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“WHAT CHILD IS THIS”

Erling G. Lindstrom

Near the end of the Christmas narrative in Luke we have this reflective verse, “But Mary kept all these things pondering them in her heart.” Others were exuberant about Jesus’ birth: the angels sang of it and the shepherds hastened over to see for themselves. But the person closest to the baby quietly pondered the meaning of his birth. When something important happens to you, you know it is more wonderful, yet more complicated, than it seems to anyone else and you need time to reflect on it. Though babies are born every day, your child is born only once; when the baby is yours, the whole world is changed.

“What child is this, who laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping.” Unlike most of our hymns, which were written by clergy, this one was written by an English layman, William Dix. His regular employment was as manager of a marine insurance company in Glasgow. The particular circumstances of the writing of this hymn are unknown to me, but those which led to writing his even more widely known Epiphany hymn are suggestive. Unable to attend church on Epiphany due to illness, Dix read the day’s gospel lesson, the arrival of the Wise Men, and later sketched a hymn on it.¹ His lines urge us to imitate the example set by the Wise Men: “As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold; . . . So, most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led to Thee.”² What Child Is This appears to be no less a response to a text, the Christmas gospel lesson.

In question and answer format the first stanza asserts the wonder that the child on Mary’s lap is the one for whom the angels sing. For any family the birth of a baby causes a change in devotion and routine. The schedule is altered to match the baby’s needs; nights of uninterrupted sleep have to be given up. Friends and relatives come

1. Albert E. Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns* (New York: Scribner, 1950), p. 359.

2. *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), hymn number 82. What Child is This is hymn number 40.

to see the new person around whom the household now revolves. If the birth of any baby makes such a difference, much more does the birth of God's promised son change the lives of those who receive him. A baby brings joy to a home; the Christ child brings joy to homes around the world. A baby brings love for a few quickly passing years; the child on Mary's lap brings love and salvation now and forever.

The wonder of the first stanza is followed by a warning in the second. Why is the child not suitably received? "Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?" If the son of Mary is Christ the king, why is he lodged with the animals? This is the child for whom there wasn't any room; in Luke's familiar phrase, "there was no place for them in the inn." Walter Bowie suggests one reason why Luke's account "lays such a hold upon the mind and heart is that the crowded inn of the story becomes also an eternal parable of the human soul. Therefore in that everlastingly present sense, why was there—why is there—no room in the inn for the Christ child who is at the doors?"³ The inn had rooms of course, but no one wanted to give up their place for the young family. There was room at the inn, but not for them. Soon there would not be room for the child in Bethlehem; the family would have to flee to Egypt. Then, as this stanza later observes with its references to Good Friday, there would not be room for Christ in this world.

The tune, Greensleeves, to which this hymn is sung has been described by Ernest Ryden as haunting.⁴ If the tune is haunting, the second line of this stanza is doubly so. "Good Christian, fear; for sinners here the silent Word is pleading." Words are sung by angels and said by shepherds, but Jesus the Word of God makes his case in silence. In our day of inflated speech, where voices tend to be loud and messages repeated often, ears need to be rightly tuned if the silent proclamation of God is to be heard. God was hidden in the child in a manger, as he was later hidden in the man on the cross.

If the innkeeper had known the importance of the family seeking room that night, things would have been different. He would not have sent them to the stable but would have rearranged his guests; there is always room when the guest is important. And the guests would have been glad to give up their space. There would have been lots of room: "Stay here, I'm an early riser anyway and will soon be getting up;" "No, stay with us; we have more space than we need." But isn't that always the way? We do not know the possibilities of the hour and the people around us unless we are sensitive to them. The innkeeper and his guests did not know the savior of the world would be born in the stable that night; but any sensitive person must have known a young woman was soon to bear a child, and needed room at the inn more than they did. Just so God is at our door this day in the cause of his son and the needs of the poor around the world.

Following the wonder and the warning of the first two stanzas, the last stanza calls us to worship. "So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh, come, peasant, king to own Him." Worship with the bringing of gifts is our response to the child on Mary's lap. We have Christmas because of God's great gift of a son; God loved the world so

3. *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), volume 8, pp. 51-52.

4. E.E. Ryden, *The Story of Christian Hymnody* (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Book Concern, 1959), p. 632.

much that he gave this costly gift. We respond in worship, bearing our gifts. The gifts named in this line are those brought by the Wise Men (Mt. 2:11). The characteristic common to them is costliness; they are gifts fit for a king. Frankincense and myrrh are resins obtained through incisions in the bark of trees; the resins are then distilled into expensive oils, whose chief use is as incense and perfume. The other gift, gold has, as you know, retained its appeal even in our inflationary times. Bringing these gifts the Wise Men came at a costly expenditure of time and effort as well; the journey taking at least months and maybe even a year or more. They spent their time and treasure that they might come before the object of their devotion in worship.

The Wise Men bringing costly gifts provide the example for our own worship response. Love is a spendthrift; we naturally spend ourselves and our means on what we take to be important. In using the Wise Men as example, Dix follows the pattern set in his Epiphany hymn, *As With Gladness Men of Old*:

As they offered gifts most rare At thy cradle, rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy, Pure and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring, Christ to thee, our heavenly king.⁵

As we increase in years it is fitting that we also grow in maturity, spending ourselves and our treasure in worship response to the Christ child. In the last line of our hymn Dix calls us to unrestrained celebration, "Joy, joy, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary."

5. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, hymn number 82.

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