

We carry the seeds of both life and death within us. Covid has made us very aware of this and, until recently, perhaps, very unsure of the risks we take in meeting others – risks both for them and for us. And one thinks of that terrible decimation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas as Europeans visited upon them all sorts of plagues and diseases and, no doubt, on others elsewhere, too. And pagan kings, or at least emissaries of other peoples, visiting Israel – a people who had kept themselves for so long apart from others as a special people of God – can be seen as symbolic of this risk of meeting others, on many levels: a threat as much as a blessing symbolised, in turn, by these gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh – gifts which also visit us, as Christians, portending death and difficulty as well as life and riches. The point being that to live is to risk death, and to live well, or fully, is to risk death all the more. The pagan kings or emissaries could have kept themselves to themselves and refused to follow that star, to be safe and comfortable within their own milieu, and Joseph and Mary could just as equally have refused them entrance; turned away those gifts so redolent of both life and death. And so we have two sets of people, strangers to one another but willing to take a risk, neither party really knowing where it might lead. And that dynamic hasn't changed. We allow for it even in monasticism under the rubric of hospitality, perhaps recognising even in that word that in meeting others we risk being hospitalised ourselves. And one is reminded, then, of that wonderful poem by Edward Lysaght, *Love's Reality*.

*If love should count you worthy and should deign
 One day to seek your door and be your guest
 Pause! Ere you draw the bolt and bid him rest
 If in your old content you would remain.
 For not alone he enters. In his train
 Are angels of the mist, the lonely guest,
 Dreams of the unfulfilled and unpossessed,
 And sorrow and life's immemorial pain.*

*He wakes desires you never may forget.
 He shows you stars you never saw before.
 He makes you share with him for evermore
 The burden of the world's divine regret.*

*How wise you were to open not
 And yet
 How poor if you should turn him from the door.*

Br John Mayhead
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