



The best-laid plans . . .

Matthew 2: 1-12

The Feast of the Epiphany falls on the 6th January, twelve days after Christmas, the day we remember the coming of the magi, the wise men, to Jesus, the first revelation of Jesus to Gentile people.

It's a story I love and have thought about a great deal, even to the extent of writing my own 'take' on the tale after travel in the desert made me rethink our traditional views of their journey,* but in that work I didn't pursue the journey back home. I wonder about it now.

Imagine their initial planning: "We'll get ourselves a reliable guide, keep up a good pace and ask around when we get there – local ruler's obvious, isn't he? – find the child, spend a bit of time there maybe learning a bit about him, then take it easy coming back – look into some places we missed on the way out? Sound good?" But, as Robert Burns said, "the best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley." (poem, *To a Mouse*)

The reality was that they had to set off for home fairly quickly "by another route," perhaps a slow, roundabout route that would give Joseph time to arrange the family's own sudden journey to Egypt before Herod got suspicious and set his soldiers to come a-calling. Plans all gone frighteningly awry.

T.S. Eliot imagines their thoughts as they journey home in his poem, "The Journey of the Magi," seeing them as unsure what they had seen: a birth, yes, but also a death – a beginning or an end - they had seen them as separate, but now they wonder, as they also seriously question the life to which they return, and whether they can go on as before.

We're in a good position to really sympathise, for what became of our own plans last year? What plans we had for Christmas went suddenly adrift, we hear of couples choosing wedding dates for the fourth time and as for holidays, well! So, what do we think as we look at our own plans and hopes pre-pandemic, the things we've lost and gained as we've journeyed through this time?

We could, of course, just want everything to be like it was, but I suspect that the whole experience of having our lives limited, our plans knocked aside can have a good outcome, if we, like Eliot's magi, reflect on it all as we go. We are probably already learning what is most precious to us, the people and the little things that maybe we took for granted before but that we now see are really important - vital even – to us.

Eliot again, in the poem "Little Gidding" –
"the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

We have all taken a journey that we didn't plan – indeed, we're on it still! It's a journey that has much to teach us, if we're open to learn. May the Holy Spirit guide our reflecting and living in these days to come so that we can look at our own lives, knowing and understanding what is precious to us as if seeing it all for the first time.

We picture the magi as kings, or if not royal, then certainly upper-class and a bit posh, yet early depictions, like this 4th Century one, show them in ordinary dress. If we imagine the magi as people just like us, perhaps that can help us see that their struggles connect to ours and that their determination in seeking Jesus can be ours, too.



A Prayer:

Loving God, Father, this journey through the pandemic is hard. We had plans, we had hopes a year ago and they seem to have been tossed aside, lost. It's so easy to become despondent and wonder when this journey will end, especially when the virus proves more adaptable than we are. Thank you for the persistence of those who seek to find cures, for the skills of those who have worked on the vaccines and the skills of those who care for the sick lovingly and often at personal cost. Thank you for their acceptance of a calling that we can so easily take for granted but that is essential. We remember with thanksgiving those who have helped us: doctors, nurses, dentists, carers, radiologists, pharmacists, auxiliary staff, cleaners and folk in administration who keep the processes of healthcare moving – for all these and more, we give thanks and praise. Help us to be willing to make our own sacrifices so that the health of others may not be compromised.

As we reflect on the journey of the magi back to their home, we are conscious that many are kept from home or from the people who are 'home' for them. We thank you for the several ways we have of contacting family and friends, and for how much those connections mean to us. We pray for those dear to us, close at hand or far away, asking blessings and peace of heart.

We are also conscious that for many the pandemic has led to the last journey home, home to you as they move through that doorway we call death. Thank you for those who have enriched our life journey but are no longer physically with us: those who gave tirelessly of themselves that other's lives may be rich. We pray for those who mourn the loss of people they love, asking for them a real peace of heart and a touch of the love of Jesus who led the way through death to eternal life. To him we entrust those we love and to him we entrust our own life journey.

Loving, living Lord, by your Spirit guide us on this new stage of our own life journey, we pray, that we may see and understand all that you have to show us, and may live fully in each moment. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen

Blessings, Ruth

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*The little book is *A Dead Mans Gift*. I have a few copies left at the reduced price of £2.00, proceeds going to the Waddington Street Resource Centre, Durham, for people with long term mental health needs.