

Pilgrims
TO THE
MANGER

Exploring the wonder of God with us

NAOMI STARKEY

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WRONG?

*Where is that place apart
you summon us to? Noisily
we seek it and have no time
to stay. Stars are distant;
is it more distant still,
out in the dark in the shadow
of thought itself? No wonder
it recedes as we calculate
its proximity in light years.*

*Maybe we were mistaken
at the beginning or took later
a wrong turning. In curved space
one can travel for ever and not recognise
one's arrivals. I feel rather
you are at our shoulder, whispering
of the still pool we could sit down
by; of the tree of quietness
that is at hand; cautioning us
to prepare not for the breathless journeys
into confusion, but for the stepping
aside, through the invisible
veil that is about us into a state
not place of innocence and delight.*

R.S. THOMAS¹



INTRODUCTION

‘Christmas isn’t what it used to be!’ I was twelve years old, sitting on my bed, tears trickling down my cheeks as I gazed out in a melodramatic verge-of-adolescence way at the rooftops of suburban Cambridge. My mother hovered in the doorway, trying to make sense of my mood amid the 1001 tasks of a family Christmas Eve.

While I had known for years that there was no Father Christmas (although I pretended, to keep my younger siblings happy), what triggered my despair was finding that I no longer felt the magic. *I wasn’t excited any more.* I knew the stories of baby Jesus inside out and back to front; I was still up and about when my mother was filling the stockings; I knew that Christmas dinner was followed by mountains of washing up. I would go to bed on 24 December, wake up next morning and, yes, there would be presents—but in the end it was just another day, followed by the next, and the next.

Thankfully, life has moved on in all kinds of ways since then. I have come to realise the difference between knowing Bible stories and understanding their message; I have learned the pleasures of giving as well as receiving; I have discovered the blessed invention that is the dishwasher. When my own daughter was born at the end of November one year, she appeared as the Christmas morning sermon illustration—and I found that all the carols about mother and baby acquired special resonance.

Christmases continue to come and go, though, and each

year the turn of the seasons seems to happen faster. The round-robin letters, which I for one always enjoy, start to change. Instead of announcing the latest baby, music exam grade or Brownie badge, the news is of children starting to scatter from the family home to further education, jobs or travel. For my parents' generation, there is the shock of familiar names beginning to disappear from the Christmas card list, couples of names dwindling to one on its own. The letters are increasingly dominated by health issues and the upheavals of retirement and downsizing.

It may be, too, that as we try to sum up our news for family and friends, we face the uncomfortable truth that life hasn't turned out quite as we expected. Somehow or other, we never did get that promotion. Yes, our marriage held together but we keep thinking about that old flame we met at the school reunion. Thanks to the economic climate, our dreams of trading up to a more commodious house have evaporated, at least for now. Then there's our relationship with God. Yes, we go to a lovely church but somehow the worship doesn't touch us in the same way any more. Same old hymns, same old Bible readings, same old sermons that leave us feeling vaguely—or sometimes specifically—guilty. And, dare we say it to ourselves, 'Same old God'?

This book of readings is an invitation to pilgrimage, to accompany me through the weeks of Advent, to Christmas itself and on to Epiphany. As the days and weeks pass, we will reflect together on a range of issues—the significance of the festivities, the deeper values that underpin our lives, some of the other special days in the Church calendar at this season, and how we can begin to deepen our understanding of God's perspective on our world, our church and ourselves.

'Pilgrimage' is more than a figure of speech in this book,

however. I invite you to join an imaginary group of pilgrims whose path takes them from a city centre high street, out to the suburbs, beyond the city to a mountain top (don't worry—it's not very high), and then back into the city to find the cathedral, where we rest for the celebrations surrounding Christmas Day itself. In the following days, we travel beyond the streets and down to the sea, where this book concludes. It's not a conventional pilgrimage. It does not follow a well-trodden route to a well-known destination, although we will pass familiar landmarks; it is a pilgrimage of both head and heart in that our aim is to learn more of God and allow ourselves to be challenged by what we discover as we journey together. Above all, we will discover the truth of Immanuel: God is here, everywhere, present with us, if only we will look up and notice him walking alongside us.



1-7 DECEMBER

Eat, drink and be merry

Our pilgrimage begins in a familiar place: the shopping mall, the modern temple of our towns and cities. This is not an endearingly tatty little concrete precinct but a gleaming air-conditioned world-within-a-world, hosting the choicest of retail chains. As we walk the levels and ride the escalators, our eyes are dazzled by the tinsel hangings, our ears soothed by seasonal background music. Looking at the faces in the crowds pursuing the UK's number one leisure activity (shopping, in case you weren't sure), we see many that are grimly focused, some (fewer, admittedly, unless you count the teenage girls) relaxed and smiling. Some clutch long lists, others consult mobile phones as they hunt for celebratory clothes, gifts for all manner of loved ones, enough food for days of feasting.

As we stroll through the crowds, what we might find echoing through our minds are the platitudes of a typical off-the-peg Christmas sermon or school assembly—because the idea of eating, drinking and merrymaking is so frivolous, isn't it? And life is so materialistic these days, not like olden times when boys and girls used to look forward to finding a lump of coal and sixpence in their well-darned stocking, and, if they were really, really lucky, an orange. Look at those hordes of parents staggering along with multiple plastic shopping bags from multiple toyshops. Chances are that their children

would be just as happy playing with a cardboard box. And are those young men throwing a party or are they going to drink all that wine themselves?

