

## **Ruben's Long Day and The Night in the Stable.**

It was a very dark, cold night in the fields around the town of Bethlehem. Not a star could be seen above, for the sky was shrouded with clouds and the darkness clung to Ruben like a blanket. Ruben was a shepherd, but that night as he sat on the damp grass he was a troubled shepherd - and he was in a state of shock.

Earlier that day Ruben had left his fellow shepherds and set off to Bethlehem to buy food for everyone, and he had reached Bethlehem and now he carried bread and cheese and wine in his bag on his back. In Bethlehem he had stopped at an inn and there he had got talking to a man named Cleopas from a nearby town called Emmaus. As they talked Ruben was aware of a young woman and a man who came into the inn. Ruben noticed them because the woman was obviously about to give birth and he overheard them asking for a room, and the innkeeper telling them they were full up but that they could stay in the stable behind the inn, and out they went. And so deep and lively was Ruben's conversation with Cleopas that he decided to accompany him as he walked home along the Emmaus road. And as dusk fell they had arrived and Ruben had realised that he must get back quickly to his fellow shepherds as he had been gone a long time. So he said goodbye to Cleopas and he set off on a short-cut, heading across the fields and over the hills, back to his flock and to the warm fire that he knew would be waiting for him. But then, as he walked hurriedly on, the night had closed in around him, and suddenly Ruben was in deep darkness, and next thing he knew he was lost. He could see nothing. Relying only on his sense of direction he strode on, a mild

panic stirring in his breast. The problem was that Ruben had no sense of direction. In fact he had got lost before when he was out with his sheep and the other shepherds had had to come searching for him, and they made fun of him – Ruben the shepherd who got lost! He had seemed to be walking for hours and he grew desperate. He couldn't possibly find his way back until morning light and his fellow shepherds would go hungry that night.

Suddenly, however, he stopped in his tracks. Not very far ahead of him he saw a light in the sky – a dazzling light that pierced the darkness, and from it he could hear singing. The whole sky lit up for a few moments, and Ruben could see his surroundings and he knew where he was, and he knew that the light had shone where he had left the other shepherds earlier that day. He was not far away. And the singing rose and swelled and seemed to fill the air and then it stopped and once again there was silence, and darkness.

Now he sat amazed, and troubled. What on earth had he seen? And what would the other shepherds say to him now? Once again they would make fun of him – the shepherd who got lost!

And now we pause there and remain seated as we sing the first two verses of hymn 324, 'Angels from the realms of glory...'

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So Ruben sat, anxious, bewildered and wrapped in darkness. Just then, however, he looked up and his heart skipped a beat. Coming towards him was a figure. He could see it because it seemed to

glow in the dark, and as it came close he could see it was like a man, dressed in shining white.

‘Who are you?’ shouted Ruben, terrified. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Don’t be afraid’, came the reply. I am Raphael, an angel. I come in peace.’

‘An angel?’ cried Ruben. ‘I don’t believe in such things!’

‘Don’t be afraid!’, repeated Raphael. ‘Let me sit down beside you.’

And then Raphael sat on the grass beside Ruben and he told Ruben his story. That night Raphael was not a happy angel. He explained that he came from heaven, from the very presence of God where the angels dwell and sing their praise as they worship around God’s throne. But Raphael had one problem. He couldn’t sing. He had a terrible singing voice. And the other angels made fun of him – the angel who couldn’t sing! And that night they had been given a very important job by Gabriel, the angel-in-chief. They were to appear to a group of shepherds near the town of Bethlehem where a king had just been born, in a manger in a stable, of all places. And they were to sing and to proclaim the good news to the shepherds. So Raphael had gone with them but he was miserable. He did not want his voice to spoil the angel’s song, and so as soon as he could he had slipped away from the others and sat here in the dark while the angels sang and then returned to heaven. And he had watched as the shepherds set off to find the baby, and now he felt alone and very sorry for himself.

‘Well’, said Ruben, ‘If all the other shepherds have gone to find this baby, I’d better go too! And’, said Ruben, ‘I have a feeling I know where to go. I am certain that the couple I saw in the inn

today... that young woman about to give birth – she is the mother of this new-born king!’

‘And I’ll come too!’ said Raphael. ‘I want to greet this child! But I’ll make my own way there. We angels prefer not to be seen by human beings. I know where the baby lies and I will meet you in the stable!’

