

Epiphany: Is there really no such thing as a free gift?

By: Terrance Klein (Article found at AmericaMagazine.org)



The Magi by Henry Siddons Mowbray, 1915

If you understand the expression “There is no such thing as a free lunch,” congratulations! You have already mastered a classic of modern French deconstruction philosophy, Jacques Derrida’s essay on gift giving, *Given Time*. If understanding deconstruction has not been on your bucket list, you only need to know that Derrida denies the possibility of giving a gift for the same reason that we say there is no such thing as a free lunch. Because, Derrida says, no gift is ever free. It is always part of an exchange, a complex balance between what we consider to be owed to each other. Derrida says that a gift is never truly a gift, not something freely given, because the giver always wants something in return, just like the person inviting you to lunch.

The magi from the East bring the Christ Child gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. If you ask the exegetical question “What do these gifts symbolize?” you get something like this: Gold symbolizes the child’s kingly status; frankincense, his divine nature; and myrrh, his sacrificial death.

But having mastered a seminal theme in deconstruction philosophy, let us ask a more basic question. Why are the magi giving gifts in the first place? To some extent, Matthew’s Gospel has already explained it. The magi arrive in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage” (2:2). The magi bring gifts to the Christ Child for the same reason that you gave your boss something for Christmas: if not to curry favor, then at least to be in “good standing.” It is Derrida all over again.

Maybe. Or maybe a deeper meaning of the gifts lies in the word we use to name the feast that celebrates this Gospel scene: Epiphany. Each year, preachers remind us that the word means “the shining forth.” This is the day, they say, in which Jesus was revealed to the nations in the persons of the foreigners from the East. He shines forth as the newborn Christ.

But maybe “shining forth” also explains what the magi are doing—and on a deeper level than Derrida. In giving gifts, they are expressing themselves. They are doing something external to say something about themselves. This is a deeply human need, indeed a fundamental fact about our humanity: We must shine forth. The only way that we humans can share what lies within us is by showing it.

Perhaps a contrast is helpful. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that the angels know intuitively, meaning that once they decide to know, they do not have to observe or to speak. They are like Mr. Spock, doing a Vulcan mind-meld. Their interiority is immediately given to each other.

We are not angels or Vulcans. We can only share life with others by “shining forth,” by expressing ourselves. Think of all that entails. We share thoughts and emotions—our innards—by speaking or not speaking, by smiling or frowning, by touching or not touching. Indeed, our very location at any given moment is an act of self-expression. It bespeaks what and who matters to us.

Shining forth, expressing ourselves, is a fundamental condition of our humanity. So much so that it is not unreasonable to ask if there is anything within us that is not ordered toward external expression. We might, at a given moment, be striving mightily not to kiss or to kick someone, but it is the very ability to entertain either of those alternatives that tells us how we feel.

St. Matthew's magi do not speak to Christ or to his parents, but we know that he matters to them. First, because they have brought themselves to him, and with no little effort. And, regardless of what they bring, the fact that they come bearing gifts says that they want to enter into a relationship with this child.

What are some takeaways from understanding ourselves, like the magi, as those who must shine forth? St. James says that faith without works is dead. More foundational than the Christian debate about which comes first, faith or good works, is this question: Can faith be unexpressed? How do I show that I have encountered Christ and want to give myself to him without seeking out the communion that we call the church? How can I claim to understand Christ's mission and still do nothing to improve this world?

If your Christ is only a notion, then—great—you have complete control over him, just as you do any of your notions. But if your Christ is a person, then you must relate to him as all humans do: by shining forth, by choosing to be where he is, by listening to him and by speaking to him, by encountering him with your senses. This is what we call liturgy. And then by serving him in others. This is what we call mission.

Christ was never just a notion. He was a person, and he has chosen to remain a person, even after his death and resurrection. He has chosen to remain a person, one who shines forth to us in the community, which we call the church. And that is where we shine back at him.

