

CHRISTMAS AND THE MAGI

T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi" tells the story of the Three Wise Men who set out on a journey to satisfy their curiosity about the appearance of a star. They struggled at the "worst time of the year, the very dead of winter," willing to travel at night, through cold and hostile towns, "with the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly."

"Then at dawn," they are rewarded for their perseverance, although "there was no information," and they "arrived at evening, not a moment too soon, finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory." The place, of course, is where they saw the baby. The phrases "no information" and "not a moment too soon," however, refer to Herod, who is seeking out the child in order to kill it. If the Magi had delayed, the Holy Family would already have fled into Egypt.

Reflecting on their experiences causes them to ask, "Were we led all that way for Birth or for Death?" Eliot sees a moment of self-discovery in the arrival of the Magi at the manger: "This Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our Death." So it is with all who encounter this holy infant. As Simeon told Mary, "This child is destined for the rise and fall of many, and your own heart a sword of sorrow shall pierce." There is no turning back to the same old world for the Magi. Scripture tells us that they went home by another way. Eliot develops this idea when he writes, "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation...with an alien people clutching their gods."

The season of Advent calls us to leave the security of what we know to search for what is beyond the old dispensation. In the birth of Jesus lie our birth and our death. Like the Magi, we must live with both. Eliot's poem ends with the words "I should be glad of another death." This death is the birth of eternal life.

The Gospel imperative is clear: Be on guard! Stay awake! In his book *Fathoming Bethlehem*, Bishop Morneau calls Advent a time of attentiveness and accountability. He writes, "We have been given a trust and a set of responsibilities that make us stewards and servants of the mysteries

We don't have to wait four weeks to encounter God. The Lord breaks into our lives today, in words and in historical events, in the needs of our sisters and brothers. Like the Magi, we travel by day or night, with information or with no information, with support or with "the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was folly." Advent is, as Eliot writes, "a journey, and such a long journey: the ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter."