

A Meditation on Matthew 2:1-12

THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI: OUR FAITH JOURNEY

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So often we think of **having** a Christian faith as having a **set of beliefs or truths** given to us by Scripture which guide our lives as Christians. We forget that faith is also a **journey** encompassing moments of rupture, transition, insight or revelation, and repatterning. The inbreaking of God in our lives through events and persons, as well as in worship, sometimes dislodges us from our familiar ways of seeing things and our habitual ways of responding to others and to God. Such events may be occasioned by a joyful or painful disruption of the ways our lives have been organized, such as a birth of a child, or a separation from loved ones through divorce, death, or geographic relocation (events which disrupt our daily routines, our economic responsibilities, our way of organizing our futures). There is yet another way in which our lives may be disrupted. We may one day glimpse a star on the horizon and have a moment of truth when the deep inner stirrings of our beings are moved by a glimmer of the "more" of what we can be. The promise of God forever calls us to "more being." Often these insights, intuitions, rumblings, awakened in us by the Holy Spirit, mediated through certain events (personal, social or historical), come when we least expect them. They may even come when it feels downright inconvenient to us.

T. S. Eliot has captured something of this in his poem on "The Journey of the Magi." Having seen the star (having felt the intuitive glimmer of a promise of more to be known and loved) the Magi set out on their journey to see where it would lead. Such leavings require faith in the form of courage. "A cold coming we had of it,/ Just the worst time of the year/ For a journey, and such a long journey:/ The way's deep and the weather sharp,/ The very dead of winter." In the Magi's setting out on their journey, we hear echoes of God's call of Abraham to "leave your country, your homeland for the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1) and God's promise to Moses "I mean to deliver my people out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them...to a land where milk and honey flow" (Ex. 3:8). Indeed, when a glimmer of light (a star, a call, a promise) awakens or

reawakens in our hearts and beckons us to follow, we set out on a journey and enter into a time of transition that is at once uniquely personal and intimately connected to other members of the human family.

In times of rather instant travel, the notion of "journey" may lose its symbolic significance. Yet each of us knows that whenever we have experienced times of transition in our lives, whether they be individual transitions or transitions in the life of our communities, no instant arrival at a new way of knowing, valuing and believing is possible. Internal and external conflicts signal that the old ways of understanding and making sense of our lives no longer hold us together. We have indeed set out but we have not yet arrived at a new place. Being "in between" is not experienced as comfortably as riding in an airplane, car or bus where we may bring along the comforts of home. Rather, some writers in the Old and New Testaments have more accurately imagined this transitional space as a wilderness or desert.

Abraham, Moses, and the Magi "leave" the familiar and journey onward in the light of the promise. When they enter into the wilderness/desert where the dim light of promise recedes in their memories, they become despondent. Indeed, there were times of deep regret for having left what they had known. Even if it was not the best of times, it was at least familiar to them. And the Magi could discuss together the "times we regretted/ the summer places on slopes, the terraces,/ ...With the voices singing in our ears, saying? That this was all folly" (Eliot). Or perhaps, regret becomes more a deep-seated anger and protest "Why did you lead us out to die in the wilderness?...Better to work for the Egyptians (remain oppressed) than die in the wilderness' (Ex. 14:11).

The wilderness phase of the journey disorients and tests the heart. It stretches every fibre of our being in order that we may be capacitated to receive more of what the Promise holds for us. We may grumble, kick or scream, and want to turn back, blaming others for our precariously vulnerable condition. The star disappears, leaving us in the darkness with a sense of meaninglessness, a felt experience of the void. This darkness is the time of unknowing, undoing, dispossession in order to become possessed with a new kind of knowing that will affect our very way of being together as a people. Indeed, this is the time when we are invited to let go of all our images and preconceptions of who we are and how things should be. By the power of the Promise alone we continue the

journey, encouraged by other significant fellow travellers who hold out the memory of the promise to us in times of darkness.

Emptied, the Magi come to the place where the star reappears brighter than before. Not a moment too soon, the Magi entered into the stable and "they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage." (Matt. 2:11). The desert journey prepared them for this moment of seeing, of encountering the Holy Mystery of God in the very midst of human experience. Indeed, the Magi could not grasp the Mystery by standing outside it, simply observing the facts, but by allowing themselves to be grasped by the Holy Mystery revealed in this moment. "Falling on their knees" they were "still and still moving/ Into another intensity/ For a further union, a deeper communion... Requiring a condition of complete simplicity,/ Costing no less than everything" (Eliot, *Four Quartets*), And they understood. The meaning of the whole journey bursts forth in a moment of revelation: Emmanuel, God in Christ among us, our hope of glory (Col. 1:27). A new, more complex and richer understanding of how God has been and is with us in all our moments in the journey of faith allows us to piece together the disparate elements of the journey and to know each moment as an essential part of the journey itself. Then, "opening their treasures, they offered gifts" in response to the gift given to them. They indeed are empowered to be response-able for what they have received.

Hence, the journey does not end here. The Magi "returned to their own country by a different way" (Matt. 2:12). Indeed, having encountered the Holy Mystery pervading all life, they must return home by a different way, for they are different. Everything of necessity will be different as they and we repattern our lives according to what we have been given to see, to know, to understand. The repatterning of our lives is not easy. There may be times when we wonder with Eliot's Magi: "Were we led all the way for Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly./ We had evidence and no doubt. We 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./ We should be glad of another death."

The inbreaking of God in and through Christ in our lives is consequently both a birth and a death. We are graciously born and borne into a new way of seeing, valuing, and believing as persons in relationship to others and the world within the context of human history. As such, there is a death, the loss of our former ways of being as individuals and as communities of faith. Each new breakthrough, insight, revelation in the journey of faith requires a repatterning of our lives according to what has been given to us to see and know.

Not only is this true for our personal lives, but it is also true in terms of human history. Ever since the "Word was made Flesh and dwells among us" (Jn. 1:14) we Christians become responsible to actualize our freedom in and through the world, time and history. Today, we are in an unprecedented historical period wherein the vision of who we are and what we can become as a human community is being threatened by nuclear disaster. As Christians, our journey in faith leads us to take seriously our responsibility of preserving the planet Earth, the world God so loved. Indeed, in the face of such a challenge, fear of disrupting our smaller worlds may prevent us from setting out. But have we as a people of faith been led all this way for birth or death?