

Feast of the Epiphany

Journeys – Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12

‘Arise, shine, for your light has come...’¹

Long ago, when a man named Herod was king, and after Jesus was born in a place called Bethlehem, there were some very wise men who were sitting in their own countries minding their own business. One day a bright star shone in their eyes. It was so bright none of them could ignore it, though they couldn’t tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imagination, but they were wise enough to know that it didn’t matter. The point was, something beyond themselves was calling them – calling them to take a journey – to respond to a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.

The trouble with stars that beckon us to follow them, is that we can never know at the beginning of our journey where their light will lead. The invitation is simply extended: ‘arise, shine, for you light has come.’ The invitation can appear in various forms: an unexpected opportunity, a new relationship, a chance to do something different, a possibility to explore a long-held desire, or it may even emerge from a crisis or a loss. We may perceive it through another person, or it may rise up from within – perhaps through our imagination.

We sense a call, hear an invitation, feel a tug – something that beckons us to follow a light, to start a journey. So, the wise men began their journey, not knowing what the journey will mean or where it will take them. If your experience is at all like mine, and probably like countless others, we set out on the journey with only the light, a desire, a tug to guide us. We start with a single step, followed by another, then another, believing that the light will somehow lead us on.

The poet, W. H. Auden, penned an extensive reflection entitled *For the Time Being - A Christmas Oratorio*, in which he imagined the thoughts of the wise men and contemplated why each made the journey.

To discover how to be truthful now
Is the reason I follow this star.

To discover how to be living now
Is the reason I follow this star.

To discover how to be loving now
Is the reason I follow this star.²

Each followed for a different reason, but as the third wise man says:

At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
But we have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.
To discover how to be human now
is the reason we follow this star.³

We follow the prompting, we accept the invitation, because we know, deep down, that it will lead us ‘to discover how to be human now,’ to discover truth and life and love.

It seems to me that the whole of life is a journey of discovery – discovering what it is to be the person God created us to be. That requires the willingness to take risks, to step out into the unknown and follow the star.

Led by the light of an unusual star,
We hunted high and low.

Have travelled far,
For many days, a little group alone
With doubts, reproaches, boredom, the unknown.

Through stifling gorges.
Over level lakes,
Tundras intense and irresponsive seas.

In vacant crowds and humming silences,

By ruined arches and past modern shops,
Counting the miles,

And the absurd mistakes.

O here and now our endless journey stops.⁴

The wise men risked their fortunes and their reputations to travel so far, only to have their purposes nearly thwarted and their lives threatened by a paranoid ruler. They faced their own doubts and reproaches on many occasions; experienced uncertainty, reinforced by the ridicule of some along the way who wouldn't have been slow to question the foolishness of following a star. Imagine them, camped out at night, questioning the sense of their journey, feeling undermined by the threats and the criticism, pondering their absurd mistakes.

Is this familiar – facing such feelings, asking such questions? It's part of our search, part of the journey of faith. Sometimes it's exciting, at other times boring. Sometimes we're full of confidence and trust, at others, riddled by doubts and questions. Sometimes there's light, at other times darkness. It's a long, challenging journey as we face obstacles, make mistakes, and have our doubts and reproaches along the way. Sometimes we pretend it's not so, but many of us know otherwise, as did the wise men.

Their star led them first to Jerusalem, to the palace of Herod. They knew that he wasn't the one, and they asked Herod, of all people, if he knew of any other kings in the area. It was a stupid question, but it got Herod's attention, and he quickly conferred with his priests, who consulted their scriptures. Yes, there was to be a new king born, they told him, in the city of Bethlehem. So, Herod sent the wise men in search of the new king, with a map to Bethlehem, on the condition that they report back to him. They had no intention of reporting back, but the amazing thing to note is that Herod had served as an instrument for their guidance. As Auden observes:

And for Thy Goodness even sin
Is valid as a sign.

On our journey nothing is wasted – not even sin, not even our worst mistakes.

A parish priest used to say to those he was training, 'Don't follow me. I don't know where I'm going. Follow Christ. He knows the way.' On our journey it's Christ's relationship with us that matters. It's what we trust. John's Gospel describes Jesus preparing his disciples for his departure and death. I imagine death as the ultimate journey; and Jesus says, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me.' He goes on, 'you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas, the disciple who likes to pose questions, asks, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus replied, 'I am the way and the truth and life.'⁵ ... 'I am your way,' he tells us. 'I am your path and your destination. I'm in the star that you are following, in the questions you ask, in the scriptures you read, in the sacraments you share, in the mistakes you make, in the people about you, and in your dreams and hopes. I'm there in that deep-felt desire that beckons you on. I'll show you where you need to go, if you but trust in me.'

So here we are, on a journey, following the light, open to a call – open to new discoveries – to that tug that beckons us on. We're invited to take that first step, followed by another, then another, to what may be unknown and uncertain, and even risky, but trusting this journey has a purpose and the knowledge that Christ journeys with us. Auden's *A Christmas Oratorio* ends with this chorus.

He is the Way.^{[L] [SEP]}
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.^{[L] [SEP]}
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;^{[L] [SEP]}
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.^{[L] [SEP]}
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;^{[L] [SEP]}
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.⁶

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¹ Isaiah 60:1

² 'For the Time Being - A Christmas Oratorio' in *W.H. Auden Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 369

³ *Auden*, 370

⁴ *Auden*, 380-381

⁵ John 14:1-7

⁶ *Auden*, 400