

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Matthew 2:1-12 ("The Visit of the Wise Men")

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Good Christians all rejoice (CH:322)

As with gladness, men of old (CH:326)

Child in the manger (CH:314)

Joy to the world (CH:320)

Today's service is being led by the Worship Team with a seasonal address by Janet Anderson. If you would like to start by reading the beautiful poetry of "Bethlehem Down" (pausing to reflect upon its meaning for you) the words are to be found on page 4.

The Christmas song, "Bethlehem Down", is one of the most beautiful I know, every element of the composition perfectly reflecting the sweet wonder of the birth of Jesus against the shadow of the bitter suffering that lies ahead. A masterpiece. It was composed in haste, in a single evening, by Peter Warlock together with his poet/journalist friend Bruce Blunt, for a last-minute entry to a Daily Telegraph Christmas Carol Competition in 1927, in the hope that they might win and receive enough prize money to fund yet another boozy night out in London. And indeed, they did - both win and carouse! How on earth could two such revellers come up with something so sublime? Certainly, there is far more in this work of seemingly human art than meets the human eye. The poetry and symbolism of the words and music could have come straight from the Old Testament, the Psalms or other poetic writings - word pairs, alliteration, the parallelism of hope in verses 1 and 2 against despair in verses 3 and 4, all set in the heart-breaking key of D minor, to a tune and style belonging to centuries past. And all that came about in one short evening's impromptu composing session in the pub? Weird!

Yet how evocative the words, how haunting the tune; there is a mystery here that we can't ignore! We cannot help but be transported in mind, body, and spirit to that moment in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, beautiful music filling the air, Mary cradling her baby in loving arms, stable animals standing close by to keep out the draught - the scene, one of sublime safety, security, warmth, and peace. Perhaps it's the trailing, winding tune that carries us over Bethlehem Down on the camels' backs with the Magi - certainly we can feel the night chill, blink with wonder under the dazzle of the brightest starlight, catch the faint scent of the spices floating in the breeze. Truly magical! With Joseph at her side, we can share in Mary's hopes and dreams, marvel at her courage, smile with joy for the innocent delight of one so young.

In this way we really experience awe and wonder through the words and music of this song.

And yes, we can also feel the fear. We, with the benefit of knowing how the story unfolds, we, who travel on camel-back, snaking along the sands at funereal pace, swung side to side with every forward inch, clutching our precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh in homage to a King on the occasion of his birth, as to the Son of God on the occasion of his death, yes, *we* have cause to fear.

But at this point, did Mary fear, did *she* have cause to fear?

Certainly, Mary would have been well acquainted with the Torah (the Old Testament), as was Jesus in his day. She would have been familiar with the writing styles, the special uses of the Hebrew language for prose, for poetry, for matters of Law, in the Wisdom literature, and in the unique language of the Prophetic books. Dreams and symbols were, after all, commonplace in Mary's day, part of everyday life - we can recall many characters in the Old Testament with whom God communicated through angels or dreams, symbols, and signs - Abraham, Moses, Jacob, David, Daniel, Esther, Joseph, to name but a few! Perhaps that's why Mary was able to receive Gabriel and his message so calmly, and with such remarkable serenity and obedience. Her Jewish faith and its teaching had conditioned her to

such celestial encounters through her immersion in the faith's teaching. Prophecy regarding the arrival of a Messiah, a Saviour, an Anointed One, abounds in the Old Testament - the place and time of birth, lineage, details of his life, his suffering, even the manner of his death. Psalm 72 tells of Kings who bring their gifts to a great ruler, Isaiah 60 of Kings who would honour God's light in Jerusalem. Of course, signs, symbols and dreams don't tend to make much sense at the time, nor does prophecy, until fulfilled, but yes, of course Mary had cause to fear, not least because of the political situation at the time.

