



## hard journeys

Some years ago, I realised a long held ambition – to begin to learn to play the saxophone. It's an endeavour that has largely fallen by the wayside in recent years, mostly out of consideration for my neighbours, now that I live in a flat with thin ceilings and floors and people above and below me. When I began, I couldn't read music at all, and as I progressed, I discovered that often the challenge was to play the tune as it was written on the page, rather than the familiar tune you thought you knew. I would suggest that's a helpful approach to adopt when we come to reading the Christmas Gospel stories and especially on the feast of Epiphany, this Twelfth Night.

The gospel reading we've just heard is one with which I'm sure we all feel familiar - it's a regular feature in most carol services and we have seen it enacted in countless nativity plays and pageants, in television and at the cinema. After the shepherds come the wise men, who visit the infant Jesus, having followed the star which stops above the stable, and so they enter and offer their gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Enroute to this encounter they have met King Herod, who asks them to let him know the whereabouts of the child who is born King of the Jews, but having been warned to steer clear of him in a dream, they leave for their own country by another road.

But Matthew and Luke's accounts of the birth of Jesus differ considerably. Luke's version makes no mention of the magi, but rather focuses on Mary and the angel's visit, and on the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the birth in a stable and the appearance of the

angels who give the shepherds the good news, prompting them to go and see the baby for themselves. There is no mention of the star, or the magi, or King Herod. By contrast, in the account written in Matthew's Gospel, the focus is on Joseph rather than Mary, and on King Herod. There is no mention of the stable or shepherds, but rather, the magi – we don't know how many or whether the group included woman – follow the star that appears when Christ is born, and finally find him in a house in Bethlehem, sitting on his mother's knee, no longer a new-born but possibly up to 2 years old.

It's all too easy for us to sanitise and romanticise these stories. But they point to some pretty tough realities – the stigma of Mary falling pregnant before marriage would have been a topic of gossip and scandal; the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem must have been extremely uncomfortable and exhausting for the heavily pregnant Mary; and giving birth in a stable must have been difficult to say the least, not just for Mary but for Joseph too, unaccustomed as he doubtless was, to midwifery.

Tradition has led to the magi being called the three wise men or kings but Matthew doesn't tell us that they were only men, or how many of them, just that they brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Christian tradition has frequently evolved them into named monarchs - Balthasar, king of Chaldea; Casper, king of Tarshish; and Melchior, king of Nubia; but that's certainly not what Matthew tells us. He simply says there were "wise men from the East." The Greek word

Matthew uses translates most closely as astrologers, but the term magi better hints at the mystery surrounding them.

Magi had a distinctly mixed press in the ancient world. Hailing originally from Persia, beyond the eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire they were originally regarded as “the low life of the city, mixed up with drink and prostitutes, full of superstition and naïve belief in astrology”. But gradually, they came to be recognised as having skills in interpreting both dreams and the movement of stars and so rose through the social ranks.

When they’re referred to as simply “wise men”, it’s easy to lose the full sense of the “otherness” of the magi. They were exotic, oriental travellers from a distant land and, perhaps most importantly, not Jewish. They were not only from beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire, they also represented the whole pagan world, the Gentile world outside of and beyond Israel. Yet, the significance of what they saw in the sky compelled them to undertake that long journey and to ask, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

They must have been resilient, determined and dogged. Many images down through the years depict these three distinctive individuals riding on camels, but it’s quite likely they formed a sizeable caravan. Either way, this lengthy journey must have been extremely arduous, as poets over the years have suggested, including T.S. Eliot, whose famous work *The Journey of the Magi* begins:

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.

Eventually, they find this new king, but not where they might have expected, in the palace in Jerusalem. Instead, these exotic, wealthy magi with such rich and deeply symbolic gifts to bring - gifts which would no doubt in their culture be de rigueur for an aspiring king - eventually find themselves outside a very simple, ordinary dwelling. Their reaction? Matthew chooses his words very carefully here, “they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

It’s a wonderfully tightly written scene. There’s no extraneous dialogue; in fact, there’s no dialogue at all. You can easily imagine the whole thing taking place in silent reverence and wonder. The magi have barely got up off their knees before they’ve left, no doubt for Mary as mysteriously as they came; perhaps if it wasn’t for those gifts, she would wonder if she’d dreamt the whole episode.

