

The Offertory Gifts

(something said just before the Offertory at the Eucharist services at St Mary's on 07.01.24)

This moment in the celebration of the Eucharist is called the offertory. The offertory is the moment when the gifts of bread and wine are brought forward and placed on the altar; it is when we offer these gifts to God. They represent the fruits of creation that we first receive from God and which we then work with our hands so that they are of use to us. By placing these simple gifts on the altar, we acknowledge that all that we have comes from God and we offer it back to God, placing these things - and by extension our whole selves, all of our life - in God's hands.

As the Eucharistic prayer then progresses, these gifts which we have laid before God on the altar are transformed and given back to us by God, as a sacramental gift, an act of grace by which we are able to share in the life of God: no longer gifts of mere bread and wine to sustain this life, but gifts of God's own self, given for us all, that we might share in the life eternal.

So when we come to a Eucharist we come with gifts to offer in the expectation that we will receive back from God, by God's grace, immeasurably more than we bring or give.

You can perhaps see why this point in the service, the offertory, has traditionally been used as a time to take a collection of a money from the congregation and bring that money forward to be received by the priest. This offering of our own wealth, the fruit of our own labours, is another way, alongside the eucharistic gifts of bread and wine, of offering a gift to God in gratefulness and in recognition that all we have comes from God. This money is a token, just as the bread and wine are tokens, or symbols, of our offering of ourselves and all that we have back to God, from whom we first received all that we have.

I am mentioning this today, not as a mini tutorial on the Eucharist, but because I need to say something about our gifts of money.

Few people enjoy talking about money and financial giving in public, and I am sorry if this makes any of you feel uncomfortable. But we are in uncomfortable times, and so this needs to be said.

Many people outside the church community do not know that a parish church has to pay its own way: we receive no external funding. A surprising number of people within the church also do not know this, or if they do know, they do not really process what it means for us. It means that it is down to us to cover our costs. That 'us' is the regular members of the congregation, those who consider this to be their own church community. We do not have wealthy patrons or benefactors to pay for our church; it is our church and it is up to us to pay for it. That is the bottom line.

And we are not managing to cover our costs.

Now, there is much that could be said about this, and indeed should be said about this if we are to turn things around. But this is not the right moment to go into all the detail and all the possibilities for encouraging more people to support St Mary's financially (we have very few

regular donors: only around 20-25 people give regularly to St Mary's) or to talk about reasons why those who do give might give more generously (our average level of donation is remarkably low – far below the national average, which is itself shockingly low). On another occasion, we might explore all this, and reflect on the fact that our giving in the collection plate when we come to church is, or should be, a symbolic token of a deeper, wider, richer offering of our gifts back to God, not our total offering. But today, there is a much shorter and simpler request.

Today we are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany. When the magi visited Jesus in Bethlehem, they took with them their treasure chests. When they knelt before him in joy, they opened those treasure chests and gave him of their wealth: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Epiphany is a time of gift-giving and, as you may know, in some countries it is at Epiphany and not Christmas that people exchange gifts with one another, recalling the generosity of the magi.

At the moment, we are in the process of finalising the PCC accounts for 2023. As with recent years, our regular giving has come nowhere close to covering our costs. We have therefore had to divert all the money we have made through fundraising and all the other donations we have received towards covering our basic running costs. We would wish to be able to use that additional money for missional activities and to invest in improvements, but we are currently not able to do that.

Even with the help of those additional funds, we are still short this year. The final figure is not yet certain, but it is likely that the shortfall between our expenditure and our income in 2023 will be between £1,000 and £1,500.

That is a very bridgeable gap – this deficit is far less than in recent years, but it still a deficit. If everyone who considers themselves to be part of the community here at St Mary's were to give a bit extra now as a one-off additional contribution (frankincense and myrrh would be interesting, but gold is probably easier to pay in at the bank), we could break even this year. Today, this Epiphany, please do consider whether you are in a position to open your treasure chest and help us, working together, to bridge that manageable gap by offering an Epiphany gift. Thank you.