

epiphanies

..... for at this time we celebrate your glory
made present in our midst.

In the coming of the magi
the King of the world was revealed
to the nations.

Extended Preface for Epiphany Times and Seasons

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."*

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2.¹⁻¹²

Matthew's account of the Coming of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus is a wonder-filled story; arguably the pinnacle of the infancy narratives. Yet Matthew is the only one of the four gospel writers to mention the Magi, and then the details are scant. The richly embellished story that we love is the product of the imagination of artists, poets and musicians alike, as well as a theologian or two!

All we are told is that wise men (astrologers) came from the East. The assumption is made that there were three because of the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Their identification as kings in later Christian writings is probably linked to a verse from Psalm 72¹¹, "*May all kings fall down before him*". It was Origen (184 - 253), an early Christian writer, who loved allegory, who pronounced that the gold symbolised Jesus' kingship, frankincense his divinity, and myrrh his humanity.

Their names and ethnicities, Melchior of Persia, Caspar of India and Balthazar of Arabia are attributed to the vivid imagination and prolific writings of Pope Gregory the Great from the mid 6th century. The Coming of the Wise Men was one of his favourite themes, arguing that just as the wise men were warned not to return the same way, so we too, having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return by the way we came.

The poet, T S Eliot, picks up the same thread in his well known poem the 'Journey of the Magi', the first five lines of which are a plagiarism of a sermon preached by Lancelot Andrewes (1555 - 1626) in front of King James I on Christmas Day in 1620. (Lancelot Andrewes was then Bishop of Winchester and the steering power behind the Authorised Bible.

It is said that T S Eliot came to faith by reading Lancelot Andrewes' sermons. (It's not a route by which I would recommend someone to come to faith!))

In his sermon Lancelot Andrewes contrasts the hardships endured by the Magi in coming to the Christ-child, with the slothfulness of King James' subjects. Unwilling to leave their beds, the Bishop lambasts their indifference to the Magi's diligence calling on the King's subjects to 'Ecce Homo', (Behold the Man!)

Journey of the Magi (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, 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 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 palaces, 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.

T S Eliot

T S Eliot weaves his poem around the idea of searching and finding, and on finding returning home on a different path. As Pope Gregory the Great emphasised when we behold Christ we are 'no longer at ease with our former selves'. And, as we promise in our baptism vows, we turn away from evil and turn to Christ, returning home by another way.

In his much shorter poem, 'The Magi', W B Yeats (1865-1939) takes a different stance. Writing in the midst of the First World War, Yeats contrasts the dissatisfaction of the Wise Men with his belief that humanity had yet to discover the meaning of Jesus' time on earth. The weariness of the wise men is, for Yeats, an allegory for humanity's lack of fulfillment. The Magi's plight parallels our own lack of purpose.

The Magi

NOW as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

W B Yeats (1916)

Yeats was an Irish poet who used his writing to both critique and comment on the then turbulent political events in Ireland. Yeats had rejected Christianity early in his life, but his poetry demonstrates his profound interest in the divine and how it interacts with humanity. But what makes Yeats take on the story of the Magi so interesting is his insistence that the events had all been preordained.

This article is not offered as a critique of Yeats' poem, but his leaning towards Gnosticism, which understands the world (the bestial floor) as something to be denied, colours his poem. The cruelty of Calvary pierces the hope the Magi were seeking. Likewise our searching - we find only the stark bare realities of being human, where the loving deliverance revealed in the glory of the divine remains an uncontrollable mystery.

If Yeats' understanding is right (remember that he is writing in the context of the horrors of the First World War and the brutal suppression of Irish Nationalism) perhaps our searching is futile. Or is our searching something to do with our coming to understand that the cruelties we experience are not the final word? Just as for the wise men, in our searching poverty is turned to riches, our sorrow into joy.

The Judeo-Christian tradition understands God to have declared Creation good, and humanity, very good (which is why Gnosticism is a heresy). Whilst such truth remains incomprehensible to reason and is only knowable through divine revelation (an epiphany), the mystery continues, and like the Magi we must continue searching to our journey's end.

Does all this embellishment of the story matter? What I think is important to understand is that we do not compose an audience watching God's Play, as predestination would imply. At our baptism we are invited to participate as a character acting out God's Story on his stage. By entering into the bible stories, through using our imagination and reason, we shape our character and gain insights that would otherwise pass us by.

And the reason why I think the story of the Coming of the Wise Men grabs us is because within our own meanderings of faith we can readily empathise with the Wise Men who lose sight of the star.

But they don't give up. They diligently continue their search discerning for the truth. Thank God they did, for their epiphany is ours also.