

Reflection: THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS

- *Carols, shopping, gifts, families and food OR ... ?*
- *“Angel song ... lifts our hearts and tunes our ears to the harmony of the universe, making us wonder ...”*
- *The shepherd and magi/ wise men are both within us!*
- *“ In the small rough stable of our lives, Christ is born”*

We sing the familiar carols and we get caught up in the busy preparations for Christmas. We go shopping for gifts or make them ourselves – and we spend time wrapping them. We arrange to meet with family and we prepare food. Christmas preparations overwhelm some of us. In New Zealand this all happens at the end of the school and work year and at the beginning of the summer holidays. We lose the imagery of cosy celebration in mid-winter and of light coming into our world at the darkest time of the year and Christmas becomes just part of our very busy end of year rush. For many people Christmas is just an excuse to have lots of parties – or maybe one party that just keeps going for a long time.

Christmas is also a time when, in church services and community carol services, we particularly listen again to the stories of the birth of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. We look at the manger scene and think about the characters from these stories. We think of the birth of a very special child.

Yet every birth is a miracle – and every baby is special. God’s love and grace shine through the eyes and smile of every child. At Christmas we think particularly about the birth of Jesus and the wonder of God entering our world as a human baby. Christmas is a time to give thanks for all children and for all members of our families- and to share the love of God with them.

We have heard read this morning the two different accounts of the birth of Jesus, from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke - two stories with different details and some different characters. But the Bible is not just a book of stories that happen to characters long ago and far away. Some people choose to dismiss these stories because they cannot believe that they could be literally true. But there is far more to the truth of the stories than we get through just a literal understanding. The more than literal understanding of these stories has power to teach us about ourselves and has the power to transform us – if we will let that happen. They are like parables that hold truth within them and apply to us right now, if we are open to exploring them.

We listened to the stories of the shepherds and of the wise men - and we have sung carols about them. These birth stories are different introductions or overtures to the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Each story is fascinating just as a story - of groups of individuals who came to visit Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus - but they have significant meaning to explore.

The story of the wise men is recorded only in Matthew’s gospel. These wise ones were educated men who studied the stars. They followed a star to get to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem. They made a long journey. They travelled from the east. They travelled through the desert, through very difficult terrain, and they travelled the same sort of distance as from Gisborne to Wellington. They had taken time to prepare for the journey and to make it. They believed they were coming to visit a new king and they brought gifts suitable for a king. They were not actually kings themselves although carols and legends make them so. They were people revered for their wisdom, knowledge and understanding. They were the intellectuals of their day. They used their wisdom and learning to prepare and to make a journey in understanding as well as distance.

The wise ones are symbols for us of the wise and discerning use of our intellect, our minds and the opportunities we have for education. We have a responsibility to use our knowledge and our thought processes wisely – and then we too may discover a new awareness of God in our lives.

Luke’s gospel by contrast tells us the story of the shepherds. Their journey was much shorter. They lived and worked just outside Bethlehem. They did not have to travel hundreds of miles – just a short distance down the hills into the township below. They hurried down the hill and into the town and saw this new baby there. They did not plan this – they just heard a message and rushed into doing what they were

told. We might call them reckless, followers of the moment, impulsive. Joy Cowley has that wonderful image of the impulsive, reckless shepherd running helter-skelter with arms outstretched to embrace the wonder of it all.

And wonder and amazement was what they found. The shepherds had a similar new awareness of God and of themselves as the wise ones, but from a different perspective. The biblical story tells us that the shepherds learned of the birth of Jesus from angel messengers, not from a star. Angels, messengers from God, also appear in the birth stories in other ways. Mary learns from a messenger from God that she is to have a son. Joseph learns not to be afraid of this event when an angel appeared to him in a dream. The wise men were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod.

You may not believe in angels in the form that we see them in paintings through the imagination of artists, or in the many different kinds of angels we can buy or make as ornaments to hang on a tree or be part of a nativity scene. But have you ever had a nagging voice inside that will not go away – or a strong feeling that you need to do something or go somewhere or take a particular course of action? Has a friend or stranger ever said something that was just what you needed at the time? Maybe these are your angels, your messengers from God.

Or does something lift your spirits and make you more aware of the world around you? Maybe music has that effect on you. Is that your angel song? May I invite you to allow your imagination to take over for a moment and hear the angel message you need today? Let the music, the thoughts swirl around you.

Maybe the message you need to hear this Christmas is a very personal one, like ‘Don’t be afraid’. Or maybe it is a more general message, like ‘peace on earth, goodwill to all’. Maybe your angel message is to remind you that you are not alone. Even if you are terrified, there are other shepherds in the field with you. Or if the responsibility you have for caring for others weighs heavy upon you maybe the message you need is to know that you are surrounded by God’s glory, a host keeping company and sharing God’s mission with you. Hear the song and let strong wings enfold you. Angels come in many guises - perhaps in the hug from an understanding friend, or the lyrics of a popular song or a Christmas carol, or in a letter or some lines of poetry or in a novel, or in the natural world in your garden or on the beach or in the wilderness, or the particular time when your subconscious mind breaks through into a swirl of thoughts racing around you, or maybe in moments of indescribable transcendence. Whenever and however God’s message comes to you, take time to listen and to let it speak to you.

Just as we can all hear an angel message if we are open to seeing life that way, we may all have the possibility of the wise ones and the shepherds within us – two parts of our nature, as Joy Cowley’s poem makes clear. So what do we really learn from these characters in the Christmas stories?

We all have the potential to think and reason and plan ahead. We also all have the potential to be impulsive and reckless. Some of us will be more likely to act in one way or the other. But both the impulsive shepherds and the thoughtful wise men came to Jesus. They all came to worship God. The Christmas story includes various characters but also symbols – the star, journeys, wise and uneducated, old and young, rich and poor. The gospels are telling us that everyone matters to God. I wonder what are the most meaningful symbols for you? Maybe you might like to consider that this Christmas Day?

Joy Cowley’s poem provides us with another twist and another possibility to consider. *Christ is born in the small rough stable of our lives.* The wonder of the Christmas story is that it is about each of us. God breaks into our lives dramatically. Jesus becomes human, is born as a baby – but through his life shows us the best picture of what God is like – pure love and compassion. And the wonder and the mystery and miracle of Christmas is that, not only do we have the wise and reckless nature within us, we also have the Christ within us too. *“We have no words to contain our praise. We ache with awe, we tremble with miracle, as once again, in the small rough stable of our lives, Christ is born.”* The Christ is born in us. Christ can live through us if we are open to that.

May I encourage you this Christmas Day to acknowledge both the wise and the reckless within you and to allow the Christ to work through you in the world. Startled shepherd or seeking wise one, may God bless you as you grapple with understanding what Christmas means to you. Joy to the world and glory to God. Amen.

We sing: *Joy to the world*