

BY THE LEADING OF A STAR

I.

The Collect for Epiphany begins “O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles”

“By the leading of a star” . . . What was it for a star? Three candidates have been proposed: First, *a supernova*, or ‘new star,’ which occurs when a faint or distant star explodes, emitting for some weeks or months such brightness as to be visible on earth, sometimes even during the day; second, *a comet* circling in an elliptical path around the sun, periodically nearing the earth, as with Haley’s comet, appearing remarkably bright, sometimes developing a luminous tail of gases and dust; third, and many think most probable, *a planetary conjunction* of the slow moving Jupiter and the even slower Saturn, which, according to Kepler who saw it in October 1604, crosses paths with a third planet, Mars, once every 805 years and were so conjoined early in the year 6 B.C., about the time of Christ’s birth.

What was it for a star? We cannot know with scientific certainty, and, even if we could, that really would not answer the question. For the star, whatever its explanation in terms of astronomy, was most importantly an instrument of God’s revelation: “O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles” And as an instrument of God’s revelation its significance could only be grasped by faith. Thousands of people, tens of thousand, must have seen that special brightness in the sky, but only the Magi comprehended its import. True, they studied the heavens, for they were the astronomers of their day, but when they saw this star it was not through their reasoning powers, not by scientific deduction, that they knew what it was but by the insight of faith. St. John Chrysostom asked, “What then was it that moved them? It was that which moved before them, so that leaving their own country they had begun this so weary journey, namely: the Star, and together with the Star the light that God had placed in their hearts, which was to lead them step by step to a more perfect knowledge.” Blasé Pascal said famously, “The heart has reasons which reason does not know.” And so the

Magi were led at once by the light of the star in the sky and by the light of faith in their hearts.

II.

Thus it was that they began their journey, motivated not by curiosity but by faith. They were fundamentally interested not in the star itself but in the One whose birth they knew it signified. So when they came to Jerusalem they inquired, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east (or, more accurately “we have seen his star at its rising”) and are come to worship him.”

How did they know what the star signified? It was not unusual in that day to find portents in the heavens for important happenings on earth. “Virgil reports that a star guided Aeneas to the place where Rome should be founded. Josephus speaks of a star that stood over Jerusalem and of a comet that continued for a year at the time of the fall of the city” (Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*). However the Magi knew that that this star was “his star,” the star of the new born ‘King of the Jews,’ they knew. And though they themselves were Gentiles they set off to worship him.

“O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles” This wondrous star was a sign that he that was born King of the *Jews*, that this One of whom the angels told the *Jewish* shepherds, “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord,” that this One is come not for the Jews alone but *for the whole world*. In the closing words of Isaiah, God declared that he would come to “gather all nations and tongues, and they shall come and see my glory, and I will set a sign among them” (Isa. 66:18-19).

III.

The Magi, when they saw his star at its rising, set out to find him. Faith, when it is born in our hearts, sets us on a journey, and that not an easy journey. Pius Parsh remarks, “It is no pleasure tour over a smiling countryside; rather an arduous march through storm-swept steppes.” This is the note, you will remember, on which T. S. Eliot (following Lancelot Andrewes) began his poem, “The Journey of the Magi.”

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 weather sharp,

The very dead of winter.

.....
 And the cities and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices
 A hard time we had of it.

No, the journey of faith is not easy for them or for us, but we travel on, over rocky ground, through unpleasant climes, and amidst inhospitable places.

Through it all the Magi persevered, for they knew that the end would make the journey worthwhile. I think of the Magi as the Gentile counterparts to Simeon and Anna, pious Jews who waited in the Temple longing for, looking for, Messiah. And Simeon, when he saw the baby in the arms of Mary, cried out, as we noted last week,

Lord, lettest now thy servant depart in peace,
 according to thy word.
 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation
 which thou has prepared before the face of *all people*,
 A light to lighten *the Gentiles*,
 and the glory of thy people Israel.

The star was the first beam of light to lighten the Gentiles, and the Magi, even though they knew not the Hebrew Scriptures, were waiting and searching, their hearts ready, ready like Abraham to set off on a journey, leaving hearth and home, going they knew not where.

And when they saw its light they followed the star, first to Jerusalem where the Jewish Scribes told them of the place where, according to the Scriptures, the One they sought was to be born, and then to Bethlehem, the city of which the prophet spoke. “And, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” When you follow the light of faith and the guidance of Holy Scripture, then, however long, however arduous the journey, you will find at its end “exceeding great joy.”

IV.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary, and fell down and worshipped him.” Three times in this story we are told that the end purpose of their journey was to worship him. The final and guiding purpose of the journey of faith is always to worship Christ, to worship God the Father in Jesus Christ his

Son by the Holy Spirit. The word here translated ‘worship’, which, as we said, occurs three times in this passage, means literally ‘to fall on one’s face in adoration.’ We were made, you and I, in the image of God that we might find our highest fulfillment not in self-seeking, self-serving ways nor in any pleasure the world has to offer but in loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor, in whom also is the image of Christ, as our very self.

“And when they were come to the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshiped him, and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” St. Ambrose comments, “What are these gifts offered in true faith? Gold, as to a King; incense as to God; myrrh, for the dead,”—appropriate symbols for the one who was born King of the Jews, yea, King of kings and Lord of lords—thus the *gold*; . . . who was also the Son of God, the Word of God incarnate—thus the *incense*; . . . and who, though possessing both royalty and divinity, wondrously came to die for our salvation—thus the *myrrh*. St. Gregory the Great wisely counsels,

It should also be our resolve to offer gold to the newborn Lord and thereby show our faith in Him as King of heaven and earth. It should be our resolve to offer Him incense as evidence of our belief that He who appeared in time was God from all eternity. And it should be our resolve to bring Him myrrh in token of our conviction that He who could not suffer in His Godhead could die in the human nature He assumed.

Could, . . . and did, the worthy Lamb that was slain that he might be the Savior of us all, “a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel,” to whom be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.