

# *the journey of the magi by T.S.Eliot*

a sermon preached on the

## *the epiphany of the Lord*

05 January 2020

at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by mother Colleen Clayton*

the lections: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Psalm72: 1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3: 1-12; Matthew 2: 1-12

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, sorefooted, 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 arriving at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you might 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.

*T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909-1962 (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991).*

Eliot wrote this poem immediately after converting to Anglicanism. The first five lines are taken almost word for word from a sermon given on Christmas Day in 1622 by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, the man who oversaw the King James translation of the Bible.

It is an amazing sermon, full of Latin and at nearly 6,500 words, a bit over an hour in length, something you can be grateful I am not going to share with you in its entirety. I will however, read you a small part of it;

It is not commended to stand 'gazing up into heaven' too long; not on Christ himself ascending, much less on his star. For [the Magi] sat not still gazing on the star. Their *vidimus* begat *venimus*; their seeing made them come, come a great journey.

When I was studying homiletics, my lecturer said that there was much wisdom to be gained by reading the sermons of theologians and preachers past. It seems that Eliot, beginning his life as an Anglican was doing just this, reading Andrewes' sermon from two hundred years before, to help him to express the pain associated with the journey of transformation his new faith had begun in him. Wrestling with the recognition that even welcomed and longed for new beginnings bring fear, uncertainty and the death of the familiar and comfortable.

As the magi search for birth, they are surrounded by signs of the death of the one they seek; six hands dice at a door for pieces of silver; feet kick at old, empty wine skins that cannot hold new wine; the three trees of the crucifixion stand on a hill top, and the pale horse of the apocalypse gallops past.

Eliot's poem expresses not just the complexity of inner transformation but also something of the journey through the seasons of the church. Advent leads to the birth of Jesus at Christmas, Lent leads to his death at Easter, and travelling between them, bearing gifts, asking questions, dreaming, and searching are the magi from the East.

Often Epiphanies are described as *ah hah!* moments. They are portrayed as instants of blinding clarity, revelation and certainty. To have an epiphany, is to suddenly see and understand something that has previously been hidden. It is the like the moment when the Ancient Greek mathematician, Archimedes stepped into his bath, saw the change in water level and yelled Eureka! I have found it!

But *The Journey of the Magi* does not focus on the moment of discovery. Instead it presents the determination of the travellers in the face of difficulties and doubts. It seems that their epiphany took time and persistence. They didn't *have it* so much as *it had them*. Whatever it was that gripped them when they first saw the star, it could not be ignored. They planned, prepared, packed and departed. They were drawn on and on, despite the weather, the camels, the camel men, the poor shelter, the lack of sleep and *the voices singing in their ears, saying that this was all folly*.

Although we hear nothing at all about the moment of encounter, we are told that its reality was deeply unsettling; not what the magi had expected. Long after they have returned from their search, what they found upsets their worlds leaving them, *no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods*. Growth means change. Out of the old comes the new. Sometimes birth looks a lot like death.

The magi search and they find the Christ child. And even at the end of their journey, when they have found what they are looking for, they still don't know what it means. They still wonder, *were we led all that way for Birth or Death?* Perhaps we wonder too.

In writing about this poem, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams said, *Eliot never wanted to present religious faith as a nice cheerful answer to everyone's questions, but as an inner shift so deep that you could hardly notice it, yet giving a new perspective on everything and a new restlessness in a tired and chilly world.*

Epiphany is not about receiving a clear answer, but about the ongoing decision to seek. It is not about us grasping facts but about us allowing ourselves to be grasped by God. At Epiphany God calls to our hearts, wanting us to journey towards new birth. It is very likely that we will find that this birth will be *hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.* And yet, if we are wise, like the magi, we will make the journey to seek for it.

Let me read to you a little bit more from Lancelot Andrewes.

*And we, what should we have done? . . . Our fashion is to see and see again before we stir a foot, specially if it be to the worship of Christ. Come such a journey at such a time? No; but fairly have put it off to the spring of the year, till the days longer, and the ways fairer, and the weather warmer, till better travelling to Christ. Our Epiphany would sure have fallen in Easter week at the soonest.*

Epiphany moves our gaze from the birth of Christmas towards the death of Easter, but it urges us to move more than just our gaze, to continue our search for the Christ child rejoicing in moments of insight and persisting through the long hard slog of doubt. Epiphany encourages us, even while we wonder about the sense of it all, to allow ourselves to be seized by something that cannot be rationally explained, to become people who follow stars, and listen to dreams, who celebrate the searching heart of humanity.

The Lord be with you.