

The Wise Men: Matthew 2:7-12

You'll find a story, a song and a craft activity linked to today's TFTD on the church website. Just click on the link below:

<https://www.stphilipandstjames.co.uk/advent>

You'll also find an audio recording of the wonderful Carol Service on Sunday night:

<https://www.stphilipandstjames.co.uk/advent/christmas-services/>



7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying: 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'

The image of the Three Kings, mounted on camels and following the star, is one of the most familiar on the Christmas cards crowding together on bookshelf, dressing table, and mantelpiece. They are also familiar in religious art, in the stained-glass windows of our great cathedrals – and carved in stone in churches and abbeys all over Europe. And even more familiar, the Kings presenting their gifts to the Christ Child who is sitting (or often standing) on his mother's lap.

As well as the journey following the star to Jerusalem – and then on to Bethlehem – the Kings are also frequently shown asleep in bed, being 'warned in a dream not to return to Herod'.



A window in the North Choir Aisle of Canterbury Cathedral has all three scenes. My favourite of them is ‘the Three Kings in bed with their crowns on’. I was introduced to it when I was very small, and I thought it hugely funny. Later I used to pass the same window each day in procession when I was a cathedral choir boy. It always gave me a chuckle.

My chorister experience is much in my thoughts at this time. Christmas has never been as much fun as those Choir School Christmases of almost sixty years ago. When everyone made such a fuss of those poor lads who were away from home. Sardines in the Deanery. A party in the Old Palace hosted by Archbishop Michael Ramsey. Silver threepenny bits in the Christmas pudding.



We encountered that same image of the Three Kings being visited by the angel on a carved stone capital in the cathedral at Autun in Burgundy. A framed picture on the Dining Room wall will look down on our Christmas Dinner. (No silver coins in the pud, I’m afraid.)

King Herod was certainly a nasty piece of work. And about to get even nastier. There's something quite contemporary in his duplicitous invitation to his visitors 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' 'Put paid to him', more likely. Fortunately, the Magi weren't fooled. And then they were warned in that dream.

I have failed spectacularly this week to catch the big planetary event – the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Apparently, it may have been the same conjunction 2000 years ago that attracted the attention of the Magi. They wanted to find out more. I, by contrast, have been too busy writing Christmas cards and unscrambling Christmas plans even to locate where the planets might be seen. In the East? In the West? How wonderful that the Magi weren't too busy to spot what was going on – and to act.

The poet T.S. Eliot's familiar lines on *The Journey of the Magi* tell of the Kings' action in response to what they had observed. Following the science – and at no small cost.

*'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.'*

The quotation marks suggest the words of one of the intrepid trio. In fact, these are the words of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, preaching before another king, King Charles the First, at Whitehall on Christmas Day 1622.

Bishop Andrewes was concerned to make the point that the Magi just got on with it: *And we, what should we have done? With them it was but 'see,' 'come'; with us it would have been but 'we will come' at most. Come such a journey at such a time? No; put it off to the spring of the year, till the days longer, and the ways fairer, and the weather warmer, till better travelling to Christ. Our Epiphany would sure have fallen in Easter week at the soonest.*

For Eliot's Magi, 'another road' was not just about avoiding Jerusalem:

*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.*

The sadness and regret echoes our mourning for happier Christmases in happier times. Perhaps our ‘another road’ should be about thinking ahead to how things need to be different in a new post-Covid ‘dispensation’ – the ‘new normal’, if you like. And preparing for it.

My last week as a chorister coincided with my Confirmation. December 23, it was. Another prompt for reflection at this time of year. Archbishop Ramsey preached on a different Matthew text: Jesus’s command ‘Freely ye have received, freely give’. (Matt 10.8).

Christina Rossetti’s carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* reminds us to get on with it:

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.*

So, this Christmas, let’s sing it like we mean it. And mean what we sing.

© Christopher Graham, Lay Reader, St Peter’s, Hale
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