

ARTABAN

“THE WISEST” OF THEM ALL

Adapted from the legend of “The Fourth Wise Man” of Henry Van Dyke. by P.Ribess, s.j

Intent of this Legend

- ✓ *Christian Maturity is found in serving others, in being a person for others.*
- ✓ *There is no other way of serving Christ but serving others.*
- ✓ *Worship and the practice of any religion has down-to-earth social consequences*

THE LEGEND

Narrator: Gaspar, Melchior, Baltazar and Artaban mounted their camels and started off on their journey. Their goal: to pay homage to the new-born King of Kings. Their destination: unknown. Their guide, a tiny twinkling star that appeared in the skies! The first three Magi had sold all they had to buy gifts worthy of a King – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Artaban, the fourth one, chose to buy precious gems – a ruby, some emeralds and diamonds. As he journeyed along, Artaban, gazing at the precious gems in the palm of his hand, was proudly muttering to himself:

Artaban: The King of Kings will look his grandest and lordliest with his royal diadem studded with these precious gems. How I long for the day when I’ll meet my King and offer him these precious stones! That will be the greatest day of my life!

Narrator: Artaban’s reverie was abruptly interrupted by the pitiful groans of someone in pain. Quickly, Artaban put away the precious gems in his little purse, dismounted his camel and went about searching for his fellow-man in distress. Yes, there he was, lying helpless in a wayside ditch, half-naked bleeding and dying. The man was full of cuts and bruises. He had been attacked by robbers and thrown into the ditch to die. Artaban’s heart bled with pity for the man. He lifted him up put him on his mount and took him to a nearby inn. There, he cared for him. He devoted himself so completely to this work of mercy that, for a while, he forgot all about the star, the journey ahead and his new-born King! Having seen to the man’s welfare and recovery, Artaban was about to leave the inn when the innkeeper demanded payment for lodging and boarding for the wounded man. .

Artaban was at a loss to meet the demands of the innkeeper. All the wealth he had was his precious stones. Being in a fix, he dipped into his purse for the ruby and without a further thought gave it to the innkeeper. Then he rushed out to look for his traveling companions. He kept telling himself:

Artaban: Never mind the ruby. My King will not take it amiss that I gave it away to save the life of a dying man.

Narrator: Search as he could, he lost trail of his fellow travelers. He never met them again! The star, too, vanished from the sky! Artaban was left behind, alone and lonely. Limp with exhaustion from the long and fruitless search, Artaban sat down on a tree-stump and prayed.

Artaban: Lo, my King of Kings! I left my home, my kith and kin, my country and my all in my quest of you! Now, I am now alone and un befriended in this trackless waste. Guide my steps, Lord, that I may find you and offer you my precious stones!

Narrator: Then, rising he remounted his camel and set out on the journey all by himself. No friends to keep him company, no star to guide his path. Day, after weary day, he journeyed onward, past bustling towns and sleepy hamlets and palm fringed oases, in a determined bid to find his King! Deep down in his heart he felt that some day. Somewhere, somehow, he would find him!

One day, tired and thirsty, Artaban sat by a well in a little oasis in an expanse of burning sand praying to his King. After a while, in the distance he saw a caravan slowly trailing its way in the direction of the oasis. May be, he thought, the travelers would give him news about his King! He waited anxiously for them. But no, they did not; nor could they tell him anything

about his king! That was a caravan of death! They were slave traders dragging along their human cargo.

Soon, the caravan stopped by the well to rest and to refresh. Artaban looked at those wretched, emaciated and frightened slaves condemned to a life long bondage. He felt so sorry for them! His heart went out to them. The loving countenance of that old, soft-hearted, merciful man struck a responsive chord in the heart of the slaves. They flocked around him with heart rending pleads:

Slaves: Please, Sir, buy us all! Buy us, free us from the hands of these brutal men, these heatless beasts! We shall serve you, yes, for the rest of our lives!