If to give a gift is to give something unconditionally, then Derrida says that there is no such thing. Gift giving is always an exchange. But here is an exception that may yet prove the rule. We believe that God created the world, which is another way of saying that the world comes from someone who freely gave it and then just as freely withdrew. It is entirely possible to enjoy our world without any consideration of the giver, which makes the world itself the only true (unconditional) gift.

But once the giver “shines forth,” everything changes. Then we know that the gift is an act of self-expression, which means that there is someone who created us and our world to share life with us. Then to receive the gift is to enter into a relationship. So we must decide carefully what it is that we want, and how it is that we will respond.

St. Matthew’s magi encapsulate the Gospel message. Christ has shown forth. For them, God is no longer a notion. Not to shine back is to reject a person, indeed the most unique of persons, the one who makes possible our own personhood. The Gospel tells us to imitate the magi, to let our own lights shine forth because a light that does not shine is no light.



CAN WE ENDURE THE LIGHT?

By: Simcha Fisher

(This essay was originally published on Aleteia in January of 2016. Image: “Epiphany” by Gallardoblend via Deviantart.)



There was a man who could read people's souls, and he would sometimes deliver messages from God.

It sounds fishy, but if you saw his face, especially his eyes, you'd believe it. For some reason, he visited my house when I was a teenager. When I came in the room, his dark eyes pooled with pity, and he asked, "Is there anything you would like to ask?" There wasn't. I was on an ugly, dire path, and I knew it, but I wasn't ready to turn around yet. So I walked out of the room. Fled, really. I could see that he was very close to God, and I couldn't stand being that close to him.

It is not enough, you see, to recognize the presence of God. You can *identify* holiness, but it won't do you any good if you've been living in a way that doesn't prepare you to *endure* it.

Herod, for instance, recognized the Christ. Or at least he was well-versed enough in scripture to know that something big was coming, something that could change the world. But when he found Him, his whole thought was to extinguish that light, because it was a threat. Not to be endured.

Herod was a brilliant, powerful, and exceptionally brutal tyrant, who protected his throne by killing everyone who might someday threaten it, including his wife, two of his sons, his wife's grandfather, her brother, and her mother. You cannot live that way and then suddenly rejoice when your savior comes. You don't *want* a savior, when you live that way. It's not that you don't recognize salvation; it's that you hate it.

The magi, on the other hand, also found and identified the Child Jesus, and had (what an understatement!) a different response. Before they ever appeared in the Gospel, they had spent years studying scripture and anticipating the arrival of the Savior. But their studies clearly brought them beyond some academic knowledge of the coming king. Isaiah spoke of glory and brilliance, a "Hero God" — and yet when the magi found Him in Bethlehem, just another poor baby Jew, they still knew who He was — and they rejoiced, and adored, and gloried in His light.

It's not enough to identify God when you find Him. It won't do you any good unless you've been living in a way that makes you ready to want salvation.

Several years ago, I had a little glimpse of Jesus. He was in the form of another man, someone who served God with every moment of his life. When I walked into the room, he was on his knees on the floor, binding the ankle of a boy who had hurt his foot. The boy was not grateful, not at all. He sulked and pitied himself, but the man radiated love. His posture was a living expression of love. The room shone.

This time, when I saw holiness, I didn't run away. I stayed and watched, because the light of charity that shone in that room had something to say to me: "Be like this."

In the first reading at the Mass of the Epiphany, Isaiah says:

*Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come,
the glory of the Lord shines upon you.*

