

# Cradle and Cross

*Readings: Isaiah chapter 60, verses 1-7; Matthew chapter 2, verses 1-12*

I don't want to put a damper on your Christmas but in all the celebrations centering on the birth of a child there is another dimension. And we ignore it at our peril. Having Communion just a day or so before Christmas, makes the point. The point being that hanging over the Cradle is the shadow of the Cross. We celebrate the birth of Christ by remembering His death, the two cannot be separated. In a very real sense this Child was born to die.

This truth is there in the Christmas story if you care to look for it. We are told that Wise men came from the East, bringing with them gifts; gold and frankincense – and myrrh! Each gift is symbolic of who Jesus is but the strange one is myrrh. For myrrh is an embalming agent, used to wrap up the body of someone who has died. It speaks of death, not birth. It was a strange and early insight into the meaning of His birth.

A week after Jesus' birth Mary and Joseph took the Child to the Temple for the rite of circumcision and went again for the rite of purification. On this occasion an old man, well known for his piety, and gave thanks to God and took the Child in his arms and uttered a dark prophesy. "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel". And he said to Mary: "A sword will pierce through your own soul also." Little could Mary have imagined that 30 years later she would see a Roman soldier thrust his sword into the body of the crucified Christ.

And there is an apocryphal story about Jesus as a young lad working in his father's carpenter's shop. He takes a piece of wood, mis-shapen and ready to be made into a yoke for somebody's oxen. The boy takes the plank of wood, holds it high, his arms outstretched. And the flickering light throws a shadow against the wall. The shadow is of someone whose arms are outstretched forming the outline of the Cross.

The rest of the world will not give a moment's thought to that dimension of Christmas. And, I suspect, very few Christians will either. At least having Holy Communion now focuses our mind beyond the Cradle to the Cross; and beyond that to an Empty Tomb.

Which is not to say that the Cross was the purpose of His coming. God came in Christ in order to reveal Himself to the world and through Jesus, to reconcile the world to Himself. What made the Cross inevitable was the human response to His coming. In the memorable words of St John's gospel: "He came to his own people and his own people would not accept him". Instead they rejected him out of hand and demanded his crucifixion.

So it was that Herod heard about the birth of one born to be King and immediately determined to get rid of him. His words to the Wise Men were entirely cynical. "When you have found him bring me word that I too may come and worship him."

The pattern of Christ's life was one of rejection. The religious leaders and political powers combined to kill Him off. And not just because of what he said and did. They killed Him off because of Who he was. His words and actions were simply the expression of Who he was. As long as Jesus remained true to Himself His death was inevitable.

By way of illustration. Many years ago, when radar was still in its infancy, two ships sailed in opposite directions off the coast of Newfoundland. They were on a collision course. Thick fog blanketed the area and both ships relied on their radar. One captain misread his radar and ordered his helmsman to hold fast to the course he was on. The outcome was a collision and many lives were lost.

So with Jesus. Right at the beginning of His ministry, out in the desert, He had set course and would not be deflected from it. It was the course determined by God's Truth and God's Love. And

that commitment set Him on a collision course with human nature. No way was Jesus going to change course. And equally human nature refused to change. The outcome was inevitable and crucifixion the result.

So let us not go gooey-eyed and get all sentimental this Christmas. On Christmas Day we shall rightly celebrate the birth of a baby. There is joy and wonder, the more so since we celebrate the birth of not just another baby. The Child of Bethlehem is none other than:

*“Our God, contracted to a span / incomprehensibly made man”*

But while we celebrate His birth let us never forget its inevitable outcome. The shadow of a Cross looms over the Cradle, and the star shining above the Cradle gives off a light which is cruciform in shape.