Then Raphael the angel disappeared, and Ruben set off along the familiar road to Bethlehem.

And now we pause again, remaining seated as we sing the next two verses of hymn 324, ‘ wise men leave your contemplations...’

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When Ruben reached Bethlehem he made his way through the crowded, narrow streets, and soon he came to the inn. Inside he could see his fellow shepherds drinking and laughing, but he couldn’t face seeing them then. So he slipped round the back to the stable, and he entered. There he saw a beautiful sight: two cows, a donkey, and the woman and the man he had seen earlier, sitting by the manger. And in the manger he could just see a tiny baby, fast asleep. And, in front of them, there stood a tall man, dark-skinned and dressed in fine robes.

‘Er... hullo! My name is Ruben and I’m a shepherd. And I have been told by an angel that a special baby has been born here tonight and I wanted to come and see.’

‘Yes’, said the baby’s father. ‘Your fellow shepherds have just gone. They came and greeted our child.’

‘And - um – who are you?’ Ruben asked the tall, dark man.

'I am Darius', said the man. 'And I have a story to tell. I come from the East, from the land of Persia and I am an astrologer, a reader of the stars. The sky reveals to me things that are to happen. And nine months ago I and my fellow star-gazers saw a new star in the sky, which proclaimed that a new king would soon be born. The very stars in the heavens were proclaiming this birth and so we set out to follow where this star was directing us – me and my fellow astrologers, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. We travelled far and came at last to this land of Judea – but here something very bad happened of which I am deeply ashamed. Melchior and I had a falling out. In fact, it was more than that. It was a fight. Melchior said that we should head for Jerusalem, the capital city, for that is where a new king would be born. But I have read the ancient Scriptures of this people Israel, and I knew that the promised king would be born not in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem. Indeed, I saw that to alert Jerusalem to the birth of a new king would be highly dangerous! And so we argued. And we scientists are proud, and soon there was anger and insults shouted and I, so sure that I was right and sorely provoked... I... struck Melchior and knocked him out and ran away. And here I am now, at this stable where the star has led me. And soon Caspar and Melchior and Balthazar will arrive here with precious gifts they are bringing for this baby, and then I must say sorry to Melchior – even though I was right! – and I must beg his forgiveness for losing my temper and hitting him.'

There was a moment of silence in the stable, and then suddenly there was a rustle and the stable lit up with a soft glow - and there, beside Ruben and Darius, stood Raphael the angel.

Darius gasped and fell to his knees, and just at that moment the baby awoke, and let out a little cry, and the woman took him and held him to her breast.

Then Darius bowed before the baby and said, 'My eyes have scanned the stars and peered into mystery but never before seen an angel. I greet you! Soon my fellow astrologers will be here with gifts, and in the presence of this visitor from heaven I offer a prayer. I see that this baby has come to bring peace. And so I pray for forgiveness for striking Melchior, and I pray for the world and for an end to conflict and war and violence. I pray for the rule of this King of Peace.'

Then Ruben stepped forward, and he said to the baby, 'you should be greeted with a song, and as Raphael cannot sing I will sing instead. And then Ruben sang, and it was a song for all who are lost and who stumble in darkness, and who cannot see the way ahead or find their way home. 'For', sang Ruben, 'this baby is the good shepherd who will gather his sheep and lead them by still waters.' Then Ruben bowed and knelt before the baby.

Raphael, however, stood silent and sad. After a moment, he said, 'And what can I give this new-born king? Darius has prayed and Ruben has sung – what shall my offering be?' Then Darius the astrologer turned to him and said, 'My eyes look upwards to the stars, but sometimes they turn from there and see ahead to the future, and I see that your gift will be offered in years to come. For in my mind I see a cross on a hill, and I see a crowd shouting, and I see women weeping for what is happening to the man this child will become. And I see a tomb, but I see its stone rolled away. And I see you, Raphael, announcing to women who have come to anoint

his body, 'He is not here. He is risen.' You will be the first to proclaim that good news. That is your gift!

Then Raphael fell to his knees and there was silence in the stable, save only for the sounds of the animals breathing, and the baby feeding at his mother's breast.

And we remain seated and sing verse 5 of hymn 324, ' All creation, join in praising... '.