

## Epiphany 2022 – Ecumenical service

This evening we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany. The epiphany is many things – the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the story of the Three Wise Men, a story of gift-giving and of deep metaphor. It is also a classic story of a journey – the journey of the Magi.

Do you know the poem by T.S. Elliot?

"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 arrived 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 lead all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I have 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.

The theme of Journey is almost a commonplace, even a cliché in Christian thought, and perhaps even of secular thought about how to describe our existence. Life is a journey, we are told perhaps too often. Yet today, as we reflect on a particular journey, perhaps we might use it to explore our own lives as followers of Christ. The specific journey of Matthew's Magi is sometimes presented as a saccharine story for young children, but read on a few verses further and you will find a rather hard and even violent story revealing just how fragile life can be.

Journeys are a risk: When you're on a journey, you often don't know what you are about to do, who you are about to meet, where exactly you are going, when or whether you'll ever get back home. And even if you're the sort of person who plans against every contingency things can go wrong. The car can break down, your flight can be cancelled, you can take a wrong turning, you can find that what you had journeyed to see has moved to a new place, and your trip was in vain. You can find your travel plans smashed to pieces, yet again, by a global pandemic

Risk, I think, is certainly the experience of the Magi. They've seen a sign. They think they know what it means. They've taken off on their journey. They've reached Jerusalem, but everything is very different from what they expected. They're in the wrong place, seeking the wrong king. They set out again, not knowing what lies before them.

For the magi, as for all of us trying to negotiate the early weeks of 2022, the journey became about living with uncertainty.

A second point is that journeys can be times for reflection. In the Ancient World, being on a journey meant either walking or riding, or perhaps sailing in a boat – no fast trains, planes or cars. Slow travel can inspire reflection – on the landscape one is passing, but also on the things one has left behind. One reflects on the past, as well as the present and the uncertainty that is the future. The great luxury of slow travel is that one gets to smell the flowers rather than simply to watch the fields fly by. The little things: the running stream, the vine leaves over the lintel, the changing terrain, the hands of the people, become things we notice, because the pace is slow. Because of the measured pace of the journey, one has time to reflect on the changes, to process them, with each new encounter.

There is another aspect of slow travel. Some of you will know that I don't drive a car. In consequence walk a lot, and whilst I walk I have time to think, taking time out from the hussle and bussle. I like the aloneness. But I find that even better than walking alone is when one goes for a long walk with a friend or a small group. Travel then becomes a social

occasion, in which the walkers sets their own pace. It becomes an opportunity for conversation, a chance to engage with others.

Here again, I think we hit on an aspect of the experience of the Magi. Their journey would have been a slow, reflective, but communal process; with time to regret the summer palaces and the sherbet as Eliot puts it. But the long hours of silence, each in his own little world on the road, would have been punctuated with conversations, sometimes bright, sometimes reflective, about the journey they were on, and what they hoped to find at its end.

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The journey of life, then, is about risk, about uncertainty, about careful, solitary reflection, and about community and conversation.

So, my preacher's questions for Epiphany: where are you on your journey right now? What are the risks ahead, and will you take them? Where are opportunities for reflection, and will you slow down for long enough to take advantage of them? Is life too fast? Or is it so slow that the impetus for movement seems lost?

A cold coming we have of it, sometimes, on our journey. Eliot was right. Yet how rewarding it is, how great the gifts given to us, when we follow the star set before us, as Matthew's great story guides us to the Christ of God.

- Craig D'Alton