



Advent Journey

1: STARS



When I have a terrible need of - shall I say the word - religion.
Then I go out and paint the stars.
Vincent Van Gogh

Starting Out: Something to Think About

Alone of the gospels, St Matthew tells us that before the journey even began the Magi looked up and out. Two thousand and more years ago there was none of the light pollution that has dimmed the stars for us, nor any artificial light beyond flickering fires and oil lamps. No one had ever ventured into the sky, the home only of birds, bats and insects. Night came with its great bowl of stars and moonlight and when darkness fell, earth-bound people looked up, and out.

Looking up and out is fundamental to Christian mission. When we imagine people engaged in prayer and reflection we often think of the search for stillness and silence, closing our eyes and folding our hands, becoming inward looking and focused as we dig down inside ourselves for God. Yet prayer and reflection can be the opposite as well, an opening of our eyes to become more aware, more connected with the universe around us, more aware of the needs of our fellow human beings in our communities and neighbourhoods and of our place in a stupendous creation.

Ancient peoples looked up at the stars and sought to make sense of what they saw there. Moving stars they called *planetes*, the wanderers, because they seemed to be moving about among the fixed stars. Now we know these are the planets of the solar system. People used their eyes to distinguish the brighter from the dimmer stars and joined their dots of brightness to imagine them as images, people, animals and things: the names of constellations. The seemingly random arrangement of lights became accessible, nameable, so that any new thing could be noticed. And if they saw something new, those people, the ones who looked up and out, would ask: what is *that* doing there?

In the time of Jesus, new and unusual phenomena in the night sky could be understood as signs from God. After all, God created the heavens as well as the earth, so that any new thing, - a supernova, a comet, would be noticed and interpreted as something God wanted his people to see. Such rare but marvellous and wonderful sights must surely, those people thought, be signs of something really extraordinary happening, something we would really want to know about. So heavenly signs must have correspondingly amazing events associated with them: a birth of a king perhaps, a change in earthly power relations, something new, exciting or frightening. And those who looked up and out would talk about this among themselves, and they would say: *we need to find out what God is doing.*

We now know so much more about the moon and the stars, even about the exact composition of stars and their distance from us. And they are no less marvellous for all that. But for Christians, knowing more about the heavens does not lessen the impact of the creation for us. The quest is still relevant: *we need to find out what God is doing.* In Advent this question of what God is doing is especially important. What is new in *our* world?

Journeying through Scripture

If the stars should appear but one night every thousand years how man would marvel and stare.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Matthew 24. 42-44

42 'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him'.

The Magi in Matthew's gospel were the sort of people Jesus was talking about in this passage of Scripture. They were good at keeping their eyes open and keeping watch.

No one really knows who the Magi were. Theologians have argued about whether the Magi could have been Zoroastrian priests who were astronomers (those who study the stars) or astrologers (those who interpret the stars) or whether they were a mixture of both. But whatever or whoever they might have been, the worldview of people like the Magi would have had little in common with the sort of astrologers who write your horoscope in the paper or offer to create charts of astral influences which tell you what your life will be like.

The Magi of St Matthew's gospel, the ones who kept watch, were ready. They had heard their own prophecies and had their own expectations and when they saw the sign they decided to go on a journey, a spiritual quest or pilgrimage to get beyond portents and guesswork but to see and experience what God was doing for themselves.

Christian mission is like this. It's not about talking and guessing, but about keeping our eyes open for what God is doing, which needs a spiritual attentiveness created by prayer and reflection. And when we see God at work, we are called to be in that place too.

This Advent, we can journey with the Magi to find God at work, in giving his son, Jesus Christ to be born in a manger at Bethlehem in Judaea.

Something to Read

*I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near—
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel (Numbers 24.17)*

A Spiritual Exercise in groups

What kind of feelings do the stars invoke in you, - a scientific curiosity, a desire to paint or draw, photograph, write or simply watch and marvel? Are you the sort of person who stays up to watch an eclipse of the moon?

God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.

Martin Luther

Something to Pray About

God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass- grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence...

Mother Teresa

God of the created cosmos,

We look up and out towards your universe

We marvel at its beauty

We thank you for all those who work to understand the stars and planets

We look always for signs of your love for us

We listen for the signs of your call to us

Help us always to be alert to your will for us

And be ready to continue the journey with joy

Amen.



