

We just heard about the magi from the east who followed a star to Bethlehem bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the newborn baby king, Jesus. There has been a lot of speculation over the centuries about what the “star” was. An article just published by the BBC re-proposes that it was a comet and that this comet was seen by astronomers in ancient China who kept records of it.

Whenever I read anything on the internet, I read it with a healthy dose of skepticism. I recently read about another comet that ancient Chinese astronomers had been watching. This comet displayed some odd behavior similar to the 31ATLAS comet which is currently journeying through our solar system, but what is really interesting about the ancient comet is what else the Chinese recorded while they were studying it. At the time this odd comet was in the sky, there is a record that the heavens unexpectedly went dark. It was very common for ancient people to believe that what they observed in the heavens was a reflection of something occurring on earth. The astronomer who made the note offered this explanation according to his or her religion: “the cosmic forces of yin and yang had switched places.”

While yin and yang are not part of judeo-christianity, the ancient astronomer wrote something else which unknowingly might have been. He or she continued that those cosmic forces had reversed positions because “a great injustice has occurred on the earth. One man has borne the sins of all humanity. The man from heaven has died.” The Chinese use a different calendar than we do. But the year from our calendar that corresponds to their calendar was around the timeframe of thirty to thirty-three A.D.—the traditional date for Jesus’ crucifixion. The author of this article—and again it is okay to be skeptical—proposes that the ancient Chinese had witnessed the same celestial events recorded in the gospels when Jesus was crucified. And—even though this was before Christianity had reached China—they correctly connected those celestial events to the death of the innocent “man from heaven” who had died to pay the price for the sins of all humankind.

If some of you are grumbling that this would be more appropriate for Good Friday you are wrong. There is a spiritual connection to Epiphany. First, both celestial events—the star of Bethlehem and the darkening of the heavens—in some way drew foreign non-believers to God in partial fulfillment of the prophecies that Jesus would draw all people to himself. The second connection is through one of the gifts the magi brought with them: myrrh. Saint Gregory the Great wrote that in the moral sense of scripture the treasures of the magi

represent the gifts we give to Jesus in our daily lives. Gold is Christ's wisdom which shines in us—probably in how we wisely keep his commandments. Frankincense represents the prayer and adoration we give him. Myrrh represents our daily self-sacrifice. Myrrh was used to anoint priests—whose job is to offer sacrifice—and it was used to prepare a body for burial. Myrrh foreshadows the eternal high priest Jesus' self-sacrifice of laying his life down for us on the cross: the man from heaven has died.

Saint Gregory the Great said that the magi's treasures represent our gifts to Jesus. Regardless of who those ancient Chinese astronomers thought the man from heaven was, we know that Jesus is the innocent God-man from heaven who died to pay the price of our sins. We also know that death did not claim the final victory over Jesus, that Jesus actually conquered death and that his resurrection reopened the gates of heaven for us.

We cannot repay the debt we owe to Jesus for his sacrifice on our behalf. But how generous are we in offering to Jesus what we can give him? How generous are we with our gifts? How faithfully do we show his wisdom reflected in us by keeping his commandments? How generous are we with our gifts of prayer—whether that is personal prayer, devotions or attending Mass regularly. How generous are we with our spiritual gift of myrrh, our daily self-sacrifices? Do we offer them readily or do we offer them grudgingly?

A very specific thing to consider which can be connected to all three gifts, but especially myrrh, is our attitude regarding attending Mass. It does require sacrifice in many different ways. Do we spend our time focusing on the things that annoy us? Are we resentful of the inconvenience, especially on holy days of obligation? Complaining is a sign of ingratitude. There has been a lot of complaining recently, especially since Christmas Eve. The willingness with which we offer daily sacrifices to our Lord is a sign of our gratitude to him. How generous are we with our gifts of sacrifice to Jesus in gratitude for all he has done for us?

Wise people seek out Jesus and recognizing him as Lord of all, they pay him homage with their lives. The magi threw themselves down on the ground before Jesus then they went home by a different route than the way they had come. Spiritually, that means they went home changed by their encounter with God incarnate. Having encountered Jesus here today, may we imitate the magi and go home changed and grateful for everything our savior has done for us.