

Epiphany

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Rev Jeannette McHugh
4th January 2004, Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

“We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the Heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known, We have only to follow the thread of the hero's path And where we have thought to find an abomination, we will find a God. Where we have thought to slay another, We shall slay ourselves. Where we have thought to travel outward we will come to the centre of our existence. And where we have thought to be alone we will be with all the world.”
— Joseph Campbell and the Quest

Where do these words come from? And why are we reading them today when we remember the magi coming to worship the Christ child?

They have to do with our story today about the wise men and the Christ child and the film, *The Return of the King*, the third film in the trilogy of Tolkien's classic *The Lord of the Rings* which opened in Australia on Boxing Day — the day after the celebrations of the birth of the child Jesus.

We planned to go to see the film on the opening day but all the tickets were gone Then we got caught up in 21st birthday parties for the 30th of December. On Thursday I watched the second film in the series, to prepare me for the final one but I still haven't seen it. Who has?

Indeed one of Margaret's friends called in and she had already seen it twice. It is wonderful she says. And the best seats are at Woden with the big screen. Much better than the seats at Belconnen which give you a sore back. So we are making progress in our plans to see it. Then we planned to go yesterday, but it all became too difficult. There were only 90 seats and one hour before already people were queuing for the show.

Why? Why? Why does a university student who is very down to earth managing her studies, a part time job, and, a horse, on Mt Ainslie, spend her money and time this way. Why this great wanting to see a film about a world that never existed, about stories that never happened.

Why ... because the film and the story of the wise men are about the deepest truths of being human, and the stories themselves help us to understand ourselves at our deepest level. Not by being allegories indeed Tolkien says quite explicitly that his story is not an allegory. Rather, the film and the story of the magi have the quality of mythology which is to give us an experience of life, an experience of the vitality of being alive.

They are not about abstractions but **embodied experience**.

Just as Jesus in his life on earth, gives us an **embodied experience** of how we should live in relationship to God and to those around us, so the Tolkien stories and the story of the magi give us embodied experiences of how to live and how to act and how to be.

They also save us from the great and awesome loneliness of living with the truth that we are each a separate person, alone, and different to everyone else. They link us to each other.

They make us part of the whole world. They help us to stay sane in the midst of all the uncertainties of our present existence.

They link us to the past, and give us confidence to step out into the unknown future.

Because: *We have not even to risk the adventure of the unknown future alone for the heroes of all time have gone before us.*

We need the stories of our faith to keep our faith alive and relevant. We mustn't apologise for them, rather we must glory in them, tell them with zest, and seek in them true knowledge and wisdom.

We need them, and outsiders and our young people or who don't go to Sunday School anymore and therefore do not know the rudiments of our faith, they need them even more as an embodiment of Christianity and what it has to offer to the world.

So to the wise men but first about our magi. You see they are nearly there, nearly at the end of their journey, but not quite.

January 6th is the day their journey's end is remembered and celebrated around the world. We are permitted to move it forward today, though in the great cathedrals of the world, probably in every city in the world, our reading today will be read and the journey remembered. And this will continue every year until the end of the world, or until the end of Christianity.

And what was their journey, and what did they find, and how did they feel when they got to the end of their quest?

The wise men, by tradition three though the number is not mentioned in Matthew, were astrologers, probably from Persia, now Iran. They were learned and held a priestly role in society. No sacrifices could be held without their presence. They were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. They were soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. Their ideal was to be good and holy men, searching for the truth. They watched the stars because at the time people believed that they could foretell the future from the stars, and they believed that a person's destiny was settled by the star under which he or she was born

We do not know which brilliant star these ancient Magi saw. Many suggestions have been made.

About 11BC Haley's comet was visible shooting brilliantly across the skies. About 7 BC there was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. And in the years 5 to 2 BC there was an unusual astronomical phenomenon; in those years, on the first day of the Egyptian month, Mesori, Sirius the Dog Star, rose at sunrise, and shone with extraordinary brilliance. Now, the name Mesori means "the birth of a prince" and to those ancient astrologers such a star would undoubtedly mean the birth of some great king. We cannot tell what star the Magi saw, but it was their profession to watch the heavens and some heavenly brilliance spoke to them of the entry of a king into the world.

There was also a general feeling of expectation at that time that extended to the Greek and Roman communities as noted by writers of the day, that a new leader from the Judean people who would rule over the known world. This was general knowledge.

And so we have these educated, elite men venturing out of their studies, their known and esteemed roles, into the unknown — yet not the completely unknown, because they would have known others who had done what they were going to do.

T.S. Eliot has captured the discomforts of travel, the difficulties, in his poem, *Journey of the Magi*, "A hard time we had of it." The overcoming the doubts and the ridicule of their journey, "the singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly."

We are not told what they did when they found the place, "it was (you may say) satisfactory."

Did they kneel in awe as Mathew's magi did? Did they offer gifts? Gold for a king, Frankincense for a priest, Myrrh — to embalm the body of the dead? Symbols of Christ's life in the world

We are not told in Eliot's poem but what we are told is that the magi return changed men, changed and uncertain of what they had seen: "were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a birth certainly," but also a death, their death, so that they became "no longer at ease, in the old dispensation ... should be glad of another death."

They have experienced the truth of the words I found when I searched the web for Joseph Campbell and the Quest. New knowledge comes at the end of the journey, and it is often the opposite of what we expected, and beyond our understanding.

I own up to not reading Tolkien, though his book has been on my shelves for over thirty years - a bit like the bible for most of us, unless we really have to, we never read it right through. So I got it out, curious to see how it ends. I've included the ending on page 1069. How does one end such a colossal writing venture? Very quietly, very mundanely. Why? Because there are no words to adequately describe the end of the quest, no words to describe bliss, no words to describe the completion of one's life's purpose.

So I invite all of us to take from the Magi story and The Lord of the Rings, courage to venture into this new year with the confidence to trust our own minds and hearts on what we should do. We are to seek the help of our friends and the wisdom of those we turn to for counsel. We are to remember that we are not alone, others have gone before us, and we are to invite others to travel with us.

And when we reach our journey's end, we should remember to kneel in awe of the new knowledge we have of ourselves and of the world. We are permitted to pause to experience the joy and bliss of a completed endeavour, but then, as Christians, we are called to offer ourselves the continuing creation of our world.

So we must be prepared to return to the routine demands and duties of our lives, to fit in again, to say with Sam, "Well I'm back" ... but we return, changed people, changed forever, with a new confidence that our God is present and active in our world, even though his presence and actions are beyond our understanding and our telling.

Journey of the Magi

"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 of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices ringing 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 the 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 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.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensations,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.
— T S Eliot (1927)

“Do We Really Have to Make This Trip?” [This prayer was written to begin the section of the Christian Ethics course on “Sending Forth”]

God of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Ruth and Mary, you have called us through your Son, Jesus Christ.
You lead us on our way by the fiery cloud of your Spirit. We ask you, “Do we really have to make this trip?” We are just beginning to get the hang of this “worship-of-God business,” and then you tell us we have to go and we are not even sure there is anywhere to go to.
Help us remember, as Hugo of St Victor put it, “the man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner, he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the world is a foreign place.” So we will go to travel the world. Help us remember we do not and cannot go alone. You have made us your friends and friends of one another. Help us trust in that friendship, knowing we will need it as you encounter us in the unknown. God, it is exhilarating to be your people. We praise you for giving us such wonderful work. Amen.

Stanley Haurwas — 1999