

The star and the visitors take centre stage

The shepherds and the Magi were very different visitors to the new-born Jesus.

Fr Denis McBride C.Ss.R. tells us more.



One of the peculiar things about the two Gospel stories of Jesus' birth is that the account of the birth doesn't take up much space in the narrative. The birth is narrated in half a line by Matthew: "she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus" (Matthew 1:25). Luke is fulsome by comparison, having two sentences: "While they were there, the time came for her to have her child. And she gave birth to a son, her first-born and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:6-7).

Like the death of Jesus, the birth of Jesus is passed over in language that is surprisingly spare for such a momentous event. There is no detail of this dramatic birth; no reaction noted from Mary or Joseph, no voices – not even a cry – from the three main characters. Like the death of Jesus, the story of his birth is told through the eyes of the observers, those who have come from near or far to witness the event.

The two Gospel narratives shift the spotlight away from the birth to focus attention on those who look on the event – not the immediate family, interestingly, but outsiders. We are invited to see the events through the eyes of two different groups: the shepherds in Luke's Gospel and the Wise Men in Matthew's. For the

evangelists, it is these witnesses who appear large; it is they who take centre stage and respond to what they see and hear.

The shepherds are Bethlehem locals, poor people, who are watching their flocks by night. You might think that these stargazers would be the ones to clock a new star as it lit up the night sky. Instead they are graced with an angelic annunciation, surrounded by the glory of God and treated to a bravura performance of five-part angelic choirs singing the Gloria!

The Wise Men, by contrast, are foreign celebrities, people of substance, who gain ready access to the palace of King Herod and can converse with majesty and with the King's counsellors. The Magi come from the mysterious East, which had been, long before Christianity, the birthplace of many religions. These Wise Men follow a new star in the sky; for all their exotic importance, there are no angelic choirs for them. They are excited about what is new and fresh and unexplained. They follow their instincts and so follow the star. Eventually they reach their destination in a child, offer their curious gifts, and kneel down to worship.

The Wise Men know how to consult the heavens and how to worship with expensive gifts. The shepherds come empty-handed because they have nothing to offer but themselves.

They rejoice in finding one so close to their own poverty, one whose first resting place on earth is an emergency landing – what is available at the time – a borrowed feeding trough for animals. The shepherds have been told something amazing: that this child is born "to you" (Luke 2:11). He is theirs. After all, this is the town of David; this is the place celebrated in memory of the young boy David, who was first overlooked because he was the little one out minding the sheep – just as they were before all this.

If the clever Magi are to be admired, the poor shepherds are not to be despised. They are the first group to whom the Gospel is announced; they are the first to respond graciously. The Magi, who had access to the palace of a king, have eventually to flee from a despot: they become unwilling fugitives. Their way led them through the palace of a king to the new-born child, but they cannot return by the same route. The shepherds can go back to their fields: they are a threat to nobody. No one will be seeking their counsel.

Two different groups. Which group do we feel more comfortable with? Are we more at ease with the clever Wise Men, in their embroidered silken robes, who can read the stars and can afford to travel through countries to follow their dream? Or are we happier in the company of the shepherds, first terrified and then delighted, who leave their posts and follow the angel's instructions, to pay their respects to this new-born child? Whichever group we feel more at home with, the witnesses, the watchers will always outnumber the principal characters in the drama. This Christmas we turn up, but we do more than watch. Empty-handed or not, we come to worship this little one.

Fr Denis McBride's many books are available through Redemptorist Publications.