

The Epiphany  
January 4, 2009

This feast day celebrates how the Light from the crib in Bethlehem spreads throughout the world. It says something to us about how we link outer events to our inner life, how the message of the Light is moved into the mystery of illumination.

Every year I reread one of my favorite poems," The Journey of the Magi" by T.S.Eliot and so I share it with you:

"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, sore-footed, 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 a 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 arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.  
All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And 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.”

Eliot says there is birth and death in this journey. We catch a glimpse of the cross in the manger from the three trees on the horizon, the pieces of silver, the empty wine-skins. And we recognize the hope for new life, for the birth of new things in God’s claim in us. God is also journeying toward us. There is a death of old ways and patterns, a release of something. We release ourselves and our gifts, linking our personal stories to this one so important for Christians.

In times of oppression and darkness, when the Roman government dominated everything, Mary brought her child and Joseph kept them safe. He was an infant held in her arms at birth and at death. But for some reason he would not die. Pronounced lifeless by countless voices and movements Jesus would continue to touch and frame human experience, walking on earth on the feet of others and speaking through the voices of others. His hands go on touching humanity through us, the community of faith gathered in his name.

In paintings the magi are seen as ancient ones, full of wisdom, who come to the crib with a crowd of folks. The richness of their attire and their gifts are often contrasted with the poverty of the shepherds whose only offerings are of themselves. God, it appears, partners with strangers, journeys amidst rich and poor and all in between. There is seeking and there is finding, there is birth and death, there is richness and poverty.

The Epiphany makes some things clear and brings them to the light of day. If we take our place in this story we might see that we are epiphanies of something whether we know it or not. We are given an opportunity to journey among strangers to see and be seen in diverse light among all the peoples of the earth. Did the coming of Jesus make any difference? To whom? How? This season of Light precedes the “fruitful darkness of Lent.” It is an important time for communities of faith to examine their gifts to others in God’s name. It has been said that Jesus as the Light shows a spotlight on the injustices of the world; the violence, poverty and uncertainty are met by the households of faith in a loving and compassionate way when we gift ourselves.

The gifts of the magi cost them plenty but they seem hardly appropriate to the occasion. Today we receive the gift of a child in baptism; she too, has received gifts from her family and their friends. It is my custom to ask those who support her to offer a gift to a child whose life is not as blessed as hers, in England or here or far away. She is surrounded by love and a circle of support; some children’s lives are pretty bleak.

We might also think of legacy gifts – what spiritual values we want to leave in her; how this day of baptism marks all of us as we consider what meaning Jesus' birth has had for us, what meaning our faith has made for others. This is a time when the Church looks at mission, at the spreading of love and compassion all over the world.

Someone has suggested that the magi released things that had held them captive or been definitions of who they were. Gold and the love of it were not a goal of Jesus' mission although he had a lot to say about its use. Myrrh, used for the dead, might mean that the fear of death was released; from the gospel narratives we know that Jesus met his death head on. Frankincense was a precious resin, a thing used for the worship in the temple. Jesus in his path and pattern knew that human persons, all of them, were precious. He was not devoted to things. I don't know if these gifts are symbolic of the spiritual journey or not but this insight gave me a new way to think about gifts of all sorts.

One of my grandchildren said, after opening two books I had brought for him at Christmastime, "Gramma where are the rest of the gifts?" For a moment I didn't quite know what to say but I thought "I'm your gift. And you are mine." For Olivia here today for her baptism – you are your parents' and God's gift to us and we are also a gift for you." Amen+

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