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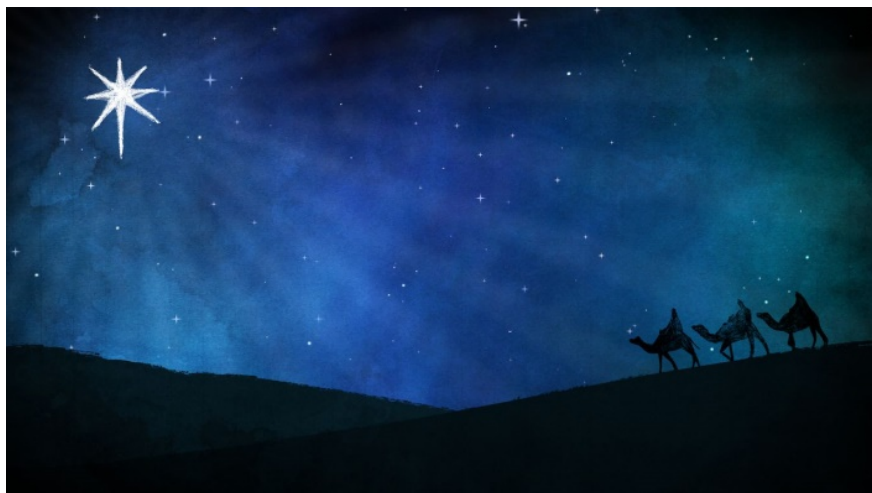
*Nations shall walk by your light,
and kings by your shining radiance.*

This is a light that may reveal all kinds of things. It's not enough for those "nations" (and we are the nations) to recognize and identify God. It's not enough to be able to realize what holiness is when we see it.

How are we preparing, before that light appears? The magi knew it was coming, and they prepared themselves to welcome and adore it. Herod knew it was coming, and he made plans to extinguish it. Herod acted like exactly like Herod when His savior appeared, and so will we act exactly like ourselves when we meet God.

Just being in His light will not be enough. If we live like Herod, we will respond to Him like Herod, with fear, with loathing. We will see the light, and we will want to put it out.

When the glory of the Lord comes to shine upon you, what will that light reveal?



Closing Prayer

(daily-prayers.org/novenas/three-wise-men-kings-magi)

O Holy Magi, you were living in continual expectation of the rising of the Star of Jacob, which would announce the birth of the true Son of justice; obtain for me an increase of faith and charity, and the grace to live in continual hope of beholding, one day, the light of heavenly glory and eternal joy.

O Holy Magi, who at the first appearance of the wondrous star, left your native country to go and seek the new-born King of the Jews; obtain for me the grace of responding promptly, to every Divine inspiration.

O Holy Magi, who disregarded the severity of the season and the inconveniences of the journey, so that you might find the new-born Messiah; obtain for me the grace of not allowing myself to be discouraged by any difficulty which may meet me on the road to my salvation.

O Holy Magi, who, when deserted by the star in the City of Jerusalem, sought humbly the information needed to continue on their journey, obtain for me the grace to seek the truth, amidst any doubts or perplexities, from the counsel of my superiors with faithfulness and humility.

O Holy Magi, who were gladdened by the reappearance of the star which led you to Bethlehem; obtain for me from God, the grace that remaining always faithful to Him in afflictions, I may be consoled in time by His grace, and in eternity by His glory.

O Holy Magi, who, entered full of faith into the stable of Bethlehem, prostrated yourselves on the earth, to adore the new-born King of the Jews, though He was surrounded only by signs of poverty and weakness; obtain from the Lord for me a lively faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, the true spirit of poverty, and a Christ-like charity for the poor and suffering.

O Holy Magi, who offered to Jesus Christ gold, frankincense and myrrh, thereby recognizing Him to be King, God, and Man; obtain from the Lord for me the grace never to present myself before Him with empty hands; but that I may continually offer to Him the gold of charity, the incense of prayer, and the myrrh of penance.

O Holy Magi, who, when warned by an angel not to return to Herod, travelled to your home country by another route; obtain for me from the Lord, the grace that, after having found Him in true repentance, I may avoid all danger of ever losing Him again.

Holy Magi, who were first among the Gentiles called to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and who persevered in the faith till your deaths; obtain from the Lord for me the grace of living always in conformity to my baptismal vows, ever leading a life of faith and, like you, one day seeing God in His heavenly Kingdom.

Amen.