**Keep on keeping on - Warton – 5th January 2020 – Matthew 2:1-12**

I find it rather strange that this week is Epiphany, the coming of the Wise Men, when last week’s reading comes after it in the Bible. But I’m not going to worry about the Church of England’s Lectionary, just thank Trish that she asked me to do a talk this week and not last!

The Wise Men – We sing about **three** Wise Men (or Magi) and we give them names … can anyone tell me what they are? Gaspar/Casper, Balthasar and Melchior.

But we don’t know that either of those ‘facts’ are true. The Bible doesn’t actually say how many wise men there were, only that there were **three** gifts given by … any number of wise men … well, more than one, or the Bible would have said that **A** wise **man** (singular) visited Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus. And the Bible makes no mention of their names.

Can anyone tell me what the three gifts were? Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

Gold: is associated with Kings and Christians believe that Jesus is the King of Kings.

Frankincense: is sometimes used in worship in Churches and showed that people would worship Jesus.

Myrrh: is a perfume that is put on dead bodies to make them smell nice; Christians believe that it showed that Jesus would suffer and die.

**Who or what were the Wise Men?** One theory is that they might have been Kings of the Yemen since, as during those times, the Kings of Yemen were Jews. They were certainly men of great learning – the term ‘Magi’ links to the title given to priests in a sect of the ancient Persian religions. Today we'd called them astrologers but, back then, astronomy and astrology were part of the same overall studies (considered as 'science') and went hand in hand with each other. The magi would have followed the patterns of the stars religiously. They would have also probably been very rich and held in high esteem by their own society and by people who weren't from their country or religion.

**Where did the wise men come from?** Well, again, we don’t actually know. Some say that they were Parthian Magi. The journey from Parthia to Jerusalem is approximately 500 miles. By caravan (no John and Gina, that’s not your kind of a caravan, we’re talking about a caravan of camels!!) – By **camel** caravan, with no major detours or disruption, the trek would have probably taken 50 to 60 days.

But others point out that the word Magi comes from the greek word 'magos' (where the English word 'magic' comes from), and ‘Magos’ itself comes from the old Persian word 'Magupati' - the title given to priests in a sect of the ancient Persian religions, as I mentioned earlier. The distance between Persia and Bethlehem is 9,187.4 miles, so the journey could have taken up to 120 days, or around 3 months.

Matthew tells us that the Magi “came from the East”. As Frankincense and Myrrh were harvested from trees in Southern Arabia, it’s also considered that they came from there.

Still others think that the journey took up to two years!

**Why did they make their journey?** They had seen an unusual new star in the sky, and knew that it told of the birth of a special king in Israel. No one really knows what the new star in the sky was, and there are many theories including comets, supernovas, a conjunction of planets or something supernatural! The Magi would have known about the prophesies of a special Jewish Saviour (also known as the Messiah) from when the Jews had been held captive in ancient Babylon several hundred years before, or maybe because they were the Kings of Yemen, who were Jews.

I’d like to compare the journey of the Wise Men to our Christian journey. Whether it took 60 days, 120 days or 2 years (as some stories suggest), their journey was a marathon, not a sprint, and that’s the same as our journey as Christians. Our faith is not a ‘flash in the pan’, it’s an ongoing journey, taking each day a step at a time, just like the Wise Men. In Hebrews 12:1b-2, the Bible says “… and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”.

Imagine their journey … they set off with great expectations, but I bet they had a few wrong turns along the way, a few ‘disagreements’, and almost certainly some days when the weather was awful and they didn’t feel ‘at their best’. They’ll have faced dangers from bandits and wild animals, too. Their journey was very similar to ours, but they kept going, as we should. We’ll also have trials and tribulations, face disappointments and dangers along the way and take a few false turns. But we need to keep on keeping on.

They journeyed to Jerusalem, to King Herod’s palace, looking for a king, but the Wise Men were not disappointed in the least when their journey ended in a stable in Bethlehem! And their reward? A long, arduous journey home ... but they’d met the King of Kings. As the poem by T.S. Elliot highlights, they were already aware of death, in that royal birth, but a death like no other that would go on to change the lives of millions of people. Perhaps we have or have had high hopes for our lives and are disappointed in where we are, but, like the Wise Men, we are in the presence of the Saviour of the World and our reward, too, is to meet with and continue our journey with, the King of Kings. What a ‘reward’ that is. And our final destination is in heaven. What a ‘reward’ that’s going to be.

**What about Joseph and Mary?** [section taken from Bible study notes] As we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, it’s good to remember that nothing could have prepared Mary and Joseph for the impressive entourage that arrived, unheralded at their door. Mary and Joseph were devout Jews and presumably held the conventional view of the day that Gentiles were generally to be regarded as unclean and should not enter the house of a Jew. But the parents of Jesus saw beyond such restricted religious views and welcomed them into their home. As they watched the eastern visitors pay homage to their little boy, they must have seen this as early evidence that the good news wrapped up in the life of their child was for all people, regardless of race or creed. Even pagan astrologers from far-off lands could have open hearts to discover Christ. They remind us that there are people all over the world who have not yet heard the good news but have developed eyes to see the signs of God.

Did any of you make any **New Year’s Resolutions**? I won’t ask you to put your hands up, but I suspect that many of them have been broken already or will be very soon. I also suspect that the Wise Men had several misgivings along the way, wondering what they were doing, where they were going and why. But they didn’t give up, they kept going, as we should. We need to keep on keeping on. As the Bible says in Philippians 3:14, “I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus” and Hebrews 12:1b “… let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” It means holding fast to our faith, our purpose, in the same way that the Wise Men kept going on their journey. Perhaps we could make it our New Year resolution for 2020 to spread the news of Christianity to all those around us?

**How *do* we hold on to our faith?** The Wise Men, two, three, twenty-two or thirty three, weren’t alone! Although they had to endure the long journey on the back of camel and face many difficulties, they would have been accompanied by a large group of servants to support them. Top athletes are supported by teams of people, and many runners and joggers join running groups or run with friends to have the additional support and motivation which that brings. Top long-distance runners and ordinary runners alike take on nourishment during a run … through energy drinks, energy gels and bars and even Jelly Babies (other types of sweets are also available). As Christians, we too need the support of others – yes, you can be a Christian and not attend church, but it helps a lot to have the support and encouragement of your ‘team’. And we need spiritual nourishment too – reading our Bibles and praying – by ourselves or with others. Just as the Magi were guided by the star, we can be guided by God’s Word as we travel through life. We need to embed His promises in our lives, so that we can call upon them in difficult times.

So, my final point to you today, is to ‘make like the Magi’ and ‘keep on keeping on’.

**Closing prayer:** Heavenly Father, help us to remember the journey of the Wise Men - the hardships and difficulties they endured on their journey but, most importantly, their determination and perseverance in continuing their journey to give you their gifts. Help us, through your Holy Spirit, to continue our journey with you, to be guided by you, and to use our gifts in your service. Amen.

**T**[**he Journey of the Magi**](https://allpoetry.com/The-Journey-Of-The-Magi) **by T.S. Eliot**

*In this celebrated poem, T.S. Eliot depicts the three magi travelling to worship the Infant Christ. Their winter journey is brought to life through a series of memorable details, but the essence of the poem is the speculation of the narrator, one of the magi, upon the nature of the great event they have witnessed.*

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.'  
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
and running away, and 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:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.  
  
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued  
And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.  
  
All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, 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.  
I should be glad of another death.