

DAY TWENTY-TWO – WONDER

Greetings everyone,

Our word for today, WONDER, is not one that is really prominent in the Christmas narratives (I did a search!) As such, I am now not entirely sure why I first included it in our list of words! There will have been a reason at the time, but I cannot recollect it just now. However, I think it is a good word to include, even if my reasons now are not the same as they were back in October!!

For me, wonder has two broad meanings, both of which can be found throughout the nativity stories, whether or not the actual word is used. There is the sense of wonder akin to awe, which must have been felt by so many of our characters: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, magi...everyone. Everyone except, perhaps, the angels, who were probably a key source of awe and wonder for the others. This kind of wonder comes from outside us, washing over us like a wave of joy, amazement, and gobsmacked-ness. Something we had not considered before or had only seen in one way, takes us by surprise and we are both filled with good feelings and, somehow simultaneously, taken outside of ourselves. When was the last time you felt such wonder? And what was the source? Perhaps a sunset, or a sky full of stars, or the birth of a child, or the unexpectedly kind actions of another? This is a sense to be treasured, for it gives us moments of magic in our lives.

The other meaning of wonder is more akin to curiosity. In Godly Play practice, we use the phrase “I wonder...” a lot. “I wonder what part of this story you liked the best...?” “I wonder if the sower has a name...?” This kind of wondering does occur in the nativity story, when the people waiting outside the Temple wonder what is taking Zechariah so long. I wonder what theories they came up with?! Such wondering is important, not just for advancement of human lives (so many discoveries will have begun with “I wonder what would happen if...?”) but, I would argue, for our souls. What happens when we stop wondering? As humans, we start to lose our empathy. We stop seeking to understand other points of view, becoming entrenched in our own. It becomes impossible to have compassion, leading to division, polarisation and unhealthy competition. Spending time wondering—thinking what it might be like to ‘walk a mile in another’s shoes’—nurtures our humanity and brings us closer to God.

We cannot conjure-up the first sense of wonder, but we can cultivate the second. I have a theory that such cultivation might allow the first sense of wonder to be experienced more readily. For our hearing of the Christmas story, a story we have heard countless times before, that might not be a bad thing. May your festive wondering allow you to re-discover the wonder of God-with-us, Emmanuel. Fee.



DAY TWENTY-THREE – MANGER

Good morning to you all,

Much of what we see in nativity plays is based on the story in the Bible, but with certain parts interpreted in specific ways. The verse that has invited most (mis?) interpretation is Luke 2:7: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a MANGER, because there was no place for them in the inn”. Our understanding of what this verse means for Jesus’s birth is coloured by the word-choice of translators and our own cultural understandings. Let’s explore further...

A manger is an animal feeding trough, usually made of stone. We assume that such feeding troughs would be away from living quarters as we are used to seeing them in fields or cow sheds or stables. That is not necessarily the case. In first century Bethlehem, most families would have kept their small number of animals in an area of their house, either on the ground floor or in a cave-like section under the house. A stable is not mentioned in the Bible: we infer one from the word “manger”; however, it is unlikely that Mary and Joseph were banished to an outhouse somewhere.

Our assumptions are further solidified by the use of the word “inn”. We envisage a travel-weary couple knocking on the doors of hostelries, being turned away because everywhere is full. For those of us who have travelled aimlessly around Scotland in the summer months, the anxiety of not finding a bed for the night with so many ‘no vacancies’ signs around is real, and relatable! Yet the word translated as “inn” here is translated each other time in the Bible as “guest-room”. Many homes had an upper room that was given over to guests when required (the same kind of ‘upper/guest room’ in which, according to Luke, Jesus shared his final meal with his disciples). Furthermore, given that Joseph was travelling to his ancestral home, it is highly likely that he knew people in Bethlehem who could put a roof over his and Mary’s heads. Altogether, then, the likely scenario is that Mary and Joseph were staying with family when Jesus was born although, because the house was full, they were mucking-in with their hosts and using every available space as best they could.

What do we lose when we remove inn-keepers and stables from our Christmas story? What do we gain when we think of a house filled with family for Jesus’s birth? And what might the animals have thought when they found a baby in the place where they usually ate their food?!

May Jesus find a home in your hearts this Advent and Christmas, whatever your family arrangements are this year. Fee.



