



Preparing our gifts for Christ

An address for the Cosmic Mass ● 3rd December 2006 ● Rev Lukas

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

*"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us).*

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25

Advent is a time of preparation for the Christmas Festival, the celebration of the birth of Christ into this world. What is meant by preparation and how can we do this? This, of course, is my question. You probably all know exactly how to prepare, so please bear with me as I look into this question. My approach has been to contemplate the story of Christmas as portrayed in the gospels of Matthew and Luke and to see what qualities are present in these portrayals, and to use these qualities as clues as to what I might need to develop during this time of Advent.

I will continue reading from Matthew 2:1-21.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a

dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
because they were no more."*

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

The Matthew story highlights the role of King Herod and the Magi from the east following the star and bringing their treasures to the Christ child. Joseph plays a leading role, actively following the guidance of angels that appear to him and tell him about the naming of Jesus and, later, escaping to Egypt. Mary is more in the background in Mathew's version.

In chapter one of Matthew's gospel we read the genealogy of Jesus. There are 42 generations from Abraham down to Jesus. The names listed in this genealogy after David, including David's son Solomon, are from the royal line, and apparently many are identifiable as Kings and rulers of Israel.

Clearly Jesus is from a significant blood-line. King Herod was also very concerned about this royal blood-line and took measures to prevent being displaced by the birth of a new king.

One way to study the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke, is to use esoteric knowledge regarding the development of the various bodies of Jesus. But I would like to leave that approach aside and try to understand these stories as they relate to aspects of our own being and our preparation for Christmas.

The Theme in the Matthew Version

The idea of kings and a royal lineage indicates for us, on a symbolic level, mastery and rulership in this world of matter. The name **Herod** is related to the word hero, which metaphysically can represent our ego and sense of self – our sense-bound consciousness and our worldly identity. In its raw form as demonstrated by King Herod, it is a consciousness that is ignorant of spirit and also is afraid of spirit and wants to kill it off.

The next image is of the **Magi** bringing treasures as gifts to the Christ child. They arrive at a house, there is no barn or manger mentioned in Matthew's version, but a house. The theme of Matthew's version includes kings, Magi and treasures and conveys the idea of successful involvement in the world. So what meaning can we draw from this story?

Has anyone else had a struggle this year, particularly over the last few months during the season of Michaelmas? It can be a battle to maintain a spiritual consciousness and

perspective in our day-to-day life. It is so easy to get thrown off track and to lose sight of our spiritual goals.

This struggle is indicated in the story by the dynamic between Herod and the Magi. Herod representing that aspect of self which fears that spirit will upset the status quo of our material existence. Herod wanted to kill off such a threat. The Magi represent that ability to remain focussed on a spiritual goal, the star, to endure, to journey a long way with perseverance until the goal is reached. This quality of endurance also enables us to discern the motives of our earthly self, as the Magi discerned the secret motives of Herod and were able to avert the danger.

What does the figure of **Joseph** indicate? In the first instance he represents outward activity, or **doing-ness** – for example, in the story he decides to take Mary as his wife, he arranges to escape to Egypt. He also embodies the ability to follow the inner prompting of intuitive thought, represented here by the angels, to make decisions, to take action and, like the Magi, to then persevere and endure.

Both the Magi and Joseph make thoughtful decisions, take action and persevere.

We have been conscious of these qualities this year in our study of the Letter of James. In that study we used the following terms:

Endurance - to remain strong and to persevere in the face of forces that would lead us away from our spiritual goal, as demonstrated by Joseph and the Magi in the face of opposition from Herod.

Control of action – in following the star the Magi demonstrate a consistent intent in their actions from day to day.

Control of thought – to be discerning in our thought life, to be open like Joseph to new ideas and intuitions, not to close our minds and become dogmatic.

The Gifts of the Magi

The result of practising these three qualities is beautifully represented in the imagery of the Magi presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child. **Frankincense** is a sweet smelling plant resin, **myrrh** is a resin with a bitter aroma. **Gold** of course is the most precious metal, often associated with the Sun. The Latin word for gold 'aurum', apparently is the same word used in the Hebrew language for 'light'. We also use words such as 'aurora', which is the word we use to describe the golden light of dawn.

