Epiphany **Mark the Evangelist**
5/1/2025

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72
Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany according to T.S. Eliot

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

Our order of service includes the poem "The Journey of the Magi" by T.S. Eliot. It is this poem rather than the story of the wise men in Matthew's gospel that forms the text for this sermon. It is helpful for our reflection as it drags us away from the cosiness that cards and carols convey. Eliot takes us back to reality to reimagining the story of the Magi visiting the infant Jesus in Bethlehem in the context of travel conditions unfamiliar to us and political intrigue that maybe all too familiar. It is worth noting that the poem begins with an adapted quote from a 1622 sermon by English bishop Lancelot Andrewes. Also worth noting is that Eliot had recently converted and joined the Anglican Church.

We have heard Matthew's version. Let's hear Eliot's poem.

'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.

Two lines always trouble me in this account of the story. The speaker arrives at the destination and rather than remembering the encounter with the one who will change his life and alter history for ever with some kind of superlative, he states: Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory. SATISFACTORY! Is that the best you can say?

I used to be a religious education teacher and had to write term reports on each student. There was no assessment to comment on. There were so many students under my tutelage I could not possibly assess most of them and judge their participation in those lessons. The best I could do was to be somewhat non-committal and my go to comment was 'Satisfactory' – just a little assurance to loving parents that, in my opinion, their son was OK.

The Magi arrive at the house where the infant Jesus is living with his loving parents – a dwelling of ordinary folk who are wearing ordinary clothes amid ordinary décor. There are no coloured light displays. No choirs of angels pre-empting Handel's Halleluiah Chorus. It was 'OK' and then we went home but when we went home it was not OK. Of course, we could try to imagine what Eliot really meant by his understatement. If you say 'satisfactory' in a certain way it can sound like a superlative. IT WAS SATISFACTORY!!!! Not convincing?

The other line that puzzles me is the last one – 'I should be glad of another death.' The puzzle is that Eliot does not specify what death would make him glad. The commentators have speculated but my speculation is that the poet wanted the reader to grapple with the question rather than get any definitive answer.

The thing Eliot is most clear about is what he says between these two intriguing sentences.

"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."

One commentator on the poem notes that Eliot was frustrated by the way that people believed his conversion to represent a kind of comfortable settling-down, when he saw himself as [engaged on] a difficult process. (Reference)

The Magi return home to the places where they were insiders, where they felt socially comfortable, where the values of their communities aligned well with their own values. But now, after their journey, after their encounter with a birth that somehow looked like a kind of death, now they were in their own lands again. But they found themselves

‘with an alien people clutching their own gods.’ The Magi were now clutched by a different God.

There is a sense in which that is every Christian’s experience. Certainly, we rejoice that the gospel message comforts the afflicted – "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

In *The Journey of the Magi* T.S. Eliot reminds us that the gospel message also afflicts the comfortable. Is it not true that, like Eliot’s Magi, the call of God on our lives through following the way of Christ brings us into conflict with the society in which we live. That even in our country whose religious affiliation is dominated by Christianity we are the outsiders, ‘no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation’.

Enough. It is still technically Christmastide – the eleventh day of Christmas. Let’s find some comfort, this time in the final lines of John Betjeman’s poem, *Christmas*. He has waxed lyrical about the trappings of a traditional English Yuletide with family and social and church festivities. Then he says:

“And is it true? And is it true, / This most tremendous tale of all, / Seen in a stained-glass window's hue, / A Baby in an ox's stall? / The Maker of the stars and sea / Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is, / No loving fingers tying strings / Around those tissued fripperies, / The sweet and silly Christmas things, / Bath salts and inexpensive scent / And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells, / No carolling in frosty air, / Nor all the steeple-shaking bells / Can with this single Truth compare - / That God was man in Palestine / And lives today in Bread and Wine.”

Now, that is satisfactory.

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