

JOURNEY TO CHRIST

THE ROOMS are filled with cigarette smoke, the tables heavy with empty bottles and soiled glasses. To the forlorn who dwell in this lonely house, life betokens the same fleeting instability as the scattered tissue paper which recently hugged the sides of the newly opened gifts. Year after year the same domestic tragedy occurs somewhere. Here Christmas is not rebirth in Christ. Rather it is boredom fading into death.

This is ironic, but it is not unique. It is a picture of the aimless futility of any life blinded to the divine light of faith. A similar, far more dramatic irony characterized the court of the Jewish ruler Herod at the time of the first Christmas. There, the Magi, foreign pagans, were the first to announce the birth of Christ in the city of the kings of the Jews. Saint Matthew tells the story plainly:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, Magi came from the East to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him." (Matt. 2:1, 2)

Their question is not, "Has there been born a new king of the Jews?"; it is only this, "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" Presupposing the birth of the new king, they only seek where he can be found. Isn't it fitting to come to Jerusalem, the city of the Jewish kings, to seek the new king? It is ironic, though, that in Jerusalem there is neither knowledge nor faith to match the belief of these pagan wise men.

The centuries have shrouded the image of the Magi with legend. Among other Fathers of the Church, Saints Leo and Bede the Venerable declare that there were three wise men (the Sacred Writer mentions three gifts). Some traditions express an understandable tendency of early ages to clothe the personalities of these mysterious figures with great pomp and rich detail. As children, we early learned to recognize the "three kings" as Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar, accompanied by the camel figurines which stood outside the stable of the crib-set patiently bearing the brightly painted bags and trappings of their plaster lords. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is evident that the Magi came by divine dispensation to give a very special testimony. They are the first to herald the new born Messiah in the Holy City.

As good witnesses, they gave a reason and an explanation of their testimony: "For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him." That star which guided them long distances—perhaps over rugged mountains and along dusty trails—stands as a sign. How could they have failed to be perplexed by the ignorance of their royal host. Moreover, they make their mission clear: they have come to worship him that is born king of the Jews.

Most of the Fathers of the Church took Saint Matthew's phrase, *to worship him*, in a strict sense. They understood it to signify that the Magi were divinely illumined to know that the infant Christ was God Incarnate and adored him as God. A brief examination of the customs and language of the Orient shed some light on the meaning intended by the Evangelist.

In the Orient, falling down before a king was prescribed civic ritual; it was the accustomed veneration normally paid to the great dignity of the royal person. Moreover, the word which the Greek text of *Saint Matthew* uses can certainly be taken to denote this act of human veneration rather than strict divine worship. It must be remembered that the Jewish people at the time of Christ's birth were expecting the Messiah. It is possible that the prophetic words of Balaam from the Book of Numbers could have been known in the neighboring kingdoms: "A star shall arise from Jacob, and a sceptre will arise from out of Israel" (*Num. 24:17ff*). The expected Christ was to be a liberator of the people, an extraordinary king sent specially by Yahweh. The Magi, who probably came from a nearby Arabic kingdom, might well have known these things so scrupulously preserved in the Scriptures of the chosen people. These and other traditions might have led them to recognize the star of the Messiah. But that the "adoration" of the Magi was strictly divine worship is difficult to deduce from the text and context of the Gospel of Saint Matthew (Cf. Ceuppens: *De Incarn.*, 203, 204).

Nevertheless, there is an intense mystery hidden here. These Magi were philosophers, probably well trained in the sciences of mathematics and astronomy, possibly even rulers of their own people. Yet they had no Sacred Scripture, as the nation of Israel had, to relate to them the centuries-old promises made by God of a coming Messiah. Their contact with the Scripture teachings would have been purely fortuitous. Can we help but be puzzled that while the Scribes and Pharisees never were to accept Christ, the Magi undertook a journey involving great expense and much hardship to pay homage to the Messiah of the nation of Israel?

Herod had no answer for them. In the mind of this oriental tyrant,

the only answer to their inquiry was egotistical, jealous rage. He summoned the Priests and Scribes, questioning where the Christ was to be born. They had the answer, as Saint Matthew tells us:

And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it is written by the prophet [Micheas 5:2], 'And thou, Bethlehem of the land of Juda, art by no means least among the princes of Juda; for from thee shall come forth a leader who shall rule my people Israel.'" (*Matt. 2:5, 6*)

Such an answer, easily given by the Jewish Priests, is unmistakably prophetic. The prophet Micheas speaks of the coming Messiah who will deliver Israel from sin and grief. He is the Christ promised by the one, true God. Certainly it is a wonder that these leaders of Israel could know the Scriptures, live with no other hope than the hope those words contained, and yet not know the time of their visitation. They did not follow the star.