Narrator: Artaban's heart melted with pity on hearing their pleas. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Quickly, as though impelled by an unseen force, his hand went to his purse. He took out the emeralds and the diamonds. They sparkled in his palm. Indeed, a royal price to pay for freedom! He stood up, without quite knowing what he was doing. He walked, robot-like, to the master caravaner and blurted out:

Artaban: I buy them, all of them!

Narrator: Astonished, the caravaner asked :

Caravaner: To buy them all? What have you to offer as a price?

Narrator: Artaban quietly opened his hand and showed the man his jewels, saying:

Artaban: This is the price! A bounty worthy of a king!

Narrator: The caravaner took the ransom and replied:

Caravaner: They are yours, all of them. Take them away!

Narrator: Then he calling his men, the Caravaner went away Artaban turned to "his" slaves and in an exuberance of joy exclaimed

Artaban: You are free! You belong to yourselves! You are not mine! Now, go home and live your lives!

Narrator: And all went home. Only Artaban remained, alone and lonely by the well. He was confused. He whispered to himself:

Artaban: What have I done? Did I do the right thing? My heart tells me I am right; but, nothing is left for my King!

Narrator: The sun set on the distant horizon. Darkness covered the desert earth. Up in the sky the stars Blinked. Artaban's weary and tear-stained eyes stared abstractedly at the starry dome of night. Then, in amazement, he suddenly exclaimed:

Artaban: Yes! Yes! It's there! Can it be possible? Surely, this is the star of the new-born King! Shall I follow it? But woe is me, it's too late! What's left with me to offer him? It's all given away! Too late for me, too late, alas, to meet my King!

Narrator: Artaban bent his head down and sobbed his heart out. As if from nowhere, a mysterious voice rent the silence of the night with words that burned in Artaban's ears:

Voice: No! It's not too late: It was just the right time, Artaban!
I want you to know, Artaban, that yours is the first gift I ever received after my birth!
Of the four kings who set out in quest of me, you are the first to find me, the first to pay me homage and the first to offer me his gift!

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

- 1) Did Artaban ever meet Christ? How? Where?
- 2) Did he really squander his jewels?
- 3) Had he a reason to be sorry and dejected for not meeting Christ? Why?
- 4) Explain the mysterious words Artaban heard in the silence of the dessert
- 5) Why we call Artaban the "wisest" of them all?

6) How could Artaban's gift be the first Jesus received after his birth?

No Artaban, no! It's not too late! It was just the right time!

Yours was the first gift I ever received after my birth".

Reflect on the inconsistencies in the way we practice our faith and in the way we serve Christ:

- ✓ We say that we love Christ, but we do not love – even - hate our brothers and sisters.
- ✓ We thank him for his graces, but we take our brothers and sisters, for granted. Their services and ministrations so often go unnoticed without a word of appreciation or gratitude.
- ✓ We praise God for what He is, but we are loath to praise our neighbor and recognize the good that is in him.
- ✓ We say that we are willing to serve God, but we are reluctant to serve our brothers and sisters.
- ✓ We ask God for pardon, but we are not ready to forgive our enemies.
- ✓ We say that we love the poor but, in actual fact, we avoid them, feel disgust for them, consider them a positive nuisance, and if we help them, it is in order to get rid of them.
- ✓ We honor Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, but when we go home, we ill-treat our servants and those under us.
- ✓ We call Christ our brother, but we make fun of our brothers and sisters, criticize them and tear them to pieces at the slightest provocation.
- ✓ We feel great compassion for the suffering Christ of the Passion, but we shun the sickbed and deathbed. We prefer cheap thrills to missions of mercy.
- ✓ We pity Christ in his exile in Egypt, but we couldn't care less for the millions of exiles and refugees in the world.
- ✓ Our hearts bleed for Christ scourged at the pillar. But we will not lift a finger to mitigate the scourge of injustice and oppression of the down-trodden in the world.
- ✓ We sympathize with Christ laboring under the weight of his cross, but we exploit our servants and impose back-breaking burdens on the poor and the weak and the underprivileged.
- ✓ We receive Christ in Holy Communion, but we banish him when we confront him in the person of the beggar at the door or an unwelcome guest.