

THE WRONG MANGER – CAROL SERVICE 2017

A story is told of three strangers appearing one night out of the darkness and seeking a child and a stable. They had travelled far and the weariness in their faces, the worn harness of bridle and saddle and the dust and grime staining their clothes told that it had been a long and a hard journey.

But now they had arrived and they hastened to the stable, drawn by the sounds of a new born baby making its first hesitant presence felt in the world.

Each stranger carried something held tight to their chests and it was clear that they bore items of rare and great value.

Inside the stable they paused for a moment, unsure as to what they would find. They saw before them a young woman, tired from a hard birth but with a face of deep, deep contentment. Beside her stood an older man, clearly her husband, also tired and just as clearly very, very proud. Something stirred in the folds of cloth within a feeding trough and the baby cried again.

The noise seemed to stir the visitors from their momentary uncertainty and slowly they came forward to stare in wonder at this child lying helpless before them. A child who in their hearts they knew was God come to earth; the divine in human form, the limitless limited by human flesh.

The first man, dressed all in red, knelt before the manger and opened his bundle. By the soft light of a lantern hung from the stable roof, there came a flash of light. Gold! Slowly the stranger lifted it clear of its wrappings and laid it at the foot of the manger.

Next came the second stranger clad all in blue, and he too knelt at the baby's feet. As he began to unwrap his gift the stable was filled with a deep and pine-filled fragrance. Frankincense was laid before this strange and make-shift cradle.

And so the third stranger came forward, trailing his purple cloak behind him in the straw. A leathery sweetness now competed with the frankincense, as he took myrrh from a box inlaid with ivory and placed it beside the other gifts.

There was silence for a long moment and then the first man spoke.

“In our country and in our culture, it is customary to give gifts to one of royal blood and we see here before us though wrapped in rags, one who is more royal than any other. And we have seen too, as we have studied the night sky and read the stars, that this child is more than human and yet will suffer more deeply than any human.

And so gold is for the one who is king: frankincense is for the one who is God: myrrh is for the God who will suffer and the Man who will die.

But it is also a custom in our culture that even as a king receives gifts, so a king gives gifts appropriate to those that he has received. And as we have presented rare and precious offerings to the child, we now await his gifts in return.

For myself – I who have given gold for a king – I require a God who will allow me to be a king also. I wish to be the only lord of my life and to live free from all interference. This child will be king of everywhere and of everything and of everyone – but he will not rule over me.”

The second stranger then spoke: “I came bringing frankincense for worship. And so for myself, I do not seek power but I do desire worship. I wish to be the centre of my world and moreover the centre of other people’s worlds as well. I want people to exist to please me and to meet my needs and my desires. In my world, even God will take second place to me.

And then it was the turn of the third stranger. “I am wiser than my two companions”, he said. “For I neither desire to be the lord of my life nor the centre of other people’s lives. I have seen how fragile happiness and popularity and success can be and I wish for none of these things. Myrrh says this is a world of suffering and of loss. And so in return for my gift I require a God who will keep me from all harm; save me from all pain; protect me from every peril; and smooth my path in this world.”

Once again there was a long silence: no-one said a word, it was as if no-one dared even to breathe.

And then Joseph spoke. “Kind sirs, my wife and I thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your gifts and we are honoured that you have come so far to see our little baby. But our son will be called “Immanuel, God with us”. But how will he be God with you, if you will not allow him to be God with you?”

“Gentle visitors,” said Mary, “I too thank you for coming so far and braving so many dangers. But our Son will be called “Immanuel, God with us”. But how will he be God be with you, if the only god you will allow with you - is you?”

“And to our third honoured guest, I thank you for the gift of myrrh. But our son will be called “Immanuel, God with us”. But how will he be God with you, if all you want is to keep life at bay?”

And then Joseph spoke once more. “Dear friends,” he said, “You came with gifts of gold for a king, frankincense for a god and myrrh for suffering. And you travelled many miles and faced many hardships to get here. But I think the gifts that you brought, you brought to give to yourselves and not to our son. He is not the God you want; he is not the God you wish to serve; he is not the God you wish to follow...

Kind sirs, gentle visitors, honoured guests: you have come to the wrong manger.”