Like all young mothers, Mary surely would have been completely absorbed in the joy of the moment, as she gazed, with a love no-one can ever even dream of, on the miracle of a new-born cradled in tender arms. Clearly, several days down the line, Mary was still able to give welcome to the Magi when they arrived; able graciously to receive the gifts they brought, *but*, was Mary ready yet to understand the underlying symbolism of these gifts, representative emblems of Jesus' future life - Gold for Kingship, Frankincense for God, Myrrh for Man, Jesus as Ruler over God's Kingdom, worshipped as God, fully human and divine?

In fact, it would indeed be some time before Mary would experience the real significance of these prophetic gifts. Yet we, who can "play the film to the end", shiver under this disturbing, sinister shadow of grief, as the union of Bruce Blunt's poetry with Warlock's music, in the second half of their song, makes its presence felt in the core of our very being - the beautiful robes for lifeless grave sheets, myrrh for embalming, wood for a crown, the rocking lullaby music of sleep, now troubled, unsettled, discordant, ominous.

And how portentous the last notes of this wondrous song, belonging to one solitary shepherd, "Songs of a shepherd in Bethlehem fold". Shepherds, who on the hillside were the first to hear the news of Jesus' birth from an angel of God, were not well regarded in first century Palestine, often criticised by Jewish leaders as the nature of their work meant they could not always keep to religious rules such as strict Sabbath observance.

Yes, this Holy child was truly born for all, one and all, especially the seemingly insignificant, the marginalised. How telling that those other main characters in the narrative are not Jews but Gentiles, the Magi from the East, representing a non-Jewish world, also have "starring" roles in Jesus' story. And Mary, the central character, a lowly young woman, with no understanding of what was in store for her, willing to take a chance on life with God, humble, simple, yet with all the courage, patience, trust, and obedience to give birth to God's desire for humanity, a Saviour for all; young Mary, who acknowledged God's great power and her own humble servanthood, the embodiment of faith and faithfulness.

And so, we might bring together these three elements, one remarkable Christmas song composed by two present-day wassailers, "party animals" we might say, one remarkable real-life Christmas story featuring a host of ordinary people, one remarkable kaleidoscope of dreams, angels, visions, signs, symbols - all together the means through which God can communicate with people and guide events.

In a dream, God warned the Magi not to go back to Herod, but to return to their home by a different route.

God is watching over us all, one and all, trying to communicate with us all the time. If only we will open our hearts and minds to hear, so that we may listen, learn to trust, and do our humble best to obey! Amen.

A New Year prayer

A New Year prayer of Vinita Hampton Wright:

God of all time,
help us enter the New Year quietly,
thoughtful of who we are to ourselves and to others,
mindful that our steps make an impact and our words carry power.
May we walk gently. May we speak only after we have listened well.

Creator of all life,
help us enter the New Year reverently, aware that you have endowed
every creature and plant, every person and habitat with beauty and purpose.
May we regard the world with tenderness. May we honour rather than destroy.

Lover of all souls,
help us enter the New Year joyfully, willing to laugh and dance and dream,
remembering our many gifts with thanks
and looking forward to blessings yet to come.
May we welcome your lavish love.

In this new year, may the grace and peace of Christ bless us now and
in the days ahead.

Amen.

"Bethlehem Down" (Bruce Blunt)

*When He is King we will give Him the Kings' gifts,
Myrrh for its sweetness, and gold for a crown,
"Beautiful robes", said the young girl to Joseph,
Fair with her firstborn on Bethlehem Down.*

*Bethlehem Down is full of the starlight,
Winds for the spices, and stars for the gold,
Mary for sleep, and for lullaby music.
Songs of a shepherd by Bethlehem fold.*

*When He is King they will clothe Him in grave sheets,
Myrrh for embalming, and wood for a crown,
He that lies now in the white arms of Mary,
Sleeping so lightly on Bethlehem Down.*

*Here He has peace and a short while for dreaming,
Close-huddled oxen to keep Him from cold,
Mary for love, and for lullaby music,
Songs of a shepherd by Bethlehem fold.*