

## Feast of the Epiphany – The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles

Quairading & York, 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2024

### 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 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 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 dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.*

Those of you who know Philip Raymont reasonably well will know that he has a great affection for poetry, engendered by learning poetry by heart when a primary school pupil at the local one teacher primary school of nineteen pupils at Glenore Grove and in doing so emulating his father who often would break into reciting poetry which he had learned while at the same school as a pupil when the

school had sixty-six pupils and two teachers! You may know by now that at Epiphany tide he is very fond of the poem “The Journey of the Magi” written by the great American born, but British subject, poet, essayist, publisher, playwright, literary critic and editor, Thomas Stearns Eliot who, only the year before this poem was written in 1927, had converted to Anglicanism.

My fondness for this poem lies in its invitation to add “flesh to the bones” of what is a fairly spartan and cameo role provided for in the Biblical narrative as to the journey undertaken by those characters called the Wise Men – there is no evidence to support the assertion that there were three of them (certainly three gifts), scholarship now questions if they were all men and perhaps more controversial is the emerging argument that they may have been Jews living in the East, descendants of the forced Babylonian Captivity of Jews in the sixth century BC. St Matthew’s account of the visit of the wise men is rather “lean” – they followed a star, they met a nasty king, they found what they came to see, they were joyful, they worshipped what they came to see, they offered important gifts, and they went home by another means so to avoid the nasty king. We learn little about these men, or their journey which must have taken some time, and then only a fleeting insight into how one part of the journey affected them. Imagine if someone were to uncover in one of the great libraries of Iraq or Iran their manuscript, telling the story of the journey of the wise men to and from Jerusalem, to worship a baby in Bethlehem?! I imagine I am not alone in wondering what must have been their experiences; the wise men are yet another set of characters in the Bible story who enter “centre stage” suddenly, and just as suddenly, disappear. I think of Ananias in the story of Saul’s dramatic conversion experience or the men on the road to Emmaus who experience, according to the twenty-seventh verse of chapter twenty-four of St Luke’s Gospel, “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” What insights might we as ordinary followers of Jesus Christ learn from reading and recalling the experiences and understandings of these characters?

Another reason for my fondness stems from our understanding of St Paul and his mission and ministry as the great Apostle to the Gentiles – affirmed in our New Testament reading. A letter from St Paul to the Church at Ephesus:

*This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although*

*I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.*

Given the story of the Magi visiting the baby Jesus, T S Eliot's poem, and St Paul's affirmation of his particular mission and ministry, might we accept an invitation to reflect upon our own journey to understanding Jesus the Christ as central to our lives and beliefs. Therefore, on this Feast Day (transferred from yesterday) in which we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, might I invite each of us to reflect upon how Jesus Christ was and is made manifest to us as the anointed one, our Lord and Saviour! It is one of the vagaries of life in the Southern Hemisphere and not least Australia that even today, if not even more so when I was a child, Australia goes on holidays or asleep between Christmas Eve and the day after Australia Day. This has meant that the important Feast of the Epiphany so central to the Christian story, and of paramount significance amongst our Orthodox Christian sisters and brothers, has been diminished. Within Orthodox Christianity the Epiphany is also known as "Theophany" in Eastern Christian tradition and commemorates not only the visit of the Magi and its significance but also the baptism of Jesus, and the wedding at Cana; all different manifestations of Jesus as Christ! Might it be that in 2025 we can add to the gravitas of this Feast Day by introducing a Service of Readings and Carols for Epiphany; I am sure David and Catherine can affirm there is much beautiful music and hymnody to be experienced.

In issuing an invitation to think about and reflect upon the manifestation of Christ in your life I am not suggesting you need have had some dramatic experience or manifestation, such as St Paul, though that might well be the case for some of us. You may be as I am, someone for whom there has been a growing awareness and understanding of the centrality, importance, significance, impact, necessity for Jesus Christ to be central in my life.

It seems to me that it is always a fruitful possibility and useful exercise to take time to think more clearly about, reflect upon and to give thanks to God for the ongoing manifestation of Christ to not only all Gentiles but each of us as Gentiles. This Feast Day is clearly one of those opportunities = may it please God that you will take up the invitation and opportunity?