

## **The Journey of the Wise Men**

**Heb 12:1-3**

**Mt 2:1-12**

Has it ever struck you that all the central characters in the Christmas story had to undertake a journey of some sort to reach Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph made the journey from Nazareth, not an easy journey, especially for someone in Mary's condition. The shepherds made a trip too, admittedly a much shorter one, but a trip nonetheless. The Wise Men we know had a huge distance to cover, travelling probably from Persia, or Iran as it is today, a journey that would have taken some months.

And what about Jesus? He made the biggest journey of all – from heaven to earth. We don't know how far that is – maybe shorter than think – but in terms of the adjustments it involved it was a vast journey: a journey from the spiritual into the physical realm; a journey from eternity into time.

So, it took a number of journeys to make that first Christmas happen. And if we are going to discover the heart of the meaning of Christ's coming, we too need to make a journey – a journey of the heart; a journey of faith, to discover and experience the Christ child; the Saviour.

As I said, the journey for the shepherds was a quick and easy one. And that is true for some people's journey of faith. They come to a commitment to Christ relatively easily. The brightness of God's glory breaks through to them a bit like it did for those shepherds. Some people's experience is almost as dramatic and sudden. And those who have such a journey can be grateful for it.

But for most of us the journey is often a slower, longer one, more like the journey of those wise men. Like them we are not satisfied with the world as we know it, and we seek something deeper. Those men had worldly wealth and wisdom, but they sensed that there was something more. A new star appears in the sky. It doesn't have the dazzling brilliance that the shepherds experienced, but it's nonetheless a beacon of hope; a glimmer of a new and deeper life. And they are prepared to expend time, effort and money to seek out the new king that they believe the star points to.

So they embark on their journey – a trek of around 1000 miles; 125 miles longer than from Land's end to John 'O Groats. Much of the journey would have been across desert sands or rough tracks. In the picture that is normally painted of these Magi, they are spotlessly dressed in bright apparel with fancy headdress and gleaming jewellery. In actual fact, they would more likely have been rather shabby and grimy after that journey, and any jewellery or other valuables would have been well hidden from the prying eyes of bandits, who would have been an ever-present danger.

We know about the gifts that these men brought for the child, but in the final analysis their greatest gift was the journey itself – their courage and perseverance that enabled them to complete their expedition. Like them, for us the journey will often require perseverance, courage and maybe sacrifice. Like them we will be tempted to turn back because of the difficulties, or the doubts about the value of the journey. But our perseverance and faithfulness will be richly rewarded. God has promised in scripture, 'You will seek Me, and you will find Me, if you search for Me with your whole heart'. Even though the way may be tough, and the light of the star may at times be lost behind the clouds, the journey is infinitely worthwhile – Christ guarantees that. He is not only the destination of the journey, but also our companion along the way. As the writer of Hebrews says, 'Let us run with perseverance the race set before us, our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith'.

Not only does He promise His presence for this journey, He also gives us fellow travellers. Going back to those who journeyed to Bethlehem, it seems significant to me that none of them journeyed alone, except for Jesus. Mary and Joseph had each other; the shepherds were in a group as were the Wise Men. Those Wise Men had each other when the way got difficult, or when one of them thought of turning back.

The same is true of us in our journey with Jesus. The Christian family offers us the companionship of like-minded people; people who are seeking out the same star and the King it heralds.

In God's family there are those who have travelled the road before us and can help us on the journey. We may know them in the flesh, or we may only have met them through the books they have written. Too often we are 'Lone Ranger' Christians, failing to draw on the gift of the others who share the journey. It is so important that we have at least one person with whom we can share deeply and honestly about the joys and struggles of this journey

Speaking of journeys, one of the best known is the journey undertaken by Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man on the yellow brick road to the Wizard of Oz. Each of them believes that the Wizard can supply what they are seeking. The fearful Lion is seeking greater courage, the Scarecrow is searching for a brain and the Tin Man is looking for a heart. But when they finally meet the Wizard, he tells them that they have already gained along the way the things they were seeking. The Scarecrow has used the bit of intelligence he has and now has a much better brain. The Tin Man has allowed the feelings that he has to be shown and in the process his heart and his feelings have grown; and the Lion has exercised the bit of courage he has and now that courage has developed significantly.

Is the same not true of us. In life and in our walk of faith, attributes like courage and compassion, faith and patience are not suddenly poured into us fully developed. Rather, as we exercise the faith, the patience, the courage and the compassion we have, no matter how small they may be, we will find that they grow a bit each time we exercise them. As someone has put it, 'What we are is God's gift to us; what we become is our gift to Him.'

We are on a journey to the new heaven and the new earth, and it is through walking that way faithfully, and using the gifts and graces we have, that we will reach our destination and hear the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master.'

When those Wise Men reached the new king that had been born, they had not arrived at the end of their journey; in reality their journey had just begun – the new journey they were embarking on, in the light of the marvellous discovery they had made. Christmas and the ending of another year is not the time to sit back and congratulate ourselves on the long distance we have come; it is a time to commit ourselves to the next stage of the journey, of faithfulness and growth, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the one on whom our faith depends from beginning to end.