

## Learning from the Magi

### Bible reading: Matthew 2: 1-12

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was a poet, dramatist and literary critic, receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. He studied Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, and then came to faith in Jesus Christ and was baptised. He wrote a poem, 'The Journey of the Magi', which is based on his journey to conversion.

A little background before you hear the poem. It is written from the viewpoint of one of the wise men later on in his life when he recalls the journey that he made with his fellow travellers to Bethlehem.

### The Journey of the Magi

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 when 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 dirty 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 wineskins.  
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 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.

What follows is a reflection combining the themes of this poem with the passage from Matthew's gospel.

**The journey of faith can be hard.** We are never promised an easy road, unless we are prepared not to question or be challenged. Like the wise man in the poem, sometimes to be a Christian seems foolish and unreasonable. Doubts creep in. Why don't the people we pray for accept the Christian faith? Why is it that Christians suffer? Was I really called to ministry or did I misjudge my vocation? When I read about the atrocities being committed in Kenya, why doesn't God step in and do something? Yes, sometimes there are voices singing in our ears, saying that faith is all foolishness.

**What is it then that brings us together** as a group of people today to worship, to have our faith restored, to help us endure with perseverance the life that is set before us? Something – or Someone – has drawn us. We have responded, whether it's out of duty, or a desire to catch up with our friends, or from a deep need within us that cannot be met anywhere else, or because this is what we do every Sunday – we have responded. We have made a journey.

Like the Magi says, he would make the journey again. But when he looks back, he asks the question, were they led all that way for birth or death? Without doubt, there was a birth. But when they returned to their places, their kingdoms, their alien gods, they were no longer at ease. There was need for another journey, a continuing journey, to a deeper knowledge of God.

**“Where is the child?”** the wise men asked (*Matthew 2: 2*). This question is echoed in our own faith experience. Where is Christ found in your life? What is your journey? Travellers are not static. Pilgrims don't stay in the same place. Journeys change people. None of us has fully arrived in our faith journey. We might reach satisfaction one day, only to find that we seem apathetic the next. We might pray many times one day, and then go a week with little connection with God. We might feel on a spiritual high one day, and then wonder what happens when we go through a valley of depression. Things seem certain – and then we are plagued with questions.

We actually have to seek God, to look for him in the experiences of our lives, in the encounters that we have with people, in the events that occur around us. Sometimes beneath the surface, in surprising ways, in unexpected people – not in the loud, obvious voices, but in the still, small voice that can be discerned through prayer and scripture.

**Where is the hope for us** as we stand at the start of a new year, knowing that our will-power is not going to be sufficient to change our human condition? Is there hope for us? Is there hope for the world? Is there hope for the church?

**What lessons do we draw from the journey of the wise men?** It is significant that the wise men or magi or astrologers could have been part of an upper class of political-religious advisers to ancient rulers in what is now Iran and Iraq - an area in our modern world beset by political, tribal and military unrest. A reminder that Jesus came with a message of peace for all the earth and goodwill for all people.

**The wise men came to pay Jesus homage** – to give him reverence, honour and worship. Three times in the scripture passage worship is mentioned: ‘We have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ (*Matt. 2:*) Herod’s words, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ (*v8*) When they saw the child with Mary his mother, ‘they knelt down and paid him homage.’ (*v11*)

During this year, each day may we discover what it means to worship Christ, to deepen our love for him, so that our lives come to be more like him. Some quotes: ‘Without worship, we go about miserable.’ (A. W. Tozer) ‘Worship changes the worshipper into the image of the One worshipped.’ (Jack Hayford) ‘When he is exalted, everything about me is decreased.’ (Jessica Leah Springer)

Worship is not only corporate worship, it is what we are called to do in the pattern of our everyday life. Kneeling in reverence before the Maker of heaven and earth, the one who is the source of all life and love – kneeling even when we have questions and doubts and fears, kneeling in faith that the Son of God has come to us, and has allowed us to find him.

**When we worship, we will want to give.** ‘They opened their treasure chests, and they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.’ (*v11*) Think of your life, your treasure chest – what do you have that you can offer to God so that he can use your gifts to bless others? Not only in material ways, but using your amazing capacities that God has built into you to make a positive difference in the world. What gift can you give others in the name of Christ?

**‘They left for their own country by another road.’** *v12* An encounter with the living Christ will always result in change, over and over again. What new journey might God be calling us to take this year? Will it be a new journey for the church? The direction of our life might need to change. Are we willing to allow that to happen?

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’  
And he replied, ‘Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!’

The blessing of God be with you in this New Year.

*Lynette Leach, 6.1.08*

Resources:

T. S. Eliot's poem on web-site: <<http://www.blight.com/~sparkle/poems/magi.html>>

Poem by Minnie Haskins, 'The Gate of the Year':  
<<http://www.batesline.com/archives/000540.html>>