

St Michael's Cornhill, London
Sunday 3rd January 2016 Epiphany
Sung Eucharist
The Revd Father Bill Wilson

*'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 the 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 to 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.*

The opening of T S Eliot's poem *Journey of the Magi* creates an interesting context for our celebration of this extraordinary episode related by Matthew.

What underlies the tale is a desire on the part of the Gospel writer to link the coming of Christ amongst the Hebrew people with God's over-arching love for the whole of humanity.

The Magi – they were sages or magicians – represent the first response of the gentile world to the appearance of God in the flesh.

The second century Church Father, Tertullian, was the first to refer to them as kings, and the Alexandrian biblical critic Origen fixed their number at three.

Art has made them even more kingly, and in the middle ages they were venerated as saints.

They are often depicted as representing widely differing age groups, their ethnicity a sign of the appeal of Christ to people of every origin.

Their exotic names, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar appeared in the sixth century.

Milan claimed to have their relics, and even today those same relics are enshrined in Cologne Cathedral.

No wonder the Magi have inspired so much!

They captured Eliot's imagination too.

He reflected on their journey.

And linked it to the Christian pilgrimage to which we are all called.

They could easily have resisted the signs they saw that an event of cosmic significance had occurred.

They could have stayed in comfort at home, but instead they embarked on a dangerous journey through inhospitable cities, towns and villages, with unreliable servants and unwilling transport.

And all along the nagging thought that the whole thing was folly.

So although at the heart of our celebration today is our wonder at the extent of God's love for all, we are thrown back by our contemplation of the Magi on to reflection on the demands of discipleship.

That indeed is never far from our consciousness at this time of year, as the calendar moves swiftly from the scene in the stable to the robust Johannine statements about the incarnation.

And from there to Stephen, the first casualty of Christian commitment, then the silent witnesses to Christ, the innocent babes of Bethlehem.

Finally in December we commemorate St Thomas of Canterbury, martyred for his opposition to Henry II 1170.

Everywhere marks and reminders of the cost of our pilgrimage, of the demands of this way we have been invited and chosen to follow.

It has never been easy.

It should not be easy, when you consider at what cost our reconciliation with God was won.

To focus on the *folly* of the Magi is to sharpen our vision of the risk they took in travelling to that particular place in those particular circumstances.

To put ourselves in their place is to realise afresh the gravity and the risk of the journey we ourselves are undertaking.

You see, it would be very easy to think that the events contained in the Gospels were there as material for the amateur dramatist in the school staffroom.

Very easy to miss their grittiness, to fail to gulp at the risks, the danger.

To contemplate their gifts is to calculate the cost of discipleship in terms that we can really understand.

To see how much of what is really precious to us we can let go to God.

We are all guilty of the gasps and sentimental tears of the dotting parents at the nativity play, because in that way we can pack the whole thing into a compartment where it can remain irrelevant to the real priorities of our lives.

But the Gospel writers saw, and Eliot made the Magi perceive, that at the real heart of this story is a not just a birth but a death.

In some sense their gifts symbolise their vision.

And the fragrant myrrh prefigured the stone-cold tomb of the pierced body of that grown-up holy Infant.

Of course, it is no sterile tableau of a birth in the remote past that energises or should energise our belonging to the Church.

No such thing that can justifiably make demands on our time and screw up our lives and compromise our families.

The central theme of all of this is the overflowing love of God.

His love among us as one of us and inviting our response.

It was wonder at this that brought the Magi far from their own country to seek a birth.

It was this that sent Stephen to his death, the conviction that this love was stronger than death, and that death to this world was a step nearer to the heart of that love.

It was this that brought the Church as we know it into being.

It is this love that manifests itself every time the Eucharist is celebrated.

Both in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the consecration of the bread and wine, Christ, who is God's heart of love among us, is made manifest, available to us.

This vision, this reality, can so easily be lost to us.

But it isn't lost.

Jesus Christ is no less present to us, here, in the early years of the third Millennium, than he was to those who first found his birthplace in his own native land.

The demands of the christian pilgrimage are no less either.

And much more than the Magi we can be in danger of giving the impression that this journey is nothing except assent to a set of propositions, sterile, undemanding, cheap.

For the year 2016, if there is to be renewal, we must be more focussed about our commitment to Christ, much more willing to bear its cost in every area of our lives.

The Magi can teach us that a new vision of God's love can move us further along than we would ever have believed possible.

That a cold coming and the reluctant camels, the folly and all the other obstacles that fall into our path are as nothing compared with the vision of God's love made visible in this Child.

A Child whose arms stretch out still.