



Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
January 5, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On this last day of Christmas, Epiphany Sunday, we hear again the story of the Magi, coming from the East, following the star, and bearing gifts to the Christ-child. I am reminded of the poem by T. S. Eliot, “The Journey of the Magi” – perhaps you have heard it before and remember these words:

The Journey Of The Magi by T.S. Eliot

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 arriving at evening, not a moment too soon

Finding the place; it was (you might 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.

One interesting aspect of the visit of the Magi that Eliot zeroes in on in this poem is the fact that the coming of Christ means the end of the old ways and the beginning of something entirely new and different. For all of humanity – Jew and Gentile alike, for Shepherds and for Magi – the coming of Christ means the old dispensation is passing away and the new is coming. Because the Word of God has become flesh and made his dwelling among us the life of the world to come has begun to grow here and now, a new life growing within the life of the old world.

Reflecting on this part of the poem's perspective, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, said that Eliot is speaking of "A new start that is felt only as the death of all that has been familiar; and yet the old world goes on, galloping aimlessly like the old white horse. Eliot never wanted to present religious faith as a nice cheerful answer to everyone's questions, but as an inner shift so deep that you could hardly notice it, yet giving a new perspective on everything and a new restlessness in a tired and chilly world."¹

Something new has begun in Christ – a new Kingdom, a new way of seeing the world, and a new way of seeing God – but what is this new thing? What is this new way of living with God that means the slow and steady end of the old dispensation?

It is the Epiphany – the revelation and the realization – that in Christ the boundless riches of God's life have been opened to humanity. That in Christ, the Word made flesh, the life of God has opened and all of us – Jew and Gentile, Shepherd and Magi – have been adopted into the boundlessly rich, joyful, and eternal life of God's own being.

1. Williams, Rowan. From "A tour of the Archive with Dr Rowan Williams" on *The Poetry Archive* <https://www.poetryarchive.org/guided-tour/tour-archive-dr-rowan-williams> retrieved 01.03.19.

Like the Magi we meet Christ, we worship him, and then we return to the everyday world, but we return with something changed inside us. As Eliot says in his poem, “we are no longer at ease in the old dispensation.” Now we are troubled by the evils of this world – like racism, poverty, and homophobia – in a way that we were not troubled before. And now we are hopeful that the world could be something better, something new, something more loving and more like God, in a way that we were never before hopeful that it could be. As Archbishop Rowan said, we have been given “a new perspective on everything and a new restlessness in a tired and chilly world.” The greatest gift of the Magi is not the gold, frankincense, or myrrh, but the Epiphany that God has entered into the creation and is making a new creation from within the old – from within each human heart, each human society, and even from within the stars themselves.

Among the ancient traditions of The Epiphany is the tradition of proclaiming the date of Easter on this day – as you might imagine, this tradition arose when calendars were much less accessible than they are now, but I thought it might be interesting to revive the tradition in order to remind us of where this story of Christ is headed and of how good the good news of his boundless riches really is. The words of the proclamation are included in your bulletin today, if you’d like to hang on to them as a reminder of these dates.

Dear brothers and sisters, the glory of the Lord has shone upon us, and shall ever be manifest among us, until the day of his return. Through the rhythms of times and seasons let us celebrate the mysteries of salvation. Let us recall the year's culmination, the Easter Triduum of the Lord: his last supper, his crucifixion, his burial, and his rising, celebrated between:

Maundy Thursday, on April 9, and Easter Sunday on April 12.

Each Easter - as on each Sunday - the Holy Church makes present the great and saving deed by which Christ has forever conquered sin and death. From Easter are reckoned other days we keep holy:

Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, will occur on Wednesday, February 26

The Ascension of the Lord will be commemorated on May 21.

Pentecost, the joyful conclusion of the season of Easter, will be celebrated on May 31.

Likewise the pilgrim Church proclaims the Passover of Christ in the feasts of the holy Mother of God, in the feasts of the Apostles and Saints, and in the commemoration of the faithful departed.

To Jesus Christ, who was, who is, and who is to come, Lord of time and history, be endless praise, for ever and ever. Amen.