

Death stalks the land and people are afraid. Can we learn anything from the Christmas story to abate this fear or at least address it? Today, we celebrate the coming of the Magi : three wise men to greet the newly born Christ with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; gifts which seem extraordinarily out of place in such a humble setting and which have led to the portrayal of these three gentile pilgrims as kings in their own right – a submission of the rich to the ways of the poor; a reversal of human values consistent with the coming of God’s kingdom, with the coming of God in this Christ-child. So there’s a whole world of meaning which can be drawn out from this scene and, in a Christmas sermon of 2002, Rowan Williams does just this through the lens of Evelyn Waugh’s novel, *Helena*, which traces the pilgrimage of the Emperor Constantine’s mother to the Holy Land in an attempt to flesh out her newly found faith in Christ.

These so-called wise men were her sort of people, the people she was used to. Clever, devious, complicated, nervous, the late arrivals on the scene. ‘Like me’ she said to them, ‘you were late in coming. The shepherds were here long before; even the cattle. They had joined the chorus of angels before you were on your way....’ (p.5. *Choose Life*)

And Rowan Williams recognises that Evelyn Waugh is working out his own complicated and privileged journey to Christ in his portrayal of *Helena* and the three wise men. He, too, comes late to true faith and has to work his way through a whole series of false starts before getting there, not least the failings of his own privileged character. But nothing is wasted.

*Even (if) on their way to Christ, the wise man create the typical havoc that complicated people create; (for) telling Herod about the Christ child, they provoke the massacre of the children in Bethlehem. It’s as if in *Helena*’s eyes, the wise, the devious and resourceful can’t help making the most immense mistakes of all.* (p.6. *ibid*)

And Rowan Williams goes on to make much of this lateness of the most complicated people as a way of saying that child-like faith does not necessarily imply unintelligence, or better, that everyone’s gifts and failings can still bring them to Christ – and one wonders how much of himself is in this picture, too.

Now, before we disappear into our own hall of mirrors, it might be worth reminding ourselves that however intelligent and complicated the wise men are, it’s in a dream that they are guided away from Bethlehem and the Christ-child is saved from Herod’s wrath. There’s something very child-like about this step of faith: a loving action inspired, not necessarily, by an elaborate process of reasoning with all its ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ and multiple levels of meaning, but by an inspiration ‘from above’. In this respect, can the three wise men really be held responsible for the deaths of so many innocent children? Surely we have to give free play to the complications of evil, also: to the Trump-like paranoia of a King Herod? Who can ever second-guess such an unreasonable and unloving person? Love, in this sense, is essentially uncomplicated. It involves a search which necessarily implies risk, for one is putting oneself, necessarily, in the hands of another and the fruit of the search, necessarily, involves many false starts before it becomes clear where one’s loved-one lies. But nothing is wasted.

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