

Melchior Remembers

The Strange Charm of a Country Inn

I was an old man then. Of course, now I am older still. Some would say *feeble*. Others might even say *feeble-minded*. But I remember it all well! It was over thirty years ago when three of us kings of neighboring provinces met together and conferred after a large star of blinding intensity lit up the heavens more brightly than a full moon, visible even in daylight. After long deliberations—checking charts, consulting records, preparing graphs—we concluded it was the conjunction of three planets—Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars joining together—a rare event happening once in a million years. It must be a heavenly sign, we said, heralding the birth of a mighty king. Presumably he would be great, powerful, influential, one of the outstanding figures of all history. He would hold sway over multitudes. Would he be a great military leader? A political genius? A renowned scholar? We couldn't be certain, but we believed he would touch the lives of thousands upon thousands. Since this would be a king whose friendship we ought to cultivate, the three of us decided to set out to find him and greet him.

We instructed our servants to make hasty preparations for this arduous trip; and an arduous journey it was!

We faced radiant sun and white sand, intense heat and bitter cold, formidable mountains and vast desert wastelands. We encountered as well insidious dangers: marauding robbers, relentless countryside, unpredictable weather.

In point of fact,

A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of 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, sore-footed, refractory,

Lying down in the melting snow.

There were times when regretted leaving our summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, and the silken girls bringing us sherbet.

And the camel men cursing and grumbling and running away and wanting their liquors and women

And the night fires going out and the lack of shelter

And the cities hostile and the town 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 it was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley wet, below the snowline, smelling of vegetation

With a running stream and a water mill beating the darkness

And three trees on the low sky. (T.S. Eliot)

So, at long last, we approached Jerusalem, eager and excited, our spirits full of expectation. We asked everyone we met the very same question: where is he who is born King of the Jews?

While no one knew the answer, we certainly attracted widespread attention. Somewhat troubled we entered the gates of the city, where our reputation ahead preceded us. We were immediately met and escorted to the palace of Herod the King, who inquired about our purpose and asked why Judea should be honored by a visit from such dignitaries. Gaspar told him of the star and about our endless journey. Then Balthazar inquired about the birth of the child.

Herod's rage could not be concealed. It showed through his outer cloak of courtesy. "No child has been born here," he said. "My children are all grown." Then he wondered aloud if there might be another King of the Jews. "If so," he said, "where could he be?" This crafty man obviously would allow no rival to his throne. Any potential menace would certainly be destroyed.

As I look back, I know that we Magi seemed crestfallen. Had we miscalculated? Had we misinterpreted the sign? Had we come all this way for no reason? We had been so certain, yet now we doubted. Those voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly, now seemed all the more disconcerting.

Herod summoned his advisors, and in the ensuing conversation we learned about the Jewish tradition of a Messiah, a great ruler who would deliver his people from their enemies and restore their former glory. "But where is he to be born?" insisted Herod. "A little town—Bethlehem," they responded. "For the ancient scripts declare: 'And thou, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art by no means least among the rulers of Judah, from thee shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'" After dismissing his religious leaders, Herod turned to us. Failing to disguise his blighting scorn, he directed us to Bethlehem, a few miles to the south: "Go and search diligently for the child and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him."

As we left the palace, Gaspar spotted the great star in the sky once again, blazing brightly. To our astonishment, this star began to move, leading us, directing us. Its beams pointed the way to a country inn—busy and bustling, possessing a strange charm. Then beyond the strange charm of this country inn the star stopped, simple stopped, with its light resting on a specific dwelling. This was it! At long last! But could it be? *How* could it be? Here was no palace; here were no soldiers, no guards, no slaves; here was no distinguishing mark of royalty. Instead, poverty was everywhere evident. Could the king for whom we had so diligently searched be here? Once again we Magi found ourselves on the verge of disillusionment.

Hesitantly we approached the stable. Then we saw them! The mother with the infant in her lap, both surrounded with a holy glow. She was so beautiful! But there was something far more than physical attractiveness: she was delicate, young, and a radiant glory shown everywhere around her.

The child? This was no ordinary child. We looked into his eyes. Truly, he was a king, but more than a king, more than a ruler delivered, more than a deliverer. This was God Himself! The good, wise Creator had come to be with us, to redeem us. Instinctively we dropped to our knees, realizing that we were in the presence of the Eternal God. We said nothing; there are some experiences where words are only redundant.

All the way I had carried a box of gold as a gift for the king. I laid it at the manger bed. All the way Gaspar had brought a vessel of frankincense that we use on the altar in our temples, but only when we are worshipping God. He laid it at the manger bed. Then Balthasar presented a package of myrrh, an aromatic, bitter spice we have in the East, a symbol of incorruptibility; it speaks of bitterness, sorrow, and sacrifice . . . and also of eternity and everlastingness.

We gave him gold because he is a king; we gave him frankincense because he is God; we gave him myrrh because his sacrifice would open Heaven's gate.

We had found the king, but how different from what we had expected. We had sought an earthly ruler; we found a spiritual Savior. We come to greet the King of the Jews; we discovered the Sovereign of all people, the Sovereign of all who are willing to enthrone him in their hearts. We three kings of neighboring provinces—Gaspar, Balthazar, and I, Melchior—kings? No, we are now but his lowly and loyal subjects, now and forevermore.

After more than thirty years of retrospective, I look back on our endless journey with new eyes.

The weather had been awful, the countryside dreary marsh, jungle, rock and echoes mocked calling our hope unlawful.

At least we know for certain that we were three old sinners, that this journey was much too long, that we often wanted our dinners,. And missed our wives, our book, our dogs, but had only the vaguest idea why we were what we were.

*To discover how to be human now,
To discover how to be truthful now,
To discover how to be loving now,
To discover how to be living now
Is the reason we followed that star
Through stifling gorges, over kevel lakes,
Tundras intense and irresponsive seas,
In vacant crowds and humming silences,
By ruined arches and past modern shops,
Counting the miles, and the absurd mistakes. (W. .H. Auden)*

But in spite of the miles, in spite of the mistakes, we found the God Child and gave him gifts.

O there and then our endless journey stopped. (W.H. Auden)
My days are over, and here and now my endless journey starts.

One question lingers on: whatever became of the God Child? When Herod slaughtered all the children two years and under in Bethlehem, was the infant Jesus murdered with the other innocents there? If so, my desperate hope died with him.

Or did he become the God Man who redeemed the world? If so, I take now a new endless journey with an everlasting hope, a hope abounding in glory, for undoubtedly he will have rent opened for me the gates of heaven.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The Rev. Calvin Coolidge Wilson
Interim Pastor
Bower Hill Community Church
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Christmas Eve
24 December 2009

NOTE

This dramatic monologue is the product of materials pulled together from the writings of:
C. Coolidge Wilson, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and H. Blaine Detrick, citing the following works:

T. S. Eliot, *Journey of the Magi*

W. H. Auden, *For the Time Being*

R. Blaine Detrick, *I Met Jesus When He Was Born: Balthasar, the King*