

## For Sunday 3 January 2010

### Incense in the Church

This is the second of our monthly columns about things we have or do in church and why. Since this is the Sunday on which we are celebrating the Epiphany, we will consider incense.

One of the gifts of the Magi mentioned in the second chapter of Matthew is frankincense, a specific kind of incense with a very pure smell, coming from the hardened resin of *Boswellia* trees found in Oman, Yemen, and Somalia. Some people (only half joking) refer to it as ‘the smell of God.’ Incense at the time of Jesus’ birth (as well as since) was commonly burnt as an offering to God. This was true in the Hebrew Temple where incense was offered daily as part of worship. It was also true in Egypt and in the other religious traditions of the ancient Near East. It was a common enough cultural symbol that everyone recognized incense as connected to God, and so a symbol of the Child’s divinity.

One aspect of the use of incense is the inclusion of the sense of smell in our worship. As we offer all that we are to God, we want to engage our whole selves, our bodies as well as our minds and spirits, so we have sensory things that engage our responses. If we associate the smell of incense with prayer and worship, then its presence will help us more quickly settle into a prayerful state of being.

It is also very common to associate the rising of the visible smoke with prayer. (“Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of

all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.” *(Revelation 8:3-4)* Because of the association with God and with worship, it has become traditional in the church to use incense to bless things. It is usual for the priest to add the incense to the charcoal and to bless it while doing so, because the priest is responsible for blessing.

In many other traditions, incense burns in a standing censer, either put directly on hot coals or lit in the form of sticks. In the Christian tradition, incense is used to bless people and objects, and so is carried through the church. In the procession, the incense leads, blessing the way before the ministers of the service. During the service, the incense may be used to bless the altar, to bless the Gospel book before it is read, to bless the bread and wine and other offerings, to bless the ministers, and to bless the people.

Depending on the ventilation, the shape of the room, and the sensitivity of the congregation, the incense may remain in the sanctuary throughout worship, or come and go as it is needed.

Some vocabulary associated with incense in church:

- Most incense used in churches (like frankincense) is composed of aromatic gum or resin from trees. It is hard and almost rocklike in form. Hence the expression to ‘put on a rock of incense.’
- The incense and charcoal are placed in a metal container on a chain or chains, called a ‘thurible’ (from the Latin word for incense).
- The person who carries the thurible is called a ‘thurifer’ and the person who carries the container of extra incense (‘the boat’) is called the ‘boat bearer’ or more often simply ‘the boat’.