Advent Journey

2: TRAVELS



All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware.

Martin Buber

Starting Out: Something to Think About

Why does anyone begin a journey? Some people will just set out into the unknown, buy a ticket to anywhere, just for fun and adventure, but most people have a motive, an idea where they will be going and why and what they will find when they reach their journey's end. Since the time of Jesus many map-makers have given us intricate and exciting pictures of where we could go, where we could explore, and today we live in the era of the GPS and the Satnav where journeys are plotted out for us. Human beings have even made the journey to the moon.

The ability to journey is a remarkable feat of the human imagination; an ability to project into the future and aim for a vision of something which has not yet come to pass: a meeting, a holiday, a new place to live or work or settle a family. Many journeys are anticipated with pleasure and excitement; others are the forced result of natural disaster, war, or persecution.

That ability to imagine a future is an important part of Christian mission. Without it, we are stuck dealing only with our current context, what we see and experience around us. But God calls us into our own future, to be prophetic about what the world could be and look like.

The Magi then, looked up and out and imagined that what they might find at journey's end would be worth the trouble and toil of those travels. But they didn't just decide on a whim. In St Matthew's gospel they come to ask for 'he that has been born King of the Jews'. They already have in their minds a hope and an expectation. That is why some commentators have suggested that the Magi were priests, because the Zoroastrian religion in Persia had a tradition that a Messiah would be born in Judea. So this tells us that God's mission, the *missio Dei*, involves not only the vision of a new future for human beings, but that that vision is for all human beings, even those outside the faithful. Indeed, it may even be those outsiders who hear and respond to God's call most effectively, - an uncomfortable point Jesus makes to his hearers in Luke 4.

So the Magi began a journey, a spiritual journey, to find the person of their religious prophecy, a person born to be a king, a person who would change the world.

In Advent, we too are on this journey. God continues to call us to set out to meet him in Jesus Christ. How will we prepare for and set out on this journey?

Something to Read

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

Micah 5.2

Journeying through Scripture

If you wish to travel far and fast, travel light. Take off all your envies, jealousies, unforgiveness, selfishness and fears.

Cesare Pavese

Isaiah 30. 6; 8.

⁶ *An oracle concerning the animals of the Negeb.*

*Through a land of trouble and distress,
of lioness and roaring lion,
of viper and flying serpent,
they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys,
and their treasures on the humps of camels,
to a people that cannot profit them.*

⁸ *Go now, write it before them on a tablet,
and inscribe it in a book,
so that it may be for the time to come
as a witness for ever.*

In our churches and fellowships, the journey of the Magi is often all too brief. Perhaps they travel from one side of the church to the other to join the figures at the crib, or maybe they hide behind the stable for a little while. But it's hard to get across the sheer scale of the journey St Matthew hints at.

Christian traditions have tried to give us a sense of this vast undertaking. St. Matthew only tells us that the Magi came from the 'east', from the direction of the sun rising. One tradition has it that the Magi were scholars and that their names were Caspar (or Gaspar), Melchior and Balthazar and that they came from India, Persia, and Arabia. Imagine coming to Jerusalem all the way from India!

Christmas cards give us a very unrealistic picture of the journey of the Magi as we see them happily swinging across a smooth sandy vista lit by starlight where all is calm. Isaiah however, gives us a much clearer picture of the hazards of travel. The Magi would almost certainly have had to use camels to cross the desert and would have needed access to water. They would have had to carry and to find food, perhaps from traders on the desert routes or in towns and villages. Perhaps they were seasoned travellers, used to carrying articles for trade, but even if they were, the journey would likely have taken months, through uncertain weather and difficult terrain, so they must have been very determined and very driven. The journey was hard and dangerous and anyone crossing such a distance must have been aware that it could cost them their lives.

Yet St Matthew says that they continued on their journey inspired by a star.

As we journey through Advent towards the birth of Christ the Saviour, perhaps we can find some of this determination and vision. Yet we cannot sugar-coat what it might cost us to make the journey, what it might mean to find Christ. The journey in Advent, as in the journey of life, asks us the uncomfortable question: *are we ready to meet God?*

Like all great travellers, I have seen more than I remember, and remember more than I have seen.