For the Magi, it was entirely another story. Their wisdom was hard come by. Granted, they had the sign of the star and received by divine favor the privileged mission to follow it. Yet, how perfectly disposed they had to be to risk a perilous journey to pay tribute to a baby king. Their science and their wisdom were a slow reward of patient investigation. Their wisdom made it evident that for all the world of things they examined there must be a creator. This is the end of philosophy and the beginning of faith.

The star was that beginning for them. It stood at the end of human learning, the culmination of the work of human reason. Flickering in the dark night of ignorance, the star of faith leads man on to higher things. For the Magi, their star was to lead them to a new kingdom, unsuspected by them. But despite the sacrifices of the journey and the mystery of the journey's end, their faith was strong and unflinching.

Herod relayed to them the news the Priests and Scribes had given him and off to Bethlehem went the Magi. From the proud court of Herod to the tiny city of David was a decided change of scene. Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote beautifully of the fittingness of this contrast:

We must understand why Christ wanted to be born in Bethlehem. Because he wished to avoid earthly glory, he chose to be born in Bethlehem and to undergo his Passion in Jerusalem. This is just the opposite of what those who seek earthly honor do: for they would like to have been born in the most glorious atmosphere, while they are unwilling to be shamed in a place of honor. . . . Then, too, if Christ had been born in some great city, the power of his doctrine might have been attributed to human worth. . . . Finally, he had to show that he was of the line of David: *Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem to be registered there, since they were of the house and the family of David.* In fact, it is important

with regard to this mystery that the name *Bethlehem* means *House of Bread*, for Christ himself is that *living bread which has come down from Heaven*. (*In Matth.*, II, 2°)

Saint Matthew relates that the Magi rejoiced when they looked upon the star again. After the company of Herod and the disinterest of the Priests and Scribes, the return of their certain guide in the heavens must have brought relief. Still, their visit to Jerusalem had not been completely in vain. It had directed them to the heart of orthodox Judaism. The glimmering light of the faithful star had directed them to the Law, which was not the complete answer to their search. Now it brings them to Christ, Who is the fully revealed Word.

There is matter for our instruction in this mystery of the Magi's fidelity to their mission. Once these wise men approach the palace of Herod, they no longer have their star before them; when they turn to seek human assistance, the divine aid is taken away from them. Though symbolic, this is an illustration of a truth which is often far from our minds in practical life. If we rely on human means, seek sufficiency in human ways alone, we leave no room for God. And God does not force Himself upon us. He is, in fact, forced to abandon us to our own self-sufficient destruction.

The Christian shares the experience of the wise men accounted in the second chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel. Catholic tradition has taken the Magi as a prefiguring of the Gentile nations to be converted to the new dispensation of Christ. The Christian, like the Magi, is on a journey to Christ. The Christian's guide of faith is not a visible sign such as the celestial manifestation of the Magi was. But miraculous signs are not part of the faith of the Christian, for faith is *the evidence of the things that are not seen*. Faith assents to revealed truth because of God's own authority.

Nevertheless, the sign of the Magi remains a sign for us. In fact, for us it takes on a two-fold significance. In addition to pointing out the place of the newborn Christ, it reminds us of the extraordinary fidelity of these men devoted to their intention to pay homage to the Heavensent King. They found him after a long search in the *House of Bread*, worshipped him, and departed. We should take heart that we find the *Bread of Life* living among us, that we have him to nourish and strengthen us for all time. What incentive to fidelity!

Imagine what the house in Bethlehem looked like to the Magi. At the end of their journey, the star "stood over the place where the child

was . . . and entering the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they worshipped him." In no way did this child differ in appearance from other infants. He did not speak; he was helpless and weak as any newborn child. What did the mother look like? What does the wife of a Jewish carpenter look like? This is the wonder. Seeing this simple sight, they had faith none the less in their star. They believed that this child was the Messiah of Israel and offered costly gifts to honor him.

It is not difficult to imagine these wise men giving up heart anywhere along the road in their journey; humanly speaking, it was all so uncertain. Their fidelity to their mission is the more remarkable in comparison with those many others who, no doubt, saw the same star the wise men saw, even admired its unusual brilliance, but paid no regard to it.

We are on a journey too. We have need of a guiding star no less than the wise men. It seems much easier, however, to follow the glare of the neon tube rather than the beam of faith. Surely, many times we will feel that we, like the Magi, are alone on the road to Christ. The flashing neon lights, though, lead along a labyrinthine route of pleasures ending in ennui. The golden afternoons turn to lead and sink to the bottom of a sea of forgetfulness. Faith is like the flickering star of the Magi: it is seen best in darkness; it demands many sacrifices; but it leads to an infinite reward.

The journey of the Magi contains much practical advice for us on our journey to Christ. It would be eternally embarrassing if we were to let these pagan wise men pass us on the road as we remained unmoved in self-sufficiency and unbelief. Rather we must be grateful for the assurance which they give us of the exceedingly great joy which comes from meeting God Incarnate face to face. We can pay that debt of gratitude in the coin of fidelity.

—Paul Philibert, O.P.