DAY TWENTY-FOUR – STAR

Christmas Eve greetings to you all,

The STAR in the nativity story has been the inspiration behind our Advent-Christmas-Epiphany journey, where we have adorned our church windows with amazing star creations (sincerest thanks to Mari E) and invited everyone else to add stars to their own windows. My dining room window is rather full now—I may have gone slightly OTT! If you have yet to make a star and put it in your window, I encourage you to have a go ☺

Sometimes referred to as 'The Star of Bethlehem' or 'The Christmas Star', the star which guides the Magi to the infant Jesus only appears in Matthew's Gospel. This celestial 'character' has inspired debate from the earliest of times, with many people—stargazers, theologians, astronomers, historians and lay-people alike—all trying to work out what caused this particular and unique star to appear. There have been suggestions ranging from comets to supernovas to planetary alignments, like we have just had between Jupiter and Saturn. Data have been tabulated, television programmes have been aired, and planetariums have created shows for visitors. There is little consensus, not least because dating the various phenomenon which might explain the star does not correlate with the narrative dating of Matthew's Gospel. But still, we search and we wonder and we try to explain. Why is that?

I think it might be one (or both) of two things. First of all, stars are fascinating. Even if you know nothing about them and cannot tell a sun-star from a bright-planet (guilty as charged), stars are fascinating. They inspire wonder and awe in us that few other things can. They invite us to consider life and existence 'out there' in the rest of the universe, even if the stars we see are only those which are also in the Milky Way...billions more are beyond our ken. Moreover, they are always there...every night...and when the Scottish clouds move off, the sight is wonderful. Which brings me to my second thing. Of all the details in the Bible about the birth of Jesus, the star is the one thing we can relate to, here and now (other than, perhaps, sheep!). I have not seen an angel. The only virgin births of which I am aware required IVF. I have been to Bethlehem but I am not convinced I have seen the *actual spot* where Jesus was born. But I have gazed at the stars. In them, I have a point of connection with this ancient story. I, too, have seen shooting stars and other celestial events, and been enthralled. The star—indeed, all the stars—unite us through time and space with this story in a way little else does.

Whilst I find the speculations around the Star of Bethlehem interesting, I do not need a scientific explanation. I already know the power of the stars on my heart and soul. Maybe that can be enough this Christmas. Peace be with you this day, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-FIVE – JESUS

Christmas tidings of peace and joy to you and yours!

Here we are: we have made it to Christmas Day, when we mark the birth of JESUS and all it means for humanity. Unlike some of the other daily words, there is far too much I could say about Jesus...in fact, I would not be surprised if more words have been written about Jesus than just about any other person or thing in history. So, I am just going to share what is in my heart this morning.

The carol earworm I have today (mostly because of the refrain “Christ is born today!”) is, traditionally, known as “Good Christian men rejoice”. Only, I do not like the traditional opening line. Like too many hymns and carols it is both male-orientated and what I like to call pious-shaming (another example is the idea from “Away in a manger” that Jesus did not cry and so, by extension, good Christian children should not cry either; both are nonsense!). So, I have changed the first line of the carol to “All Christians now rejoice!” Why? Because Jesus was not born just for men and he certainly was not only about ‘good Christians’. Jesus was born for all of us. Every. Single. Person. Our gender, our age, our wealth, our sexuality, our goodness...none of that, ultimately, matters, for TO YOU is born a child, the Messiah. Just as you are, whoever you are. Today’s star, in its multicolour splendour, represents something of that truth.

Whatever you do today, whomever you spend it with, know that you need neither be a man nor ‘good’ to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Celebrate it just as you are and, from there, may you come to know the transcendent, transforming peace and love of God. Fee.



DAY TWENTY-SIX – WORSHIP

A Happy St Stephen's Day to you all,

When I tell stories in schools, particularly to younger children, they are full of questions. And I love it...except when the answer is not easy to put into words! One such question, which I am asked fairly regularly, is "what does 'worship' mean?" Now, I can tell you how we 'do' worship in the Church of Scotland, in our own congregation, and in some other denominations. I can also tell you a little about Jewish worship practices, and even less about Islamic worship. But coming to a generic definition is really tricky. So, for today, let's be specific!

In Matthew's Gospel we are told that, when the Magi arrive and see Jesus, they worship him. One translation says, "they knelt down and paid him homage" and another says, "they fell down and worshipped him". The tone in translations is quite different. One suggests quite a stately, regal affair, which you might see on a period drama when characters meet the British monarch. The other seems much more heart-felt and spontaneous, as though the Magi are overcome with awe. Both are linguistically correct, but it does invite us to consider how we worship God. Furthermore, the actions of the shepherds are slightly different again. There is nothing in Luke's narrative to suggest that the shepherds worship or pay homage to Jesus, but their return to the fields is accompanied by them "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen". There is no disputing the translation of Luke here, and the sense of their actions is undoubtedly joyful: God has done something truly wonderful and they cannot help but acknowledge it.