Benjamin Disraeli

A Spiritual Exercise in groups

Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Imagine your life as a spiritual journey. Who have been your most important travelling companions? What resources have you had with you and what things have you had to find along the way? What helps you find out if you are on the right path and what do you think your future path looks like? What do you think you will find at the end of your journey?

Something to Pray About

It is not fit that every man should travel; it makes a wise man better, and a fool worse.

William Hazlitt

*God of the sea and desert,
You have made us travellers, explorers
Wonderers and wanderers.
You have made us restless
Till we rest in you.*

*Walk with us in our journey this Advent
Guarding and guiding us,
Until we find the miracle you promised,
The Son you sent us.
Amen.*



Advent Journey

3: GIFTS



Photo: Seth Sawyers

Each day provides its own gifts.

Marcus Aurelius

Starting Out: something to think about

Middle Eastern hospitality required that journeys and visits were marked by the giving or exchange of gifts. Monarchs, statesmen and religious leaders still bring and receive gifts when they meet other leaders in other countries. If you are invited to a party or to a friend's house it is usual to bring a gift and perhaps to take one away. But if we are to accompany the Magi on their journey towards Jesus, we have to stop and wonder: what does gift-giving *really* involve?

Gifts are words and emotions in concrete form. They embody the idea that you have thought about the other person and your friendship, love, esteem or gratitude for them is reflected in the form of gift you offer. You might take something you have cooked round to a new neighbour, to show you recognise that they might need something while they get their kitchen up and running; you might take flowers and wine to a dinner party to thank the hosts for the effort they have taken to feed you; you might take magazines or soap or fruit to a sick person to show care for them and to embody the hope that they will get well.

Most people today visiting a relative with a new baby will bring gifts of clothes, nappies, cradle linen or toys. Yet the Magi come, St Matthew tells us, with gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are expensive, costly gifts, but besides their cost, they also come laden with spiritual significance. Just as you might give a godchild a cross, a Bible or a St Christopher, so frankincense offers the idea of sacrifice and worship pleasing to God and myrrh with the idea of purification and perhaps death. It's also worth wondering whether St Matthew would like us to think about what might have happened to those gifts. Did Jesus grow up remembering or being told about exotic strangers who brought him symbolic treasures? What might his parents have told him about the people who journeyed so far to find him?

Something to Read

'There is nothing in the true believer's power which he would not do for his Lord: nothing in our substance which we would not give to him, nothing in ourselves which we would not devote to his service.' C H Spurgeon, Sermon, December 24th, 1882.

Journeying through Scripture

I thank fate for having made me born poor. Poverty taught me the true value of the gifts useful to life.

Anatole France

Malachi 3:1-4

3 'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the Lord Almighty.

2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, 4 and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

What has Christian mission got to do with gifts? If we journey with the Magi to encounter Jesus what are we bringing with us to offer to him? What, these days, is acceptable to the Lord?

At the induction of her husband into a new Church of England parish, Wendy looked round at all the people who had turned out to greet (or perhaps just get a look at) the new vicar. She reflected afterwards that it was sad to say goodbye to all the people from the old parish but it was also an odd feeling that these many strangers would soon become familiar and new relationships would emerge – and that was exciting. Every time we meet a new person, in church, down the shops, in work, in school, college or university, the opportunity is there to meet Jesus in them, whether they are Christians or not. Like the Magi, sometimes we don't know the details of the journey to encounter them; sometimes those people turn up in unlikely or unexpected places. Yet in every encounter, whatever it is, there is an exchange of gifts: gifts of conversation, of learning new things, of discovering something about oneself and about others. Journeys create stories and stories are gifts of imagination and experience which we give to one another.

I don't want expensive gifts; I don't want to be bought. I have everything I want. I just want someone to be there for me, to make me feel safe and secure.

Princess Diana

A Spiritual Exercise in groups

A wonderful gift may not be wrapped as you expect

Jonathan Lockwood Huie

What kind of gifts has God blessed your life with? Spend some time reflecting on and giving thanks for those blessings.

Something to Pray about

What you are is God's gift to you, what you become is your gift to God

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Lord,

We thank you for all the gifts you have given us;

All the gifts we have received from others.

Help us be good stewards of all entrusted to us

That we may become new gifts of love and hope

To all who need us.

Amen