

The Giving



[Farid is a wealthy merchant living in a luxurious house outside the ancient city of Susa. Susa lies in the lower ranges of the Zagros mountains, east of the river Tigris and to the North of the Persian Gulf. He has entertained three old friends on two occasions in the past months. Farid's neighbour, Saeed, has called soon after the visitors have left. He is anxious for news]

Farid climbed the steps leading from his garden to the raised courtyards. From there he could see above the lattice-work screens to where the low lands below the Zagros mountains met the ever encroaching desert. There was no movement other than the grazing sheep and donkeys working along the irrigation channels. The magi would be far away now - beyond the sacred Temple - beyond the far horizon. *The camel-trains will have all left the city now.* Farid spoke to himself but instantly recognised he was not alone. His friend and neighbour, Saeed had come behind him quietly.

Farid's first response was to wish he could be alone, but there would be business to attend to with Saeed, and his good neighbour was always inquisitive - always ready to listen to someone else's story

*Visitors all gone I see. Saeed **would** see. He missed nothing.*

Yes. Gone again. Maybe for ever this time. I'm not sure if we shall meet again.

They were here months ago you know.

Saeed did know. The whole place had become an extension of Susa city for a few weeks. A gathering of rich men and their retinues with corrals of sheep, camels and donkeys drew traders and provisioners in an endless stream. Farid, a wealthy trader like Saeed, could live well outside the busy life and the squalor of the city and be free to entertain guests from far and wide. His villa had become a meeting place for a special group of friends. It was where their roads from different lands converged. They still traded successfully, but now spent more time in the pursuit of astrology. It was that which had brought them together for their first visit.

Farid's spacious, welcoming home was a perfect accommodation for their discussions. Sitting now in wide, cool inner room looking out over Farid's treasured garden, he gestured towards the great table. *Just weeks ago these tables were covered with maps and charts and scrolls*, he said. He was interrupted briefly, by a servant bringing a tray of drinks with fruit and a variety of sweet breads.

Your friends had an air of royalty, observed Saeed. He was impatient to know the details.

Just the air! laughed Farid. *Balthazar is of royal blood, but like the others his dignity and bearing come from gathered wisdom rather than noble birth. They are all old trading friends but much of their time is given to the stars – to the ancient arts of astrology They're godly men – and wise. Their thoughts and conversations are often far beyond the grasp of my mind.*

Balthazar is from Africa? Asked Saeed

Yes. From Ethiopia, though you'll see from his white tunic and shorter purple cloak – and his clean-shaven face – he has links to Egyptian royalty. He's the quieter one. He has studied medicine and concerns himself with the sicknesses of many people – and nations. He believes that body mind and soul have to be in conjunction for a man to be really well. Casper's quite different. You can see he's the showman from the colours of his robes and turbans, – and the volume of spiced perfume he uses. It's a wonder the others aren't sneezing all the time!

Saeed laughed. *And what about Melchior? I saw him. He could be royalty. He dresses and acts like a true prince of Arabia. The long white hair gives him distinction.*

True, agreed Farid. *Sheep, and long years on the desert trade routes have brought him riches. I suppose long nights under the stars made him an astronomer too! It was stars that brought them here! I think I told you that. Each of them had observed a strange new light in the eastern sky – specially visible at dawn.*

I couldn't follow all their discussions, but they spent ages comparing their charts, and searching the ancient scriptures and stories of many different Faiths. After much hand waving and heaven-pointing, they concluded that they were seeing an unusual conjunction of planets. Apparently Jupiter and Saturn are together in Pisces. Jupiter and Saturn are signs of the birth of great kings – together they suggest an even greater ruler than ever before, And Pisces being a sign for a king and also for Israel

So they went to Israel? Saeed could not disguise the dismay in his voice. Farid ignored it.

Yes, but not before a great deal more discussion. They all agreed that the light celebrated the birth of a mighty king. They talked well into the night about their hopes for a new sort of Kingdom. I have heard them speaking before about their belief in what Melchior called the 'real kingdom' with one universal ruler – one king for the whole world! It would be a kingdom of peace, he said. It wouldn't have any military forces. It's power and motivation would be love – the sort of love which is total dedication and allegiance – with grace and tolerance and self-giving all thrown in. It seemed an impossible dream to me – it still does - but they are the wise ones! They reasoned such a kingdom could only be achieved by God – the divine Spirit - working through a new, anointed king. As for me, I'm a practical man and I keep wanting to ask 'how?' I was lost in their words by then, but they had decided to find the king and offer him their allegiance. I think it was also because they wanted to prove the accuracy of their calculations.

From then on their talk was more about what gift they should take to honour such a king. Casper insisted that gold was the only gift to take a king of all kings. 'Gold is for royalty,' he kept saying. Melchior did not agree. 'Gold,' he claimed, was good and necessary for trade and treaties, but wasn't a token of royalty. Gold he said is the source of greed, contention, war. It's all about superior power and possession. It leaves death and destruction in its wake. It's never the way of true kingship. Their conversation became heated and ended with Casper saying – 'Well then, what would you take?'

