

Wise Gifts

"It will be light soon. Are you ready?" Joseph closed the door behind him. "Talk softly," Mary whispered as he sat by her side near the half opened shutter. Through the opening they would see the dawn. "Jesus is restless." The baby whimpered in his sleep as though responding to her words.

"Yes. I'm ready." There was resignation in her voice – a certain swilling submission. She had to be in God's will. Mary knew that more than ever. Only there could she find peace.

"It will be a long journey I'm afraid," Joseph comforted himself as much as her. "And a hard one. I have no idea what's ahead of us. Only that we shall be safe."

"Safe", Mary shuddered. "I don't think my son will ever be safe. The gifts have made that clearer to me." She leaned forward and pulled towards her a bundle she had tied ready for the journey. From it she took a smaller cloth package and carefully undoing its ties drew from it a small gold band. Rubbing it carefully on her sleeve, Mary said, "I've never touched gold before. Gold for a king.

That's what they said. I still don't understand." Joseph had felt left out of the gifts. He had been in the town working with one of the Bethlehem carpenters. It helped to pay for the lodgings.

The travellers were about to leave when he arrived home. They had already offered their gifts to the baby. Joseph recognised them as being from the east - he guessed Persia and had been right. He also knew instinctively that they were men of wisdom and authority, though by their appearance no-one would have known they were not just more of the regular eastern traders who passed through Bethlehem. Joseph heard their story. They repeated to him how they studied the stars and writings of religions from all over the world. They told him how they had seen an unusual star rising and were convinced it heralded the birth of the king who would be the world's saviour.

Their studies and charts had shown them that the king was to be born in Judaea. Arriving in Jerusalem they had gone straight to King Herod, assuming a new Judaeian king would be there. Herod knew nothing about it, but the priests had known the prophecy about the king being born in Bethlehem, and so these men had come. They said they were guided by the star they had seen, but Mary knew different. They had been guided by God. How else could it have been that their first enquiries would be at the inn where Jesus was born..

Mary and these travellers had shared their secrets. The men had told her how her story helped them to understand that Jesus was to be no ordinary king. And then they had made their gifts - not large gifts, but meaningful.

Joseph had been alarmed the moment the men had mentioned King Herod. His fears increased when next day they called to say they were not returning by Jerusalem for fear the King would not understand. They thought he would be jealous and attempt to destroy the child. "You may trust us to keep your secret," was their parting word.

"They don't know Herod," Joseph thought to himself. "He'll not rest till he's found the child." Joseph's worst fears were confirmed in a dream that night. Waking, he stirred Mary to share his thoughts with her. Together they decided they must leave immediately - at first light. They would travel into Egypt - out of Herod's reach. Mary had seemed so calm. "We are in God's hands," she said. Joseph wished he could share that same deep trust.

"Gold for a king," Mary turned the band in her hand. Not just king of the Jews, but of the whole world, they said. They said he wouldn't be a ruler like Herod. "I'd see to that," Joseph observed in a forceful whisper.

"He'll have a kingdom of love," Mary spoke the words almost as a question. "I don't understand it all."

"Seems impossible to me," said Joseph.

"But so was all this a year ago," Mary reminded him. "He'll be God's king, and God knows how."

She placed the gold band in her lap and reached into the folds of cloth again to take out an ornately carved wooden casket. "Incense," she said. "They told me it is the sign of a priest."

"I hate the stuff." Joseph made a face. "It turns my stomach in the Temple, when they burn it with the sacrifices. The whole place reeks of it."

Mary did not open the casket. "They said he would be like a priest," The baby cried a little in his sleep and she lowered her voice again.

"He will make God real for people, and bring people to know and love God."

She put the casket back and took out the third gift. It was a small plain earthenware jar, sealed with wax. "They said it is myrrh."

"And myrrh for suffering," Joseph reminded her. "It's beyond me."

"I understand," Mary spoke calmly and surely. "I understand in my heart. It's bigger than I can get into my mind, and I don't know the words, but I know, I know." She paused for a long moment. "A saviour will have to suffer. He will have to share the sorrows of his people - the prophet said so. He will have to bear their sins..."

Joseph sighed deeply, "Our God doesn't make things easy." Mary put the jar away, and then reached for Joseph's hand. That hand seemed to hold all the strength and comfort of God for her at times. "But, Joseph, love isn't easy. True love hurts, but it's the most real and powerful thing in the world."

Joseph was lost for words. He found it difficult to express emotion. "Dawn's breaking," he said. "It's time. I'll get the mule ready." He crossed to the cradle and raised a tiny finger in his enormous hand. He held it for a moment, "Yes," he said, "Love hurts. I wouldn't change it though. It's the best of God's gifts."