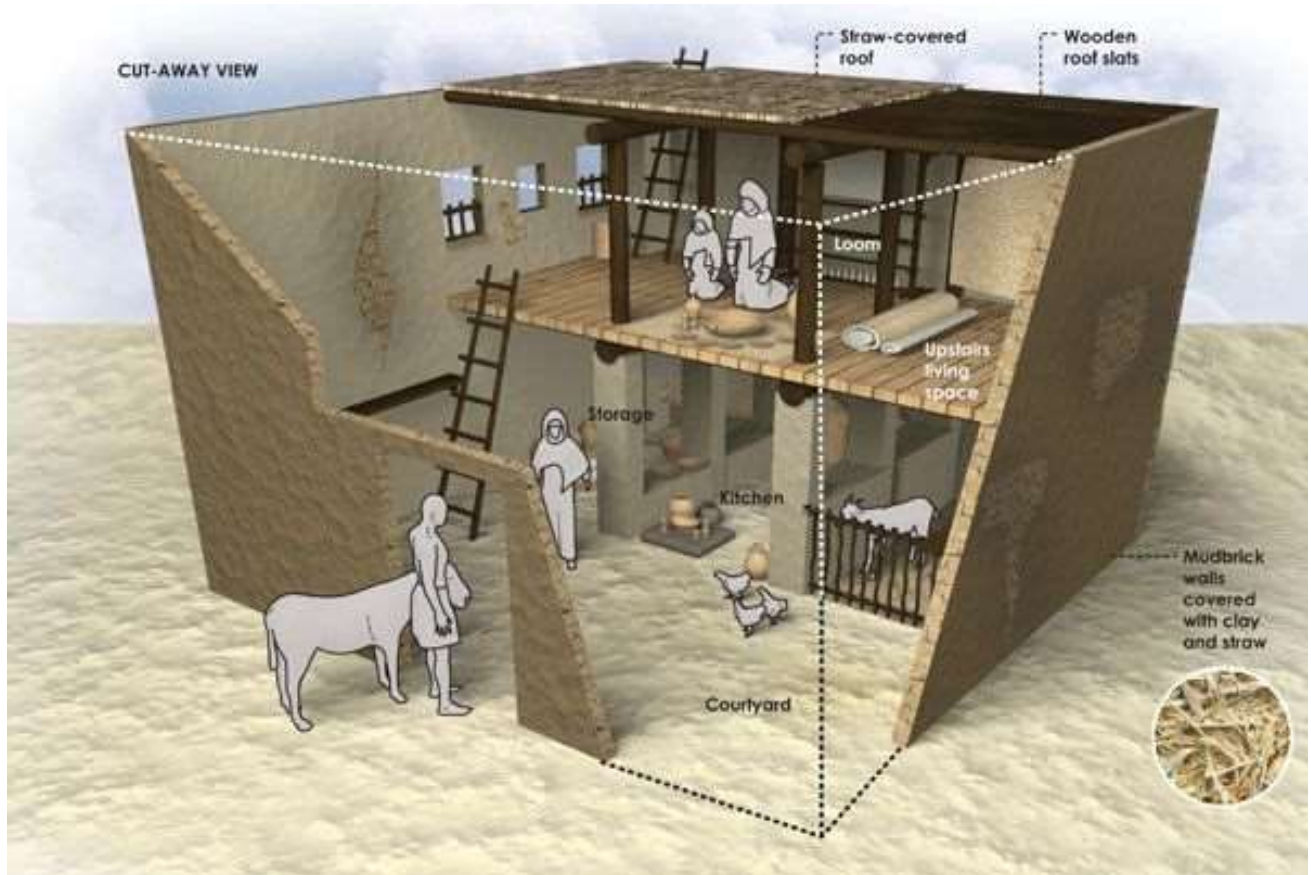
Tobit 13:11                *A bright light will shine to all the ends of the earth; many nations will come to you from far away, the inhabitants of the remotest parts of the earth to your holy name, bearing gifts in their hands for the King of heaven.*

What influence do you think “We three kings of orient are” has had on our thoughts and theology?

Does Psalm 72:10 support this idea of ‘kings’? Matthew however speaks of ‘wise men’ why the difference do you think?

What is the significance of each of the three gifts?

## Typical Jewish House in Jesus' time



Houses in the Middle East in many countries such as Afghanistan are still similar to this diagram.

## Shepherds

Many people claim the evidence against a December date is that it would have been too cold for the shepherds to have been in the fields. When deployed to Afghanistan during winter the shepherds were out in the field with their sheep and goats. When the photo was taken it was -5 deg C despite the sunny sky. December in Afghanistan!





A check of the mean temperature for the Bethlehem region shows us that it only gets down to 6 degrees Celsius at night in that area. Shepherds would have been most likely out and sheep were needed for food, clothing and temple sacrifices. One school of thought is that they were just ordinary shepherds the others is that they were Levitical shepherds. The fact that they were able to tell others about what they had seen without being mocked tends to give credence to them being Levitical shepherds looking after sheep for temple sacrifices.

There is much discussion about the shepherds being the bottom of society etc, within Israel shepherds had always been people of worth and many of their leaders – Abel, Abraham, Moses, David had been shepherds. Jesus always used shepherding imagery. The idea that they were lower class and outcaste comes from the Greeks many centuries later as shepherds were not regarded highly by them.

