

The Feast of the Epiphany
January 2018

6th/7th

A Journey of Faith

I remember some years ago the Top Gear Team, in their usual bawdy and disrespectful way, reconstructed the probable journey of the wise men from the East to Bethlehem to the place where Jesus was born. On the way they experienced the difficulties the contemporary traveller encounters in making that journey: hostile territory through which it is inadvisable to pass, refusal of permission to cross borders of countries at war, unhealthy curiosity towards strangers, the threat of attack and robbery, the perils and hardships associated with crossing the desert. I am sure that the Magi in their journey experienced similar, if not greater obstacles to their progress. In his poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, T. S. Eliot spells out some of these:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.*

*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.*

Then why did they attempt such a long, arduous and dangerous journey? It was because they had a strong and deep faith. Though they were gentiles and pagans at that, their study of the stars had led them to sense very deeply the presence of a greater power behind the sun and the sky, the stars and the moon. In the Letter to the Romans, St Paul says that even those who do not know God

can detect his presence in the things he has made. You do not need to have been told about God to feel and sense his presence in creation; this is something hardwired into our nature as human beings. These Magi, through their own particular way of studying the stars, had correctly discerned the momentous importance of the appearance of what was probably Haley's Comet, as a sign that a king had been born to the Jews, and they deemed this so important as to undertake a long, tedious and dangerous journey to honour him.

Matthew makes a point of contrasting this dedication of the Magi with the hostility of the newborn child's own people from the king, Herod, to the ordinary people of Jerusalem. Although all their major prophets had taught God's people to look forward to the coming of a Messiah, when he is finally born among them, they refuse to believe it and do not welcome those who bring them this news of great joy. In this way, early on in his Gospel, Matthew signals that because of their lack of faith, the Chosen People will lose their Messiah to those not born of the Promise who can accept him and make him their king and teacher.

This, of course, includes us. Christ has been given to us and we have welcomed him and committed our lives to him; our presence here today is testimony to that truth. However, we know only too well, that this is not enough in itself. The journey that is the Christian life is equally difficult in its own way as that undertaken in faith by the magi. Today, on the threshold of a new year, we are making a new start on that journey. It is a time to take stock and not to let the moment pass without reviewing how devotedly we follow Christ in our lives.

In their journey the Magi showed their devotion to the new born Jesus by offering him their gifts, precious gifts. Today is a moment to ask again, what gift do I have to offer Christ? It may be that we

already use our gifts to serve him by giving our time and our resources to serving Christ in the Church as a reader, a flower-arranger, cleaner, altar server, coffee-maker, Alpha group leader, parish council member, catechist or the like. It may be that we serve Jesus in the wider community by serving on the parish council, acting in the local theatrical society, as neighbourhood watch representative or simply by shopping at local suppliers; perhaps we serve him in the wider world by our support of charities to help those whose lives are blighted or disadvantaged in some way. If we do none of these things, we should give serious thought as to how we can share our talents in these areas, for to serve the common good is to serve Christ if we see it as part of our Christian vocation.

However, the most precious gift we can give Jesus is ourselves. That child born in Bethlehem is a human being. He needs love, friendship, to be in a deep trusting and faithful relationship with other human beings, with each of us, which means we need to find time to be in intimate relationship with him. We need to find time each day to let him into our inner life, to think what he really means to us, to speak words of love and praise to him and to feel his love for us in return. We need to share with him our joys and sorrows, seek his healing and comfort in our own need. In short, we need to find time for quiet presence to Jesus in our daily lives, for the prayer that is simply the gift of some quiet moments of our life dedicated to him. Only in this way can he lead us to discover his true presence in us, in others, in our world as he led those wise men to him by the light of the star.

*What can I give him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man
I would play my part,
Yet what can I give him?
Give my heart.*

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

