

Reflection for Christmas week

The Adoration of the Kings by Pieter Brueghel the Elder is full of contradictions: the wise men are travel-stained and weary. The onlookers appear bemused and eye the treasures with avidity. Joseph is obliged to listen to someone whisper in his ear. The soldiers are in the background. (To view on the National Gallery's website click [here](#).)

Maranatha: Come Lord Jesus

The 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, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.



“Journey” can be an overused word. It is often used to describe progress in thought “I’m on a journey with that”. Christianity began called “The Way” and we tell the story of the disciples meeting with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. The gospels are all about Jesus moving from one place to another, before he sets his face to Jerusalem for his last few days.

This poem by TS Eliot is about the Magi travelling not only long distances from their homes but also about their doubts and difficulties.

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.

T.S. Eliot

The Magi came to what they thought was the end and discovered things were not what they thought. It is easier to travel hopefully than to arrive, in the words of the proverb. The Magi, the wise men, were left with a conundrum. They could not return to the old ways, but they did not know how to approach the new.

Perhaps, in these hard times, it is easier to accept that the Christian journey can be full of complexities, that God is not always where we expect and that a simple answer is not always the right one.

*O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.*

*O King of the nations, and their desire,
the cornerstone making both one:
Come and save the human race,
which you fashioned from clay.*

*O Emmanuel, our King and our lawgiver,
the hope of the nations and their Saviour:
Come and save us, O Lord our God.*

Maranatha: Come Lord Jesus.

I saw three Ships on YouTube sung by Kings College Choir:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CO4FptqN2B4>