One interpretation of the symbolic meaning of these gifts is as follows. If we enter into our lives with a spiritual goal and then endure without deviation through both the **bitter and the sweet** experiences that life brings, then like an alchemist we produce gold - that is, clear, enlightened consciousness. A consciousness imbued with the light of the Sun.

Advent gives us the opportunity for some final transmutation and refining of our nature to take place and then, like the Magi, at Christmas we can offer these refined qualities of soul as gifts to the Christ within our hearts.

The Theme in the Luke Version

The Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke is not the same as that told by Matthew.

For example, the genealogy in Luke is different. Perhaps the most striking difference is that in Luke the lineage continues from the David's son Nathan whereas in Matthew the lineage is from David's son Solomon. Solomon of course went on to become one of the most famous

kings in the history of the Hebrew people. The life of Nathan, the son of David, is less well known. The lineage from Nathan through to Jesus consists of a series of names that are different from those found in Matthew. The names in Luke are obscure. They are not the names of kings and rulers but of unknown individuals. Also in Luke there is no mention of the psychopathic King Herod.

The indication in Luke is that Mary and Joseph are probably poor, compared to the family portrayed in Matthew. For example in Matthew the family was living in a house in Bethlehem, but in Luke the family tried to get public accommodation at an inn, but there was no room for them there, so they had to find a manger in which to lay the new born Christ child. A manger is an animal feeding trough. In Luke's portrayal there are no expensive gifts given to the future King. All these aspects in Luke do not create a picture of worldly power and influence.

Another significant difference is that **Mary** and her experiences are at the forefront in Luke's version. The angels appear to Mary not Joseph. Joseph is hardly mentioned - he is very much a background figure.

We also have the **shepherds** watching their flock by night and the angels appearing to them telling them of the child in the manger who is the saviour, Christ the Lord. And then a heavenly host appear saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will."

So what Advent meaning can we gain from this version of the Christmas story?

The Luke genealogy includes a lineage of unknown names. The story involves the experience of the shepherds, probably unknown folk. They were however souls who were open to the forces of nature, keen observers of nature, probably not encumbered with the learning and affairs of the world.

Can we, like the shepherds, remain open to spiritual impulses that may come to us during Advent? Spiritual impulses in the form of intuitions without clear meaning. Like an ancient shepherd, do we with faith, trust our insights?

Also we read that the shepherds were 'filled with fear' and the angel says 'be not afraid'. The shepherds were then able to receive the message from the heavens and relay it to Mary and Joseph. This demonstrates a quality of **being-ness**. In the face of fear, they regained their **composure**, and remained present with the experience.

The shepherds were told they would find the saviour, Christ the Lord in a manger, an animal feeding trough. The shepherds did not question this seeming contradiction. They demonstrated the Buddhist quality of non-judgement, or **impartiality**.

And what about the figure of Mary? In Luke we read how, after the shepherds had told of their experience, 'all who heard it wondered (also translated as marvelled) at what the shepherds had told them'. I get the sense that everyone was saying, 'Wow! Did you hear that? How incredible!' And then we read, 'but Mary kept (or preserved) all these things and pondered them in her heart'. Certainly this also describes a quality of **beingness**. Mary demonstrates a calm forbearance in the face of uncertainty; with faith she trusts that meaning and understanding will emerge in time.

Again we come across some familiar concepts from our studies of the Letter of St James: trust, calm forbearance, non-judgement and composure. These are qualities of soul to cultivate during Advent so that at Christmas we are able to be in a state of **being-ness**, able to be with the Christ within our hearts.

Two Inner Aspects

The qualities demonstrated in Matthew and Luke seem to be coming from two different directions or from different poles within our nature – Joseph and the Magi on one hand and Mary and the shepherds on the other. One way to characterise these poles is to label them as Doing and Being.

Both aspects of our nature are brought together through the birth of Christ and both bring their unique gifts and qualities in service and in offering to the Christ within our hearts.

So shall it be.

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