

## MAGI AND STRANGERS

St. Michael, Cornhill

Epiphany 1

Sunday January 8<sup>th</sup> 2017

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High Crowstairs is an isolated cottage three miles outside Casterbridge: that is, of course, Thomas Hardy's name for Dorchester in Dorset. In the cottage are a merry band, celebrating the baptism or christening of a baby. On to this scene enter three strangers. It happens the night before the expected execution, that is the hanging, of a sheep stealer at Casterbridge Gaol. Hardy was fascinated in a macabre way with public executions; such events still survived well into the early part of his life. But this tale sees Hardy at his most mischievous and his most mysterious. One of the strangers is the executioner, but who are the others? It turns out that one is the thief – but ultimately both vanish into the night.

The coincidence of all this with the baptism of the child is hardly accidental. Hardy could never let the Christian faith go, despite his own scepticism. Now, themes focusing on the birth of a child and the visit of three strangers have, of course, clear resonances with this season. On Friday we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany. In the eastern church, the Nativity of Christ and Epiphany are one: Orthodox Christians have thus just celebrated Christmas. In the west the actual birth has become separated from Epiphany, that is Christ's presence being made known among all the nations. The three Magi, seers from far off lands, are also *three strangers*. They represent humanity in all its diversity across the world.

Epiphany brings with it then a most ironic and enigmatic mixture between blazing abroad the presence of God in Jesus, and yet, alongside that, a real sense of mystery. Who were the Magi? Where did they travel from? What made them follow the star? This set of questions has fascinated Christian people down the ages. So, back in the early seventeenth century, as he preached before King James I on Christmas Day in 1622, Bishop Launcelot Andrewes, buried, of course, just across the river in Southwark Cathedral, Andrewes reflected on the Magi in his sermon:

'Last we consider the time of their coming, the season of the year. It was no summer progress. A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in *solsitio brumali*, the very dead of winter.

Some three hundred years later, Thomas Stearns Eliot, by now a devout Anglican layman, pillaged Andrewes' sermon, as he studied the bishop's works. Through this complicated process emerged one of Eliot's most popular poems. It began with Launcelot Andrewes' words - hardly changed:

'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.

Eliot faithfully captured that sense of profound mystery in the Magi. Indeed, each of these writers – Thomas Hardy, Launcelot Andrewes, T.S. Eliot - explores the mystery of God in Jesus with great subtlety. There is a really enigmatic ambiguity to it all, but we should hardly expect anything else. For God in Jesus was born into the pell-mell, the earthiness, the ordinariness of our

own humanity. The stable, the bucolic group of shepherds, the temporary accommodation all reflect this.

But Hardy, Launcelot Andrewes and Eliot take us deeper still. For already in the visit of these three strangers, these mysterious travellers out of the orient, we begin to touch on the tragic nature of our humanity and Jesus' own induction into that. In Matthew's account of the visit of the Magi, we hear of Herod enquiring about the child's birth. In their hearts they already appreciate Herod's evil intent. They are warned by God in a vision to *return to their country by another way*. This ambiguity follows the Magi all the way through Eliot's poem. Let me take you back to the coda of his poem, to his conclusion, so:

'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.'

So there we have it. In this season, when so often we look back on a year with regrets and uncertainties – and forward to another year with equal apprehension, so we see too that God has come among us – amidst all our ambiguities, mess, tragedy and everything else. At Candlemas, which will mark the end of this Christmas season, the needle moves across the screen towards the cross.

But despite all the apprehensions and uncertainties of tragedy and suffering we know that God is still there in Christ Jesus. Here is the heart of the mystery. That is what we are called to live and witness. It is after his life that our lives are to be fashioned. In that our world is redeemed. Amen

Readings:

Isaiah 42. 1-9

Acts 10. 34-43

Matthew 4. 13–end