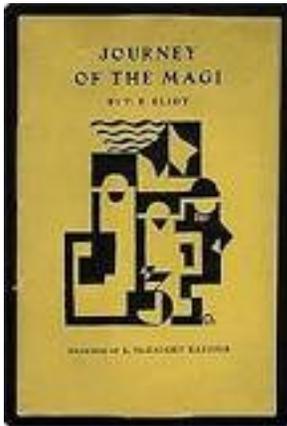


**St. George's Cathedral, Kingston
Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 2019**

Eric Friesen

Are we led to Epiphany for a Birth or Death?



On the front page of your bulletin this morning is the original cover for the first publication of T S Eliot's magnificent Epiphany poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. It was first published as a stand alone pamphlet for Christmas in 1927. I have chosen this cover illustration for two reasons: one is that I want to use Eliot's poem for our meditation on this Epiphany Sunday, and secondly I was attracted to the contemporary art work by the graphic designer and artist McKnight Kauffer. I think the abstract design perfectly reflects the mood and the time that Eliot wrote this poem, a mood that I believe really fits our time as well. He wrote it in the year after he was converted and baptized into the Anglo-Catholic side of our Anglican faith. Raised a Unitarian, in no sense devout. Now a fervent and life-long Anglo-Catholic.

Years later he told his 2nd wife, Valerie, that he wrote the poem very quickly: 'I had been thinking about it in church,' he told her. 'and when I got home I opened a half-bottle of Booth's Gin, poured myself a drink, and

began to write. By lunchtime, the poem, and the half-bottle of gin, were both finished.' I think he needed the gin to keep him going on the writing of this poem, because it was a hard time for him, as we shall see.

I'll begin by reading the poem; it's not long, just 43 lines.

The Journey of The Magi, T.S. Eliot

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a 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 in 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.

If you were looking at the text of this poem on the printed page, you would notice that the first 5 lines of the poem are in quotation marks. Eliot took these memorable lines directly from a sermon given on Christmas Day 1622, by Lancelot Andrewes, the Bishop of Winchester, before King James 1st. It's almost word-for-word, and yet what Eliot did is he put these words in the mouth of one of the Magi, in the first person. The Magus speaking these words directly to us. Speaking in old age, and remembering back to that journey that he and his two fellow Magi made.

'A cold coming **we** had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'

Not quite the joyous, happy picture of these three men that we're used to - wise men, Magi, in the images of artists over the centuries, in the joyous

moments of Christmas pageants everywhere, in Christmas cards, Hallmark and otherwise. No gold, frankincense or myrrh. No brilliant star leading the way. Omitting so much of the story in Matthew's Gospel. Just a bare bones but vivid, detailed picture of that long and hard journey: stubborn and sore-footed camels, camel drivers deserting, lack of shelter, hostile cities and villages, expensive accommodations. No wonder the Magi look back to the summer palaces and the silken girls bringing sherbet. Missing the old materialistic life, and getting that certain feeling that this whole trip in the dead of winter was pure folly. Eliot's Epiphany poem is all about the journey.

Those commentators who are sympathetic to Eliot's newfound Christian faith see in these opening lines and in the whole poem, an inspiration from Eliot's own difficult journey to conversion, to embracing an orthodox Anglican faith. Hard for him intellectually, hard for him in his reputation as a new and popular modernist voice in poetry. When Virginia Wolff heard of his conversion, she said about Eliot: "he may be called dead from us this day forward." Not fashionable this conversion. Not easy. Eliot is speaking directly to us in the voice of that old Magus, world weary, reflective and sad.

Then there are those images that come when the Magi enter the temperate valley. "Three trees on the low sky" - an obvious reference to the three crosses of the crucifixion. The "old white horse galloping away in the meadow" - perhaps symbolizing the death of the old world, the old world retreating. Further allusions to the crucifixion - "six hands dicing for pieces of silver." "Feet kicking the empty wineskins" - the empty wineskins representing the old world, the old dispensation. A vision of darkness and

the end to come all too soon for this newborn Child, rather than the trumpets and joyfulness that is the mood of most Christmas images.

And then the third stanza with its profound question stated with great emphasis - THIS set down, THIS: “were we led all that way for Birth or Death?” The birth reference is obvious - the Magi came for the birth of Jesus. “This Birth” was a “hard and bitter agony for us like Death, our death,” says the Magus. “We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods.” So what we have here is both a birth and a death. The birth of Jesus, a birth that would change the world, change everything. And a death, a death of the old pagan religions, of magic and multi-gods, the alien gods, astrology and in the case of these Magi, Zoroastrianism. And we also have a birth of Eliot into his new life as a Christian, and the death of his old life.

I am **very** compelled by this poem. I have known it since I recited it for memory in a grade 8 speech arts festival, and even then as a 14-year old, it spoke to me in its gritty realism, in its despair, in its sense of alienation, all aspects of T S Eliot’s poetry that so attracted me as a young man. But unlike some things I read in my youth, I find this poem speaking to me even more directly now, and more profoundly and in a beautiful bleak and spare language. So un-Hallmark. I trust this account of the Epiphany story, because it speaks out of deep personal agony of experience, and because it is so realistic. And because it echoes some of my own faith journey.

Just as it was so hard for T S Eliot to renounce his old secularism and embrace a conversion to Christianity lock, stock and barrel it is also hard for

many of us today to proclaim our own faith, an orthodox faith, in the face of the secular onslaught that is this world. It certainly is for me, and perhaps for at least some of you. And not only secularism. An actual hostility to Christianity, a hostility to faith, a hostility to the practice of our faith in the Church communities that we live in. We are a part of this secular world and it isn't easy to go against the grain of it. Like the old Magus, sometimes we may think it is all folly, as we plod along in our journey of faith.

Sometimes it may just be, at best, satisfactory. But because this kind of a faith is so hard-won, it may be all the more reliable, more trustworthy, maybe even more attractive to our sceptical friends and neighbours.

In writing about this poem, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams said this: "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." "...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."

The Epiphany story, as seen by Eliot, is also my story, your story, our story. It has long been understood that this was the day that Jesus was made manifest, made real, revealed to the Gentiles. The Magi were the stand in for the Gentiles, for us. They were the first of the outsiders to recognize that with His birth, everything changed. It was a signal to the world that He was not just a Jewish Messiah. But our Messiah.

As we begin this year 2019, we know it will not be an easy year, in any

sense. It is a dark time and perhaps getting even darker. As before, in this coming year the ways will be deep and the weather sharp. But in the face of all the obstacles, all the fears and uncertainties, it is for us, the Faithful, to redeem the time in which we live, by honouring our Faith, by keeping the Faith alive through the darkness around us. We as Anglicans have this wonderful structure of liturgy and the prayer book and music and a beautiful cathedral as a refuge for our journey of Faith. Eliot, in his own darkness, found the light of Faith in this tradition. So have you, so have I. Thanks be to God, Amen.