

Christmas Day

There were some strange guests in attendance at the birth of Jesus, at least, if we are to believe the nativity scenes.

Firstly, there were three so called 'Wise Men', from the east. Now, since I was little, I wondered exactly how Wise they actually were, and not only because they embarked on a lengthy arduous and perilous journey - simply because they were following yonder star. And no, they did not have a taxi, a car, or a scooter with a hooter.

But then it only gets worse. Not knowing exactly where to look, they decide, as a committee - to go and ask where to find him. And when they get to Jerusalem, who do they ask? Why, King Herod - the malevolent, bloodthirsty, power-hungry mega-tyrant. I am not sure how wise that was.

Thirdly - what do they say to this paranoid king, with a track record of regicide, homicide, and genocide? They say to him, 'Hey, where is the one who is born King of the Jews - because we'd like to worship him'. In other words, 'Hello your bloodthirsty majesty - we are here to worship your replacement. Can you tell us where to find him?' How wise was that?

Fourthly - somehow, King Herod consults with his staff, and then says to the wise men, "Once you find this King of Jews, be sure to come back and tell me. For you see - I would like to - erm - worship him also." And they believed him.

Now, at this point, I would like to see the look on God's face while he's watching all this?

So, the wise men go and visit Jesus, and can you remember what they brought?

[Gold - for a king; Frankincense - the scent of a resin burned in Temples; Myrrh - used for embalming dead bodies] And these gifts symbolised the counter-cultural kingship that Jesus, the disruptor of political power-games and redefine of social justice was set to trigger.

And if there is such a thing as wisdom, the wisdom celebrated at Christmas is that, far from hiding our eyes at all the terrible stuff that is happening in the real world, or taking refuge in the naïve optimism and trivial diversions of the legacy media - the Christmas message, in this light, speaks of an alternative power dynamic at work in the world. One that does not trivialise, or ignore, or redefine the world major injustices - so much as an alternative power dynamic that fuels quiet resistance, covert revolution, and in so doing brings the profoundest joy to the darkest places of the earth, and the darkest situations a human being can face.

Not in the delusional quest for supernatural comfort drawn from an iron-age mythology; not a means of granting access to heaven - the final resting place of the tediously well-behave, but a 'joy' that makes a real difference, to the real lives of real people, here and now. Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh: effectiveness, respect for the other, embrace of mortality.

Great - but just as the wise men might start to live up to their name and - they revert to type.

Job done, they prepare to go and tell the infanticidal Herod the whereabouts of a new pretender to his throne. And these wise men are so wise, that God has to intervene, and warn them in a dream, not to go back to Herod.

At the very least - the Christmas story suggests that wisdom is being redefined, that a quiet revolution has begun, and that tyrants are being defied.