

*"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."*

You may feel like this is a description of trying to get to church or work or anywhere else since the snow came 2 weeks ago. It is in fact, a sermon that Anglican Bishop Lancelot Andrewes preached in 1622 to King James in Christmastide.

It is also how T.S. Eliot begins his poem about today's gospel reading – the account of the Journey of the Magi. The poem is narrated by one of the wise men at the end of his life, reflecting on his journey from the east, under the direction of the star, to pay homage to Jesus with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The Scripture says that once the wise men finally found Jesus they "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." The journey was worth it, despite, as Eliot imagines, *"the camel men cursing and grumbling and running away, 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."*

The travel from points East was arduous. The Bible doesn't say exactly where the Magi came from, who they were, or even how many there were. Later tradition numbered them 3, and later Christians called them Kings, interpreting some Old Testament passages through the lens of the Incarnation. We surmise that these men were learned, wealthy and pagan; they could have come from Iraq or Afghanistan or Pakistan. We do not know.

What we do know is that the Magi followed a star, which came to rest over the newborn King. And when that star finally led them to Jesus the Magi *"saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him."* The Magi's encounter with Jesus changed his life forever – as any real encounter with God will do. For this reason, according to Eliot, the wise man says of the difficult journey, *"I would do it again."*

The Magi would do it again, but in his reflection on his encounter with Jesus, he asks a poignant question: *"were we led all that way for Birth or Death?"* Were we led all that way for a Birth or a Death? What a question. What does it mean?

As we've just said, once the Magi encountered Jesus Christ, the true and only God, his life was changed. He could no longer go back to his old pagan ways. His old self must die – hence the birth of Christ became his own death.

The Magi says after the Birth that was "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."*

What the Magi, and Eliot, and the Bible are saying is that once you have met and worshiped Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father and the God of Grace, then you can never really be at home in the world, in your old life, in the old dispensation with an alien people clutching their gods. As the scripture says, once the Magi met Jesus, "they departed to their country, *but by another road.*"

The old dispensation is filled with people trying to look out for themselves, justify themselves, prove themselves. The old dispensation is filled with greed and abuse and the glory of the self. But an encounter with Jesus Christ must result in what the Bible calls death to self. If there is to be a birth for us, there must be a death for us.

What this death looks like for people is both exactly alike and totally different. It is exactly alike in that every worshiper of Jesus must die to his own agenda for his life. Every believer must die to her own claim to control. Every Christian must die to his own illusions of self-sovereignty. If you are claimed by Jesus Christ, then you are bought with a price; you are not your own.

So it's all the same for you, me, and the Magi. But this Death is different for each one of us, because it will take a different shape depending on your circumstances. It may mean accepting your limitations; it may mean dying to your career hopes, it may mean giving up all hope in a love life, it may mean moving to Haiti to work with orphans.

And it may mean doing exactly the life you've been given to do, but doing it out of an entirely different motivation; ie: living for God and not living for self. Once you have met Jesus Christ, you may depart back to your own country, but always *by another road.*

C.S. Lewis writes about the totality of this death to self and this life to God. "*Christ says 'Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked--the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: My own will shall become yours.'*"

Lewis is exactly right on God's total demand – our death to self. As the baby born in a stable would say when he grew up, "*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit.*" But the command to hand over the whole natural self – which is the only way to real life – is an impossible one, isn't it? Or if you hand it over, don't you find that you keep clutching it back, along with your alien gods?

Our wills are too weak to just hand it all over, even though we know that this is the way to real life. The failure of the will hits home for most people around New Year's resolution time. I saw a great benediction the other day. *"May your troubles last only as long as your New Year's resolutions!"* As the Scripture says, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

I recently visited with a woman who is about turn 100 years old. Her daughter and I asked her to tell us her secret to long life. She replied, "Good clean living and plenty of bourbon." She paused and then continued, "Now by good clean living, I don't mean it has to be immaculate." That's good news, because none of us comes anywhere close to immaculate living.

But there was one who lived an immaculate life for our sake. This is why we are called to a life of trust, not in ourselves, but trust in God. We trust not only in His life for our life, but also His death for our death to self. As we often say here: Jesus lived the life for us that we could never live, and Jesus died the death for us that we deserved to die. And His life and His death are reckoned to us through faith and trust.

Or as we say in the 1928 Prayer book version of our prayer of humble access, we come to God *"trusting not in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies."* Through our trust in His Birth and His death for us, *"our sinful bodies may be made clean through his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood."*

The Magi discovered that in His birth was His death, that in his newborn body lay the blood that would be shed for them and for all humankind. You might know that the gift of myrrh brought by the magi to the baby Jesus was a gift signaling the cross. As we sing in our famous Epiphany hymn,

*"Myrrh is mine, it's bitter perfume  
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;  
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb."*

Our death to self – and make no mistake: your death to self is the only way to real life – is bound up entirely in His death for self: your self. For as the scripture says, if we die with Him we will also live with Him. (2 Tim 2:11) For Jesus, born for us, crucified for us, and raised for us, says to you today and always, *"I will give you a new self, in fact, I will give you Myself."*

Amen.