In what ways do you worship God? Do you worship other things or people? Is there a difference? These are not always questions we think about but, as we contemplate the worship and praising of others, perhaps we can reflect on our own worship. Peace be with you this day, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-SEVEN – PONDER

Good morning everyone,

Luke says that, when the shepherds tell Mary and Joseph about the angels, “Mary treasured all these words and PONDERed them in her heart”. What I love about this phrase is that Mary pondered in her heart, not her head, and it is not worry or rumination. Unlike the relentless self-chatter inside our heads, of which many of us weary, Mary’s pondering was deep in the very essence of her being. Her pondering was prayer, not anxiety.

So much of our life in the 21st century is in our heads. Thinking and being critical is not a bad thing (I often worry we do not think enough, but that is a whole other reflection!); however, it is not good for us to spend too long ‘in our heads’. It is easy to forget, even in this season of celebrating the incarnation of God, that we are creatures of flesh, blood and bone, and not just brains in a jar on a shelf. Our experience of the world around us—and of the God who creates and sustains this world—is as much through our body as our brain. Indeed, when anxiety hits our brains, we are encouraged to use our 5 senses to ‘ground’ ourselves back in the physical, here-and-now, world. But how often do we spend time noticing our body? How often do we shift our focus from our head down into our heart, our guts, our soul? I know I do not do it nearly often enough. Yet, when I do intentionally seek to open my heart and soul to God—to ponder what is going on in my life and the world around me—I meet with God in a way that rarely happens in my brain alone.

The Greek word that is translated as “ponder” in Luke 2:19 conveys a sense of ‘bringing together’, of ‘conversing’. It might be, then, that Mary brought together all that she had seen, experienced and heard over the previous days and months, and held it all in her heart...making connections...and conversing with God. That, for me, is a beautiful image and an example for us all, if only we can get out of our heads for a bit!

May you experience a time of pondering this Christmas-tide and may God meet you and bless you there, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-EIGHT – SAVIOUR

A very good morning to you all,

When the angel appears to the shepherds he says, “to you is born this day in the city of David a SAVIOUR, who is the Messiah, the Lord”. Three titles are given to the new-born child in the space of one phrase: Saviour, Messiah and Lord. Whilst I now wish I had opted for ‘Messiah’ when selecting words to reflect upon, we have ‘Saviour’ instead. Of all the words we are considering over Advent and Christmas, this is perhaps the trickiest to pin-down...at least without getting myself in trouble! You see, the nature of Jesus as our Saviour and the saving work of Jesus’s birth, life, death and resurrection, is one of the most contentious areas of Christian theology, having led to many schisms and the death/expulsion of so-called heretics. Moreover, it has become part of the Christian jargon which often trips off our tongues without us really thinking about it, e.g. “I am saved by Jesus” or “Jesus saves me from my sins”. These are deep waters indeed, and if you want to read a little more, please get in touch and I will share some literature with you; but, for today, I want to contextualise the words of the angel in the Gospel of Luke.

Earlier in Luke, when Mary praises God, in what has become known as ‘The Magnificat’, she says, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour”. Mary understands God to be her saviour. She has been told she is carrying the Son of God and yet she considers God to be her saviour, not her child. Why? Perhaps, as Mary goes on to say, because God is already known to be merciful, strong and faithful, in favour of true justice for the poor and oppressed.

Human beings need not be saved from a grudge-carrying God, so why do we need Jesus as Saviour, also? Well, I suppose that depends on what you think you/humanity/the cosmos need saving from.... God works hard throughout history to maintain God’s relationship with humankind and encourage us to live well together. But, without something completely concrete, it was always going to be an uphill struggle. As such, for me, the incarnation is as important in the saving work of Jesus as his death and resurrection. It is the moment when God is no longer distant and we are ‘saved’ from the gulf between divinity and humanity...a gulf only God, not humans, can bridge. We are ‘saved’ from the myth that we are alone or uncared-for or forgotten. We are also ‘saved’ from our selfish side, being reminded that we are created for relationship, with God and one another, and that no person is more or less worthy than any other. It is the moment when we realise, once and for all, that God sees, knows and understands the struggle of the human condition and meets us right there.

Jesus can save us in so many ways. There may well be a cosmic, eternal angle to this as well, but we are unlikely to know for sure this side of the grave. So let us focus on what we need to be ‘saved’ from today and invite God, through the words of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, to meet us there...and throw us a life-line. Peace be with you, Fee.