'Frankincense,' replied Melchior. 'I always carry some with me. It's the symbol of prayer and spirituality - of faith and dependence on God. That's how true kingship is built. Casper snorted. 'And religion is not about power and possession – priests and religious rites, rules and domination by class!?' If war is a curse, then so is religion!

To prevent further discord, Balthazar interjected. 'I think I'd like to give myrrh'. 'Myrrh's for burial!' exclaimed Casper. 'The king's only just born!' 'No', said Balthazar, ignoring the scorn. 'Myrrh represents the agony of love. I believe that the divine being – the source of all life – is love, because love is the only thing which lasts. Myrrh is for comfort and for healing, for sharing pain - even dying for his people - That's a true King!'

It seemed to me, said Farid, they were opening up the age old belief that to save the world God would have to show himself in a way we could understand - as a man! - to become one of us! It's an idea I feel is right, but I could never get it beyond feelings into words. And all the questions! How could a king of love get people to understand? Or to accept him - to obey him? - to be ready to change their life-style?

He paused, then looked hard at Saeed. My friends found the answer to my question! - and so did I - when they returned!

Which was ? Asked Saeed, hardly suppressing his impatient curiosity. Farid obliged by going on with his story.

Early next morning, he said, they were ready to leave. They looked resplendent in the first light of dawn as Aram, the priests blessed them - 'The One Great God, Lord of earth and of the heavens, all knowing, all powerful, go with you. May he keep you safe and bring you home when your task is fulfilled.'

They travelled north west along the edge of the desert, following the road as far as Damascus before turning south for Judaea and Jerusalem. The return journey was more hurried. It didn't need a great deal of wisdom to see that king Herod was dangerous. Courtesy took them to visit him as soon as they arrived in Jerusalem, , even though they knew the Hebrew scriptures pointed to the small town of Bethlehem further back in the hills as the birth place of the King.. Knowing Herod for the cruel tyrant he was and anxious for the safety of the child-king, Balthazar had had a dream, warning him of danger. So, after they found the child they left the area quietly and travelled south towards Egypt before turning East along the less popular desert road.

In the quiet of the desert night against the restless sounds of camels and donkeys and men sharing travellers tales - they talked together about the King and his Kingdom - and the appropriateness of their gifts. Melchior told us how each of the gifts was right - but not each alone - all the gifts together told the whole truth!. Yes, gold meant royalty and power - they believed more than ever that he is God's perfect king - but the incense for spirituality and prayer, and the myrrh of healing love, mercy and forgiveness were part of the kingdom.. Together! What the gifts said together - that will be the way of his Kingdom. It will be powerful - embracing and conquering the whole world and everyone in it. It will be God's kingdom - lived by God's rules - by faith and obedience.. It will be a kingdom from within - as each human soul claims its healing and is filled with God's Spirit - his truth - his Word.- it will spread like the unfolding of the dawn.

But what about the King and the visit to him, asked Saeed. You've left out the most important part.

If you're wanting a story about royal courts and pageantry, you'll be disappointed, Farid smiled at his friend. This is a different king! My friends have come to understand it better than me, but it wasn't a dramatic regal occasion. They were taken aback at first, but understood as the events unfolded in line with the scriptures and the stars.. How they found the child king I didn't ask. They had their ways - servants - angels - dreams - intuition? Who knows? But amazingly, they found him in a small dwelling just off the main street in Bethlehem. My friends were no longer dressed in their finery. They'd left their retinue well outside the town to arouse the least interest. Then, they proceeded on foot at the quietest time of day. The child whom they found was barely a year old - which fitted with their calculations, - but in the lowliest surroundings. He was sitting on his mother's knee, though obviously wanting to crawl and explore. The friends explained their visit and his mother was barely surprised - almost as though she had been expecting them. She and her son had the same eyes which Melchior said, reflected the stars from the heavens, The child showed no fear, but touched the gifts as his mother received them for him. The meeting was a moment which Melchior described to me as an experience of universal love - when their hearts were filled to bursting with the Spirit of God - with truth beyond all their wisdom. Together they dropped to their knees. The child reached out both hands to them As though with a king's blessing.

Farid was silent for a while. Eventually he looked up at his neighbour. Saeed, don't ask me to put it into words, but it seemed real to me too. Melchior's words reached out to me with the truth last evening. He said We had so much discussion about gifts, and it was right that they were all one gift. But it was the giving - the kneeling - the obedience - the allegiance. It was not the gifts which made it all come true - it was the giving! He paused, rose from his chair and went to look out again towards the desert. Without looking back at his friend, he said, 'I wish I could have knelt before this king. Perhaps, one day, I shall.