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The Third Sunday after Epiphany

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The Feast of the Epiphany

"They departed into their own country another way." (St. Matthew 2.12)

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.

Thus, T.S. Eliot, great 20th-century American and English poet of *The Wasteland*, begins his first expressly Christian poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, slightly paraphrasing a few lines from Lancelot Andrewes' Sermon for Christ-mas Day, 1622. For Eliot, the newly-conver-
ted poet, now five years after writing *The Wasteland*, just lately baptized and confirmed, the ancient story of the Magi becomes a parable of conversion: a parable of his own and every man's pilgrimage to Christ. It's a journey through a wintry desert, with refractory camels and unreliable camel-men, through hostile towns and cities, and "with the voices singing in our ears, saying That this was all folly". It's the cold and hazard-ous journey through the waste land to a new and different world.

But what of the journey's end, the destination? According to Eliot's imagination, the travellers arrive at dawn in a temperate valley, below the snow-line; a valley "smelling of vegetation / With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness / And three trees on a low sky." There's an old white horse, galloping away in a meadow; there's a tavern, with vine-leaves over the door; and one can see, within, hands dicing for pieces of silver, and feet kicking empty wine-skins. It's a landscape of symbols: as complex, as suggestive and as obscure as a Breugel paint-ing. There are symbols of new life and transformation, mixed with symbols of betrayal, futility and death. It's a world which,

as Eliot says, seems to have "no information" about its own meaning. It's Jerusalem below, Jerusalem in bondage with her children (Gal. 4:25). Its symbols are fragments of a meaning which lies beyond it.

And so we move on, to discover – "at evening, and not a moment too soon," says the poet – behind the ambiguity of the symbols, a fundamental paradox, in which life and death are strangely identified.

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.

Birth and Death: Christ's birth, our death; Christ's death, our birth. Terrible paradoxes, certainly; and they lie at the very heart of Christian faith and life. Living we die, and dying, we live. Birth and death are the two sides of every transformation, and Epiphany is about a transformation. The Son of God is manifest, and "we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (II Cor. 3:18). "Changed into the same image": transformed by adoration. No longer conformed to this world, but (as St. Paul says: Rom. 12:2) "transformed by the renewing of your mind." That renewing, that transformation in us, is a continual dying and a continual rebirth. In Christ we die, that we may live in him: that is the mystery of our redemption; that is the mystery of this liturgy we celebrate. "For ye are dead," says St. Paul, "and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). That's the point that Eliot picks up in the concluding lines of his poem:

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.

Eliot's meditation on the journey of the Magi is certainly very peculiar. There's no mention of the star, no mention of Herod and the scribes, no mention of the gifts, and no mention – except very obliquely – even of the mother and child. And yet, the poem grasps the essence of the story: it's the story of conversion, the story of faith's journey through the waste land, to find the Word of God behind all the ambiguities of human words, to taste the life of God in bread and wine, to find death in life, and life in death, to adore the mystery of divine love manifest, and to be transformed thereby.

Thus, if *The Wasteland* was a meditation on the futility and failure of desire, *The Journey of the Magi* is about the redemption of desire, the renewal of desire at a higher level of perception and aspiration, by the grace of Christ's Incarnation: "we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." "No longer at ease in the old dispensation": transformed by adoration.

The Wasteland and *The Journey of the Magi* represent the two sides of Christmas: the two sides liturgically represented in Advent and Epiphany. Advent sets before us the divine judgement upon a God-forsaking, and therefore seemingly God-forsaken world: "The Day of the Lord of hosts," cries the Prophet, "The Day of the Lord of Hosts shall be upon all pleasant pictures" (or more literally, "upon all pictures of desire") (Isa. 2:16). That is the waste land. But it is to that ruined and ruinous world that redemption comes: "When these things begin to come to pass," says Jesus, "then look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh" (Luke 21:28). It is in the waste land that the divine thunder speaks, it is in the wilderness that the Lord's coming is prepared. All that is Advent.

Epiphany, on the other side of Christmas, looks upon the glory of that coming, now fulfilled: "we beheld his glory," says St. John, "the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And all the lessons of this Epiphany season illustrate the facets of that glory, manifest in signs and wonders: signs of divine wisdom and divine power – Jesus with the doctors in the Temple; Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana; Jesus healing the leper and the Centurion's servant – signs of the glory of God manifest in Jesus Christ. But the vision of that glory is a transforming vision; we are transformed by adoration: "changed into the same image...even as by the Spirit of the Lord." "We returned to our places, these kingdoms,/ But no longer at ease here," says Eliot: no longer conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds.

"Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" Where is the Son of God, who comes to save us? Where is that Bread of Life for which our spirits faint? Faith bids us find him, as it were, in a stable. Faith bids us find the word of God in human words; faith bids us taste the very life of God in elements of bread and wine; faith bids us meet and serve the son of God in one another – in the least of these, his brethren; to see and to declare his glory shining there. There, you see, is Bethlehem for

us, now and always. There is Epiphany for us; there his glory shines,
and there we make our gifts of adoration.

And so, if we make our own winter journey to Christ; if we do behold
our Lord and Saviour, there in Bethlehem, and adore him there, we do
not return unchanged. We do not return to Herod; transformed by
adoration, we go home "another way."

"They departed into their own country another way."

The Rev. Canon Dr. Robert Crouse

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