



St Marylebone
Parish Church

The St Marylebone CE School Staff Service for Epiphany 2019

The Journey Of The Magi by T.S. Eliot

*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.*

I have been able to reflect, as will be the case for quite a few of us 'newbies', on my first two terms at St Marylebone. On what an amazing place this is, what a privilege it is to be a part of such a team of people, serving such an amazing group of young women and young men.

Rest assured, if you've been here for a while, just how amazing you are and this school is to these new eyes. And I'm not just saying that, I promise.

I've been doing lots of reflecting too on youth. I suppose that's natural. They've got it all before them. Potential: academic, talents, as human beings.

Eliot holds life and death in a rather dizzying tension. Jesus had it all before Him. Unlike our pupils, we of course know the story ahead for Jesus. But Eliot doesn't permit us just to *know* the story he disturbs us to be caught by these events and what will come out of them. Caught. Entangled. Like fish on a hook or thread carried through a weave.

All this could sound very negative. And there is an unease in the air as Eliot finishes. I think there's an unease in parts of St Matthew's account too.

But being disturbed and entangled by this story is not actually a negative thing. It is in fact the invitation to life. So much in our part of the world, in our time, tells us that our humanity is at its best when we are self-reliant, complete and insulated from need or doubt or 'other'. The vision sketched out for us by the Christian Good News is completely the opposite of this. God shows us this Himself. Christ doesn't come among us as a handsome, rich, clever, able leader. He's a baby. Babies need more love than they can give; they need protection and feeding and changing and cherishing. God entangles Himself in our story in this humble messy way, that we might freely entangle ourselves in His story. It is actually in our entanglement, in our inter-dependence, in our *weakness* and sharing *others'* strengths, in our belonging not our independence (from each other and from God) that we discover what it means to be fully human.

Entanglement is a good thing then, that unsettling tension between death and life that Eliot's wise men find themselves in is a place of life so much more *real* than their formerly comfy palaces. This is an invitation to us too. To allow ourselves to be threads entangled in the weave of this greater story, this tapestry of life God, me, us.

As CS Lewis wrote towards the end of Narnia's Last Battle: "'Yes,' said Queen Lucy. 'In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.'"

This term our stories continue as they do in school, entangled with each other and our girls, and the young people of the sixth form, and God seeking to be becoming fully human together. This is an exciting journey to be on together. There may not be any camels, thank goodness there are no 'silken girls bringing sherbert', but it is still a journey and there is a priceless treasure to be revealed. It's good to be here.