The shepherds are awake and keeping watch and here we have an echo of a later parable of the 10 virgins and the wedding feast. The shepherds are at first frightened by the appearance of the angels however then become amazed

and filled with joy and are so bubbling over with the news they can't wait to tell those around them

### **Wise Men / Gifts**

#### **We three kings of Orient are**

1 We three kings of Orient are;  
bearing gifts we traverse afar,  
field and fountain, moor and mountain,  
following yonder star.

Refrain:

O star of wonder, star of light,  
star with royal beauty bright,  
westward leading, still proceeding,  
guide us to thy perfect light.

2 Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,  
gold I bring to crown him again,  
King forever, ceasing never,  
over us all to reign. [Refrain]

3 Frankincense to offer have I;  
incense owns a Deity nigh;  
prayer and praising, voices raising,  
worshiping God on high. [Refrain]

4 Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume  
breathes a life of gathering gloom;  
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
sealed in the stone-cold tomb. [Refrain]

5 Glorious now behold him arise;  
King and God and sacrifice:  
Alleluia, Alleluia,  
sounds through the earth and skies. [Refrain]

John H Hopkins

There are three significant things with the birth of Christ and the event of the Wise Men:

1. Light
2. The Magi or wise men
3. The gifts given by them

1. The readings today revolve around light – Isaiah speak of light that drives back darkness – the whole passage is one of tremendous jubilation at the coming of the light. I am sure many of you can relate to this as when we have blackouts and our house and street is plunged into darkness you cannot seem to get enough light with candles and torches, you feel such joy and relief when the power comes back on and the lights drive the darkness back.

This is what Christ's birth means for us as humans – the world at the time of Christ's birth was in a deep crisis as there was no proper hope of eternal life or something better as no one could achieve the standard that God had set through his Law as laid out in the Bible (The Pentatuch). Christ's birth was the light at the end of the tunnel – for the first time everyone had the opportunity to enter into a personal relationship with God through Christ.

2. This is where the wise men from the east come in as they represented all people other than the Jews – the Gentiles. Their appearance demonstrated publicly that Christ had come for all people not just the Jews. This was the special revelation that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 3:1-12. That we as Gentiles have become "*members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*" We are fellow heirs of eternal life.

So who really were the Magi – were they kings, were they noblemen, were they astronomers – we do not know, we can make a calculated guest that they came possible from southern Arabia, Oman, Somalia/Ethiopia, & India area. All these areas are known for Frankincense & Myrrh as well as gold.

however we do know that they were wise men.

That they represent the people who have the wisdom to choose light and life over death and darkness.

The most important question for us today is not who they were but have we followed their example – are we 'wise men & women' – have we bowed to Christ and proclaimed Him Lord and Master of our lives – if not you need to do so today. This is the best gift we could give Christ this Year.

3. The three gifts the wise men gave were Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

As a quick aside in England a tradition has developed where the monarch offers gold, myrrh and frankincense in the Chapel Royal every year on the 6th January, the day the feast of Epiphany is observed<sup>1</sup>. It is also interesting to note we still use the medieval term 'feast day' to describe the day but do not actually have a communal

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<sup>1</sup> Cross, The Oxford Dict of Christian Church pp.457-458

feast where the whole church comes together to feast & celebrate – maybe this is something we should reinstate. The other two principal feast days are Easter and Pentecost.

The gifts though each represent something significant:

*Gold – for a king*

Gold has always been the most precious and valuable metal on earth, kings and governments have required gold to be able to establish and maintain their kingdoms and countries. This is true even today where the stability of a nation still revolves around its gold reserves. Most countries in the world mine or trade in gold.

*Frankincense (incense) is for God*

Frankincense is harvested from a scrubby and unpretentious desert tree in southern Saudi Arabia and the Yemen region. This was used to consecrate temples and medicinally for many things. (Exodus 30:1 & 40:5). It is also found in parts of India.

Our prayers are like incense to God and the burning of incense represents in the Church of the purifying the people and their prayers (Psalm 141:2) rising upwards to God.

*Myrrh is for mortal man.*

Myrrh is also harvested from a small scrubby tree in the Yemen/Oman area (Genesis 37:25), it is three times the price of Frankincense however the demand for frankincense was five times as great. Myrrh was used as an anointing oil, fumigant, in cooking, as medicine for pain relief and importantly for embalming dead bodies<sup>2</sup>. In many ways a gift you would not want given to your child if you were a mother. Myrrh was applied to Christ's body when he died (John 19:39-40) so in many ways this gift had greater significance at the start of his life than normally as it symbolised the sacrifice that He was to make for all people.

These three gifts are therefore worthy and practical gifts for a King, particularly a Heavenly King with a very important and deadly earthly mission.

Finally, we must look at the faith and tenacity of the Wise Men, they remained focussed and seeking until they found the Christ, they did not have the wealth of information that we have now, the communication systems or navigation systems, they were willing to set out on a life changing journey that took months in order to achieve their goal and mission that God had given them.

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<sup>2</sup> National Geographic Vol 148 No.4 October 1985 pp.474-512