As Matthew makes no mention of Mary and Joseph having travelled from Nazareth and mentions only the magi visiting them in a house in Bethlehem, it is fair to interpret from his account that Mary and Joseph lived in Bethlehem and that Jesus was simply born at home. Immediately after the magi visit Joseph has another dream in which the angel

tells him to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt to escape the massacre Herod orders.

As we consider those two journeys today, of the magi and of Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt, I find myself thinking of the recent reports of migrants crossing the English Channel in a bid to reach our shores to claim asylum. I'm reminded of the art installation of discarded clothes from the refugee trails in Greece that was suspended above our heads this time last year. I'm also somewhat bemused that compared with the scale of thousands upon thousands of desperate people who have literally washed up on the shores of Greece and Italy in recent years, that our Home Secretary has declared these recent attempted Channel crossings a 'major crisis'.

The story of the coming of Christ in Matthew's Gospel is a story with many parallels in the story of Moses, another special infant who escaped a massacre of infants by a tyrannical ruler. It's also a story of God coming into the world for all people; of every land and creed and language and colour. It's the story of a God who entered our world unrecognised by all but a few, and of how those who did recognise him, gave the best they had to offer, at some risk and cost to themselves. And it's the story of the Word becoming flesh, to seek out the lost, the lonely, the poor and the outcast, to show them the depth of God's love and care.

The word epiphany means an uncovering, a revelation. As we see in Matthew's account, these seemingly sudden experiences are often the culmination of considerable effort and faith. As we continue to contemplate the wonder of Christ breaking into our world, we too seek to recognise and encounter the one who loves us beyond our imagining. For many of us, that's something that also demands effort on our part. We often discover that rather than searching outside of ourselves, we need to connect with the God at the very centre of our being, a process which demands considerable courage as we

may first need to peel away layers of sadness, frustration, anger, grief, betrayal, resentment, frustration, jealousy or any other myriad of emotions and experiences that we've kept locked inside and buried. Only then, after that arduous interior journey can we pay homage and offer our gifts. Only then may we begin to realise our hopes and overcome our fears.

Finally I want to say a word about another prevalent theme in Matthew – that of light. It's the light of an especially bright star that leads the magi to the Christ child, the light of the world, the one in and from whom God's love shines. Later the adult Jesus tells his followers to let their light shine.

Last night, alerted by one of my best friends, whose two eldest boys have severe autism, I turned on the television to watch a 21 year old young man, Andrew, with Downs Syndrome, dance on a television audition show. Andrew, like most young people with disabilities and special needs, has I'm sure, had a challenging journey through life. I know my friend's boys (one of whom is my Godson) certainly do, struggling in a world they don't understand and which so often doesn't make any effort to understand them. Thankfully my Godson and his brother now attend a fantastic specialist school with its own song, Let Me Shine.

Last night's performance by Andrew, was for me a moment of pure television gold. Only six days into this new year, I think it will be very hard to beat. Andrew was clearly born to dance and lit up from within. Watching him dance his heart out was to witness and enter into an experience of being overwhelmed with joy. Sometimes, however hard we search within ourselves, we need to connect with others to know that fullness of joy and light and life.

The journey to which we are all called, on different parallel paths, is what Stephen Bauman describes as that "universal human quest for reunion with our creator, the author of our lives, and the lover of our

souls” and leads us, eventually, when we have encountered that divinity within ourselves, that overwhelming joy and love, not to the stable, but to God’s table, to encounter God with one another, bringing our joys and sorrows, our hopes and our fears, to share together where all are welcome and all are loved and all are fed. And so I close with a prayer by Kate Compston.

Thank you,  
scandalous God,  
for giving yourself to the world  
not in the powerful and extraordinary  
but in weakness and the familiar:  
in a baby; in bread and wine.

Thank you

for offering, at journey’s end, a new beginning;

for setting, in the poverty of a stable,  
the richest jewel of your love;  
for revealing, in a particular place,  
your light for all nations ...

Thank you,  
for bringing us to Bethlehem, House of Bread,  
where the empty are filled,  
and the filled are emptied;  
where the poor find riches,  
and the rich recognise their poverty;  
where all who kneel and hold out their hand  
are unstintingly fed.

Amen.

Lindsay Meader