

## **The Journey of the Magi**

*by T S Eliot*

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.”  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.  
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.  
All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Epiphany, 6th January, 2021

Where shall we go, this Epiphany tide?



(New York near Penn Station, July 2018)

*The Journey of the Magi* poem is one of my favourites. As a teacher of English Literature I'm sure some of my students grew heartily tired of my talking about it as much as I did. As a minister of the Christian Gospel I fear congregations over the years have suffered the same fate, and now, Dear Friends I'm afraid its your turn! But I ask you - if you haven't read it before (which I cannot believe) and even if you have, even if you know it by heart, please read it again, out loud, relishing the roll of wonderful words the gorgeous imagery, exotic, redolent and utterly real.

*Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.*

But where was this place, and after such an expedition! Where did they end up,  
*Arriving at evening, not a moment too soon.* It seems certain Matthew

envisaged them travelling through the local rural landscape - the place now known the world over as The Shepherds' Fields.

The Shepherds' Fields near Bethlehem are a good place to be when we're sensing what it would have been like to be in that land, that place in the early C1st B.C.E.

The topography is rolling, and under starlight unearthly. It is real, however, quite real. Like much of the land in the Middle East arid and warm-wind-swept, punctured with interruptions of limestone rock, green scrub and the odd lizard darting for shade in Olive groves. The soft clanking of bells around the necks of sheep and goats drifts in the air, and from across the way the Muslim Call to Prayer reminds pilgrims of the richness of the Middle East. If you peer in a certain direction you'll see a large mass rising from the earth: Herodian. This shekel-busting palace was Herod the Great's refuge in the melting hot summers, decked with baths and cool stone and shade, paid by Jewish peasants' taxes. Herod's sycophancy with Rome secured his localised power and wealth. It also earned the localised loathing of his betrayal, his betrayal of his own people. There is no greater betrayal, surely than to use your own people as a greedy means to your own greedy end?

Into this rich mix came, according to the writer of St Matthew's Gospel 'wise men.' It's not beyond impossibility that a woman would have been one of them, and it's not certain that the Gospel writer meant us to believe there were three of them. All Matthew records is, 'wise men' and three gifts of Gold Frankincense and Myrrh. It's this mysterious part of Jesus' Birth Narrative that catches our eye at this time of the year. Just when we think Christmas is over we find ourselves singing, 'We three kings of Orient are ...'. It's a story about travelling, about foreigners, which in our xenophobic tilting world, and the alarming rise of so-called populism may be counter-intuitive to some. In lockdown, however a good travelogue is heartening, and reminds us that one day we hope to venture forth again! How does it strike us though, Matthew's *inclusive* story telling? To have people from a far away place kneel at Jesus' birth, to call them wise and to describe such gifts? If we stop to think about the gifts we realise there's a lot more to this start than just imaginative words - there's a depth of meaning which we're not meant to miss!

Let's take Gold, for example. A good gift in anyone's book, but why name it? The properties of Gold are intriguing here, the fact that its extremely dense, is a

terrific conductor as well as being malleable. Over generations, across cultures it's been used to make wedding rings symbolising love, longevity, loyalty. Frankincense was and still is known to be a great healer, a strong fighter against bacteria and other agents which are a danger to life. It is an astringent, a purifier. What about Myrrh, a beautifully perfumed oil used in the anointing of monarchs at coronations - Queen Elizabeth 11 was anointed by Myrrh oil by the then Archbishop of Canterbury at her 1952 coronation in Westminster Abbey.

These extraordinary gifts bear meaning and messages pointing to the identity of Jesus, foreshadowing who he became. He became like gold, alive and compassionate to people's lives and plight, faithful to the fears and needs of everyone, certainly the most vulnerable, able to deal with despots, cheats and liars. He became like Frankincense, a healer working against the evils that blight and corrupt and even destroy life and hope. He became like Myrrh, a King but unlike any the world knows whose reign is only exercised in the unleashing of care, comfort, suffering with, cleansing, loyalty.

Tennyson writes that after seeing the baby the Magi returned home, but it's not the Hollywood ending we might expect. Their experience sounds disorientating, deeply strange - as strange as walking up to ground level in New York off the subway! He writes, *We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation ...* My understanding of this is (I'd love to hear your thoughts) that on encountering Jesus and (critically) understanding who he is (the gifts help) our lives will not go on as before because encountering him changes us. We can't simply be content with the ways things were because we know he's asking us to do something, do things which on first inspection we cry, 'How?!'

You'll have many stories of how as Church, you've done extraordinary things, things which changed you (individually and collectively) made you think about things and people differently, grew your horizons, challenged your inhibitions, perhaps honed skills you'd no idea you would have.

As lockdown begins again, perhaps this is a good time to think about this - I will, too. But when we ask the 'How?!' question, let's also ask the 'Who with?' question - and may I suggest an answer lies in US, the Family of Faith at CKS, together. In these still-dark days we have time to re-visit fundamental questions: the answer may not be

so terribly scary if we absorb the promise of faith that we do nothing alone, and that we are sent help - sometimes so unusual we may ignore the very gift we're given!

Shall we let this be our line of travel, this Epiphany tide? Together, perhaps to pastures new? Together! What a wonderful word in this very strange time, and true with our everlasting, loving, loyal, healer King.



(The Inter State from Massachusetts to Vermont, July 2018)