

Assistance at Christmas



I shall not sleep tonight. Casper spoke for them all. Watchful, half listening to the night; alert for words from servants with sharper ears than their own, they were too uneasy for sleep. Apart from the danger their minds were still bouncing thoughts, one on another as they reclined under their tent-awning, searching the stars. Tonight the heavens gave small light to the mountains of the Judaea desert stretching to the east of them - heights unseen in their lofty darkness. Here, near the edge of the desert, outside Bethlehem, they were spending their first night on the long journey home.

Desert they call it. Casper laughed. *Desert! We could show them deserts. Why the place is full of flowers - they pop up everywhere at the first shower of rain. We could show them real deserts - sand, sand and more sand.*

They had been aware of being watched from soon after leaving Jerusalem. These men of the world were not blind to the treacherous intentions of king Herod. His spies had been obvious to their own servant guardians when they searched the streets of Bethlehem. Herod's men would now be suspicious of their next move - checking if they would return to Jerusalem as Herod had requested.

Balthazar pulled his short purple cloak tighter across his white tunic. The night was already cooling. Balthazar combined wisdom and ingenuity with the compassion of a life of healing and care for others. He was concerned that by their visit and their brisk departure they may have betrayed the little family. They had left a man to watch the house. *I fear for the child and his parents,* he said. *We have been so much aware of a divine guidance at every part of our journey - and before we began it. I feel sure we may have been brought here at this time to help them. Perhaps we are part of a divine plan, far bigger than we can know.*

So, what do you propose? asked Melchior. He looked across to Casper, the lithe, younger member of their party for whom wealth and wisdom was not without considerable acumen. He was the practical one who had been responsible for the logistics of their travels.

We cannot defend them, Casper replied. Herod could have an army here in hours. He looked at his companions, assessing their probable response. We could take them with us!

But, Balthazar objected, our camp would be the obvious place to look for him! That's true, Casper continued. But which camp? In a while we shall part and each travel to our own lands. We have completed our objective. We could separate soon and go in three different directions. I suggest we start northward together towards Jerusalem. That will give the impression we are returning to Herod. But then we will cross the Jordan and turn east across the mountains. After that we can split up. Melchior you can go north to Damascus, travel quickly and get lost among the trading caravans and then wend your way home to Arabia via Babylon. I can make a series of devious routes through Judaea, Moab and Edom, making it seem as though I am trying to evade pursuit - leading on any who may be tracking me.. And you, Balthazar can take the family across the hills with me before you head south for Egypt and home to Ethiopia. You have many contacts in Memphis. You will be able to give the family a secure place of refuge for as long as they need.

Balthazar and Melchior made objections as wise counsellors do, but eventually agreed to the plan. Their frequent gatherings through the years, as traders and astrologers, had drawn them very close together, and even more so during the months of this journey for which their company had chosen them. Pouring over charts and staring into the heavens together, eating together, praying together to the one divine spirit who they believed was light and truth, who desired only peace for the world he had made, they had grown in respect for each other's individual wisdom.

They had the same mutual understanding earlier this evening when they had arrived back in camp from Bethlehem. None of them had spoken on the short journey from the town, almost as though they were afraid words would spoil their experience. Following a scant meal and prayers together, they had fallen silent for a while. Eventually it was Casper who spoke first.

Well Melchior, it seems to have turned out as we eventually came to believe it would, but so different from what we first imagined.

There was a brief hint of disappointment in his voice. *I have to confess I had hoped for a richer spectacle.*

I hope we may return for that in the course of time, Balthazar sighed.

Not me, replied Casper, *That's many years away. There will be someone else wearing my robes by then. It seems I brought my finest robes for no reason.*

He had in mind his finest emerald robe with pleated skirt and gold silk embroidered emblems. They all had their robes - the garments of rich traders, learned teachers, men of royal blood. Those robes had remained packed since some had been worn at Herod's court.

In Bethlehem, aware of intrigue and fearful for the king they had travelled to honour, they had decided to remain as travellers and traders, leaving their caravan here outside the town walls. Following the information they had gleaned from their servants and local traders they eventually found the carpenter from Nazareth. Joseph had agreed to stay with family for the child's first year. He had easily found work in the town - everybody needs a good craftsman in wood.

