

Epiphany 2017 – Journeys of faith

St. Brandon's

Matthew 2: 1-12

8th January 2017

Is the point of a journey the journey itself or the destination? Two stories might help. Sitting in a car, motionless on the A34, on a journey between Newbury and Birmingham, as we were just over a week ago was something of a contrast, three hours later, from sitting at a large table, family and conversation all around, food and drink aplenty. The journey by then was a somewhat distant memory, and certainly held no significance for us other than that we were late for lunch. The point of the journey was quite definitely the destination, and the people we would meet up with. That was the draw, the attraction; the journey was merely a means to an end.

Last summer, by contrast, Alison and I walked the West Highland Way. Eight days of little more than walking, eating and sleeping. The destination was Fort William, but strangely that hadn't quite caught our imaginations. We'd been there before, and it's nice enough, but it wasn't, "We really, really want to go to Fort William, now what's the best way of getting there? I know, let's walk!" The point was the journey, and that was partly to do with the achievement, but also the scenery, the fascinating people we met on the way (almost all continental Europeans), the conversations, simple time together and time to ourselves (we tend to walk 50 metres apart, particularly uphill ... well, and downhill). The destination was, in some ways, a disappointment because it meant the walk had come to an end.

So this is like a spectrum from "It's all about the journey" to "It's all about the destination", with many points in between. So was the point of the journey of the magi the journey itself, or the destination? We're not told much about the journey in Matthew's account except that they were from the East, which probably meant they were from present day Iran and so trekked hundreds of miles to Bethlehem, and that on their return they "left for their own country by another road".

But we're also told, of course, that they followed a star; that it was the rising of this new star, and for some reason their need to follow it, which led to them setting out on the journey in the first place. So the journey was important in so far as it represented an act of faith. Perhaps they weren't even quite sure what they were looking for, although they seemed to be clear that the star would lead them to a child. But the focus overall seemed to be about the destination, and not finding what they were looking for in a royal palace meant they needed to journey on until they found, mysteriously, miraculously, and yet for sure in their minds, the point of their journey – the Christ child in Bethlehem. Eventually, they realised the point of their quest.

One poem which comments on this, but also includes the shepherds, describes the end point of their journey like this:

... this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.¹

It's a lovely phrase 'haphazard by starlight', and it picks up the uncertainty of their quest. But the poem then concludes with a ringing endorsement of the end of their quest, as they 'walked ... straight into the

¹ BC:AD by U.A. Fanthorpe, from *haphazard by starlight* by Janet Morley, SPCK, 2013, p.90, together with a commentary on pp.90-3.

kingdom of heaven'. Where they knelt, and paid homage to the Christ child, and opened their treasure chests.

T.S. Eliot's poem *Journey of the Magi* by contrast focuses rather more on the journey, and the hard and cold time they had of it. In a sense this poem is trying to do away with the romanticised notion of 'following the star', which doesn't even get a direct mention. And while the destination is significant – "... a Birth, certainly,/ We had evidence and no doubt", it's the reflection on that which is important, the sense that "this birth was/ Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death", and the sense of their thereby becoming uncomfortable with their old way of life, and upon their return to their own country finding themselves, "... no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation". The journey to Bethlehem, what they found at their destination, their return and what they found there, resulted in significant change, such that the poem ends on a tantalising note of hope or despair, perhaps hope and despair, with the narrator saying, "I should be glad of another death", implying his own.²

So it seems that while there could be extremes at the end of the spectrum, usually both the journey itself and the destination are important; there is point in both, though perhaps to different degrees in different contexts. It's not, or shouldn't be, about being "born under a wandering star", as Lee Marvin used to growl out, engaged in an apparently aimless wandering where "hell is in hello" and "heaven is goodbye for ever, it's time for me to go".

And, of course, this idea of journey and destination, and their effects on the characters involved, are played out in many other songs and stories. "We're off to see the ..." (altogether now) "Wizard the wonderful wizard of Oz". Dick Whittington travels from where? (answer Lancashire) to London to seek his fortune, and is called back to his destiny to become Lord Mayor of London by Bow bells. More seriously, in Tolkein's *The Hobbit* Bilbo Baggins is plucked from home and thrown into a far-off war, through which he is changed from a rather pathetic character into a hero. And in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the central character, Christian, journeys from the city of destruction in this world to the celestial city in the world to come – so that destination is clearly vitally important in that story. But so too is the journey, during which he has to overcome many perils and dangers – the hill of difficulty, the slough of despond, the valley of the shadow of death, Vanity Fair and so on – though he also finds refreshment for his soul in the place of deliverance, and in the House of the Palace Beautiful, a place built by God to refresh pilgrims on their journey. And like Bilbo Baggins, he is a changed person by the end of it.

One of the philosophers (indeed the only philosopher) whose work I know well, speaks of life as being involved in a "narrative quest".³ Narrative in the sense that we can understand our lives as a story from birth to death, and quest in the sense that this story has some point or purpose which we need to continually seek for. And one of the points he makes is that to engage in a quest we need to have some, even if rather preliminary, idea in the first place of what it is that we're seeking, but that the nature of a quest is always to try to discover more of what the purpose of life in general, and our life in particular, is all about. So the magi had some idea of what they were looking for, even if it turned out to be perhaps somewhat different from what they had at first imagined – not a royal prince in the normal sense. In that sense, our narrative quest is about always trying to find out what more and what else the purpose of life, of our lives, might be.

And, of course, from a Christian point of view, this idea is commonplace, as we've seen with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. We speak of the journey of faith and of being pilgrims. When the magi crossed

² See, for both the poem and a commentary on it, Janet Morley, op.cit., pp.134-8.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Duckworth, 1981/2007, p.219.

mountains and deserts to reach Bethlehem, and experienced the epiphany of the incarnate Christ, they were simply embodying this archetypal pattern of the soul's journey through life and into death.

So where does all that leave us at this Epiphany? Well, somewhere on our own journey, since even being here this morning suggests that we've already set out on our journey of faith. We probably already have some idea what the destination is and, as the magi found, this should be more about discovering the person of Christ than it is about arriving at a particular 'location' such as heaven. But then the journey itself is also important. As we try to discover what more and what else is involved in this journey, and what more and what else our deeper purposes in life might be, we are likely to discover that the journey involves very real perils and dangers which we need to overcome, and that we are changed, usually for the better, in the process. And that the journey will also involve places of rest and succour, as Christian found on his journey, places of deliverance, our equivalents of the House of the Palace Beautiful.

And so perhaps one of the things we might do this year is to undertake this journey of faith rather more deliberately. Perhaps we might go on a pilgrimage, or set time aside to go on a retreat as a place of rest and succour on the journey. Perhaps we might try to find out what more and what else our own faith journey might involve, and what more and what else our true purposes under God are. The process might feel a little like walking haphazard by starlight, but surely, like the magi, if we persist, we will find Christ.

Amen