The trouble with the denunciations of the typical off-the-peg Christmas sermon is that they start to look a little shaky as we begin to delve into scripture, and especially when we take a closer look at the life and teaching of the grown-up Jesus. We find that the reign of God is more often associated with generosity, lavishness and celebration than with abstinence and self-denial. Might it be possible that, rather than standing outside the mall and handing out leaflets denouncing consumerism, Jesus might just be stocking up on nuts and drinks, ready to have his friends round—and that we're invited?



1 December

PRESENTS

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about half a litre of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.' ... 'Leave her alone,' Jesus replied. 'It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.'

JOHN 12:1-8 (ABRIDGED)

As our shopping mall visit reminds us (as if we needed reminding), the linchpin of Christmas for the vast majority of people is the buying and giving of presents. For some, the shopping comes in a frenzy in the last week before The Day, while most of us will know somebody who starts squirrelling away gifts for the following year, bought in the New Year sales. A more recent phenomenon is that of people going online after their Christmas dinner to sell unwanted presents on eBay.

Every Sunday colour supplement and consumer magazine runs features suggesting the perfect gift for the man/woman/

boy/girl/dog in your life, nuanced as to whether they are sporty or arty, bookish or outdoor (no doubt somebody somewhere includes the dog in such reckoning). In a relatively cash-rich, time-poor economy, the idea of making our own presents tends to remain at the level of guilt-inducing fantasy. We may dream of fashioning our friends pen pots from empty tins covered with shiny foil or presenting family members with handcrafted boxes of home-made fudge—and decide with relief that they would be happier with a scented candle or plain hard cash.

Our attitude to Christmas presents can be ambivalent. While we know that the correct response to the issue is that ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35), most of us, while not wanting to appear greedy or materialistic, will admit that we enjoy getting presents ourselves. When it comes to deciding what to give to whom, we may have to strive to reach a working consensus with our consciences: we don’t want to be spendthrift but neither do we want to appear miserly. How about settling this year for gifts for close family and friends only, sticking to a limited budget, and being needs-driven rather than wants-driven? Then along comes this passage from John’s Gospel, with its shocking display of generosity.

The same story is told, with variations of detail, in all four Gospels (see Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50). It is in John’s Gospel that the woman is identified as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, and the critical disciple as Judas Iscariot. No reason is given for Mary’s action; the inference is that it was an expression of love, honour and worship for her friend and Lord. She gave to him—not politely offering a token, tasteful gift but bestowing an anointing that was extravagant, reckless and indecorous.

Mary didn't simply offer Jesus a bottle of bog-standard cologne for refreshment. Pure nard was one of the most expensive and aromatic perfumes in the ancient world; as Judas pointed out, the gift was worth a year's wages. We could perhaps reckon an equivalent value of around £11,500, assuming the minimum wage. In a culture where women waited on the men while they ate and talked (a pattern still familiar in many parts of the world today), this woman grovelled at Jesus' feet. How else could she have wiped his feet with her hair, which she shockingly unloosed in public? And feet were considered unclean: again, today it is still considered the height of bad manners in some countries to point your feet at somebody.

Judas' plea to remember the poor surely strikes us as an appropriate response. Jesus could have stopped Mary when she had used, say, a quarter of the precious perfume. But he didn't draw back, politely but firmly telling her to pull herself together, that that was really quite enough. Shouldn't a good rabbi have seized every opportunity to impress his teaching on his followers? While Jesus did respond to Judas' criticism, he also seemed to enjoy the whole anointing experience. Perhaps this incident was the final straw for Judas. Maybe this was the moment when he decided that Jesus was too subversive, too far outside his comfort zone to merit continued loyalty.

Now, we should always bear in mind that the Bible is not a car repair manual. It is not a matter of reading a section and then going off to follow it to the letter. We need to read with an awareness of context, of the original intention of the text and any issues of interpretation, bearing in mind the values of the whole of scripture. This passage is not a divine decree that we should spend £10,000 on a five-star spa package for our

church leader, somewhere hot and exotic—although that’s not to say we shouldn’t, either! There are many places in the Bible where we are told to care for the poor, and places where we are told of the importance of careful stewardship, but here we are also told that our God loves generosity. In Mary’s act of love and worship, it was both the gift and the thought that counted. In receiving and honouring her gift, no matter how culturally and morally tasteless it might have seemed to the onlookers, Jesus affirmed both giving and receiving. He warmly affirmed that which was given from the impulse of a loving heart.

As we ponder our own gift-giving, it is worth spending a bit of time thinking about why we are giving, instead of focusing only on what we give. If we are honest, we may have to acknowledge that we are, in fact, trying to buy affection and affirmation; we give because we want the ‘thank you’ letter rather than because we are freely offering a token of our love to others. On the other hand, perhaps we give out of guilt, knowing that while we haven’t been particularly mindful of our loved ones, at least we’re filling their stockings or pillow cases with the best that we can afford. Again, we should admit to ourselves that this is not really giving; this is purchase.

Why do we give gifts at Christmas? Although it’s the opening line of a standard Christmas morning children’s talk, the standard answer bears repeating. Whatever other traditions we may be consciously or unconsciously echoing, we give Christmas presents as a reminder of God’s gift—his present to us of his own Son, a reckless offering, generosity beyond reason. What do we think about this gift of God? It may have been some time since we mentally stopped in our tracks and turned our hearts to reflecting on whom God has given and

why, and what our response should be. We may find that we are ready to receive—or perhaps we are forced to admit that such lavishness actually fills us with a sense of unworthiness, almost embarrassment. We know that we should give of ourselves—our time, our money, our abilities—to God, but somehow we find it much harder to fathom that God should want to give of himself to us.

A prayer

Father God, open our eyes to see you as we journey through this Advent season; open our hearts to the immensity of your love; open our hands to receive all that you promise us in your Son. Amen

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