

Travellers

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

*'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a long 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 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 and alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

I've always loved this wintry poem, *Journey of the Magi*, by T S Eliot. It lumbers, like those sore-footed camels, out of another of those mysterious strands of the nativity story. The journeying of the Magi, or Wise Men, or Eastern Kings, is often better understood by artists and poets. It is filled with imagery and metaphor. It is an event that, when interpreted, points to the future, and has to do with the revelation of God. It is associated with the Feast of the Epiphany – which is on 6th January. An epiphany is a moment of sudden and striking realisation. In this part of the story of God's involvement with the world, the intimacy of that involvement is seen face-to-face. In this new-born infant, no longer in a stable but in a house, the face of God is seen. In the contrast between Herod in Jerusalem: bitter, suspicious, dangerous, and the Christ-Child in Bethlehem: vulnerable, accessible, shining; in this contrast we see the evil and the goodness that power and kingship can represent. It is revealed.

Gifts given by the Magi – gold for a king, frankincense – the image of prayer going up in a cloud to heaven, and myrrh – a spice often used in embalming the dead body. In the giving of the gifts, something is said about Who Jesus is and what He has come to do and to be. It is revealed.

And the star overhead, mysterious, beyond human control, illuminating, shining, revealing to the watchers and the travellers of the world that something is happening; that something has shifted; that something has changed.

Seeing, journeying, giving, wondering. These eastern travellers epitomise something that is part of what it means to be human. To question and consider; to make connections and meanings with what is going on in the world, drawing on wisdom from the past, as well as experience of the present, and perhaps no little hope for the future. These travellers from the pages of the Bible – questing, seeking, wondering, looking, doubting, hoping. As T S Eliot wrote they have always had a cold coming through the difficulties and barriers and cynicism and persecution

from a hostile or indifferent world. But they still travel. They still seek. They still wonder. And perhaps they arrive at a place where revelation takes place between them and God.

A few days after the Watchnight services I unexpectedly met with some people who had attended. They've been coming, only to that service, for years. They remembered just about every sermon I'd preached, which is more than I could say that I did. They wanted to ask questions about what I had said this year, about the real word for Christmas being not God 'for' us, but God 'with' us. They stand, for me, for the many people who like those ancient travellers are still looking and journeying and wondering. They stumble into the hay of the nativity scene on Christmas Eve, to sing their hearts out in praise, to sense that something bigger than themselves is happening in the world, and to be touched, however briefly, by the revealed face of God.

The traveller and the seeker still find their way to the Christ-child to this day. Certainly our church would not exist but for the determination of simple faith of those first travellers and seekers, the shepherds and the wise men, who stumbled into the hay of that first nativity scene surrounding the birth of Jesus.

“On any given Sunday – or other day of Christian worship – those gathered will include a number of persons who could be classified as (travellers and) seekers rather than, say, as fully committed or truly knowledgeable.”ⁱ Who amongst us is to judge that they are not worthy of a place to kneel at the manger alongside those who have worshipped for a lifetime? “Not every committed Christian in name has a taste for actually kneeling in the dust and muck of a barn in a backwater town with astonished recognition that this is where God prefers to make an entrance.”ⁱⁱ

As the year turns we are all travellers and seekers. In this New Year – what do you seek? What do you prepare to travel towards? Where do you think your journey will take you? What do you hope for at journey's end? Will you, like the Magi, have a cold time of it, travelling a difficult road, facing testing challenges, but from out of the darkness, coming to a place of light? Will you meet dangerous people who will give you a hard time you through their words or actions? Will

you be guided by the star of hope and expectation, and be led to a place of sanctuary and healing? Will you be the bearer of gifts to show your reverence for the new-born king?

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It seems to me that the Christian faith will not amount to much if it is static, or if it refuses to ask questions and wrestle with answers. It seems to me that the revelation of the face of God in the Christ Child of Bethlehem, towards Whom we all travel at this time of year, gives us not only the impetus to journey, but also the goal of a life-long search.

The road may be tough; it may have its perils and disappointments along the way; but on that road there will be many fellow travellers – more than we might imagine. Also questing and wondering, also doubting and believing; also ready to lend a hand and share precious gifts.

In a famous Christmas speech in 1939, George VI captured much of the tentativeness and enquiry that epitomise this time of year. Quoting from Minnie Louise Haskin's poem, I finish with these words:

And 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 out 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.”

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.

And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Stephen Bauman, Feasting on the Gospel – Matthew vol 1, p214

ⁱⁱ ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Minnie Louise Haskins (1875-1957), "God Knows" (1908)