The Magi had disguised their initial shock at finding the 'king' - the king of all kings they believed - in the back rooms of a small family home. A barely furnished but homely place perfumed with the aroma of fresh sawdust. As they approached, thoughts which Melchior expressed were in their minds: *Is royalty about pomp and ceremony, about material wealth and power, about dominance and oppression? Or is it about justice and truth, about compassion and sacrifice - about living the deep spirituality we believe is in the heart of our God. Have we been looking for the wrong kind of king? Will his Kingdom be totally different to any other?*

Well, Melchior, Casper continued. It was more like you believed it would be. There were moments this morning when I wished I was wearing regal clothes, Balthazar sighed, but equally I felt they would be out of place. There was royalty and commonality all bound up together in that poor room. We set out so long ago now with our own ideas of royalty, of divinity, of worship, of power and a world-wide Kingdom. Now it's all so different. One hour with that child and my whole world is changed!

The three men were of one mind now, though in themselves so individual. Casper of the bright turbans accentuating the slender, regal features of his face falling into a short dark beard. Melchior was even more regal in bearing - a true Arabian king, but gentler than his companions and more religious. Balthazar had a skillful mind beneath the clean-shaven African features. He had a wealth of knowledge of healing arts for body, mind and spirit.

During the months of preparation and travel the three had brought their complementary knowledge of scriptures, astronomy, healing arts, and the world of their travels, into discussion and argument. They had grown to think of an ideal kingdom founded on truth and justice, humility, and grace. They were united in their hatred of war and political intrigue. They had been appalled by their experience of Herod and his court, and equally distressed by the attitudes of his Jewish religious advisors. Again it was Balthazar who had summed up their thoughts. *The victories of light and truth come not by war, he declared. 'but by negotiation and gentleness. It is a longer, more circuitous way. It demands sacrifice and suffering. It will be a way of teaching truth and living justly while gathering an army of compassion.*

*A beautiful dream, said Casper with a hint of doubt in his words..
But the star was a dream to begin with. A dream to follow. Balthazar countered*

Melchior broke his own silence. It was like a vision for me when I watched the little family today. He had obviously been deeply moved by his experience. There was Joseph, trusting his God, happy to serve his family and neighbours in return for simple hospitality. Mary was obviously the stronger one. He laughed. She was quite vehement in her longing for justice and truth, and yet she had a love-fired zeal for a better world. She was so sure of her faith in God and her belief that God was with the child. When I heard her I felt sure the time of God's Kingdom had come.

*That's been said many time before, said Casper.
But it has never been carried through, replied Balthazar. This was different. This was earthy and real. You could feel the divine in the simple crudity of it all. It was there in the child, just learning his first steps, clutching his father's hand.. And when he placed his little hand on mine. There was a gentleness in the infant touch which, just for a moment, was like another world. Then he tottered away wanting to touch his father's tools, and like any infant not wanting to be denied.*

Melchior took up the theme again. I saw it all in the gifts, in the child's joy at the golden trinkets. Not an adult joy for their worth, but pleasure in their beauty as he traced the intricate work with his finger. And then when we offered the frankincense. How could he possibly understand their priestly meaning? But he inhaled deeply as though accustomed to it. And the myrrh. At first he appeared repulsed, but then he took the jar in both hands , guided by his mother, and it was the way she looked at him. I cannot describe it except to say it spoke of fear and faith, love and pain all bound up together.

The brief silence which followed was broken by Balthazar expressing their collective thought. We were in the presence of a divine mystery - at the heart of everything - like the beginning of a new world.

I think we are agreed, Casper brought them back to present needs. We must be ready to leave at first light. We dare not leave the family at risk ...

A few hours later as pre-dawn shadows lay across white rooftops, in a narrow lane in Bethlehem the messenger was surprised to be expected. Joseph and Mary were waiting for him, the child still sleeping in his mother's arms. I had a dream, said Joseph. We are ready!