

Journeying with the Magi

An Exploration of Advent in Prayer and Meditation



Opening Prayers

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen

Be still and aware of God's presence within and all around. In a time of silence, let's reflect on how we are at this time...

...where we are with God...

...where we are with ourselves...

After a period of silence, we say together

God of the sea and desert

You have made us travellers, explorers

Wonderers and wanderers.

You have made us restless

Till we rest in you.

Walk with us in our journey this Advent

Guarding and guiding us,

Until we find the miracle you promised,

The Son you sent us.

Amen.

As we move and grow within the rhythms of Advent, may we sense the continuing presence of the Holy Three.

Deep peace of the Creator,

Gentle love of the Son,

Regenerative power of the Spirit

Amen

Thou who art over us, thou who art one of us, thou who art: Give us a pure heart that we may see thee; a humble heart that we may hear thee; a heart of love that we may serve thee; a heart of faith that we may abide in thee.

Amen.

The Journey: Preparing for the Journey

Advent is an *attitude of anticipation*. The entire season prepares us to allow Christ into our hearts, sometimes in ways far different from other times when we celebrate the 'excitement of December.' Many people want everything about this season to stay the same year after year: the same carols, the same schedule for giving gifts, even food prepared in the same way. Consistency does sometimes bring comfort and make things less challenging.

But another truth tells us that each year *ought to be different*. We are not the same. We are faced with different responsibilities, moved by different insights, changed (or charged) by circumstances we didn't have before, challenged by fresh opportunities and different memories, equipped with increasing or diminishing capacities for coping with all these variations. So, we never journey through 'Advent' in exactly the same way.

The Journey: Starting Out

Has it ever occurred to you that the chief priests and teachers of the law seemed know the prophecies so well that when they heard the story of the Magi they could tell them exactly where to look, yet they didn't make the trip themselves? The religious leaders of Judah ignored the opportunity to make the 6-mile journey to worship the Messiah, but these 'wise' foreigners of indeterminate religion could. Foreigners, or Gentiles, who had not just gone six miles but had crossed whole countries. The elite of the religious Jews wouldn't even go to a neighbouring town – it took outsiders to make sure the Son of God was worshipped.

So why does anyone begin a journey? Most people have a motive, an idea where they will be going and why and what they will find when they reach their journey's end.

The decision to journey requires the ability to project into the future and aim for a vision of something which has not yet come to pass. Some are physical journeys: a meeting, a holiday; some are inward journeys, a quest for knowledge or self-discovery.

"If you are so weary with the struggle of living that you have no strength even to want God, yet are still dissatisfied that you don't, you are already keeping Advent in your life."

Maria Boulding

Often the only limitation on how far we are prepared to go...is ourselves.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Life is a journey, not a destination." But Ryan Leonard said 'Life is a journey that has a lot of different paths; but any path you choose, use it as your destiny.'

Being prepared to embrace our own spiritual journey is an important part of Christian mission. Without it, we are left dealing only with our current context, what we see and experience around us.

God calls us into our own future, to be prophetic about what the world could be and look like.

The Magi had faith that what they might find at journey's end would be worth the trouble and toil of those travels. But it wasn't a whim. In St Matthew's gospel they come to ask for 'he that has been born King of the Jews'. They already have in their minds a hope and an expectation.

The Magi began a journey, a spiritual journey.

In Advent, we too are on this journey. God continues to call us to set out to meet him in Jesus Christ. How will we prepare for and set out on this journey?

"The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Matthew 2.1-18

The Visit of the Wise Men

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people, Israel.”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



“The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before ... What is possible is to not see it, to miss it, to turn just as it brushes past you. So, stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder. There will be time enough for running. For rushing. For worrying. For pushing. For now, stay. Wait. Something is on the horizon.”

Jan L. Richardson

The Journey: Discussion

Travelling however many hundred miles to worship this new king was a bit of a hassle for them. They must have had other things to do! But they let the Son of God interrupt their lives and call them to worship. We've got many calls on our time – how strongly does the call to worship feature? Do we worship in the easiest way, or in a way that requires effort?

They came with gifts. They thought through what they were going to give when they got there. Sometimes we think of minimal preparation as more spiritual – the featured worshippers of the early new testament didn't seem to think so. How prepared are we? Do we go above and beyond in our faith?

They could have left their presents at the door, but what they most wanted was to see the child. Worship would be easy if you could just turn up, do your bit, sing a song or two and go home. But true worship is an encounter with God. In true worship, we see Jesus.



NB These wise men or “magi” in Greek, originated from Persia. They were followers of Zoroastrianism, a belief system that was a precursor to Islam. Whereas translations refer to them as “wise men,” it is doubtful only men were in this group. Caravans from Persia often included women practitioners of this religion as well. Yet, Matthew clues the reader into the patriarchal context that often privileges male voice, male characters, and male presence.

“Like all great travellers, I have seen more than I remember, and remember more than I have seen.”

Benjamin Disraeli

Most of our journeys are planned but some don't always turn out as we expected. Some become journeys of discovery that will challenge us and the things we thought we understood. Our search for Jesus may be such a journey. As we look externally to find God working in our lives, we also need to look inwards, to look at how we act in response to God's call.

When St Brendan set sail with a band of friends in search of the Holy Island he did not know where that journey would lead. The following prayer is attributed to him as he prepares himself for this perilous journey. This Advent, as each of us considers the call of God in our own lives, this prayer might offer a way of seeking and waiting on the Lord.

Prayer of St Brendan

Shall I abandon, O King of mysteries, the soft comforts of home?
Shall I turn my back on my native land, and turn my face towards the sea?
Shall I put myself wholly at your mercy, without silver, without a horse, without fame, without honour?
Shall I throw myself wholly upon you, without sword and shield, without food and drink, without a bed to lie on?
Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land, placing myself under your yoke?
Shall I pour out my heart to you, confessing my manifold sins and begging forgiveness, tears streaming down my cheeks?
Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach, a record of my final prayer in my native land?
Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict?
Shall I take my tiny boat across the wide sparkling ocean?
O King of the Glorious Heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?
O Christ, will you help me on the wild waves?

Silent then Group reflection

(Read this prayer again and if you feel called to, share your feelings with the group)

What does this prayer say to you?

Do all journeys of discovery mean leaving behind, the things we feel safe with?

...and what about our journey? Dag Hammarskjöld once said. The longest journey is the journey inward'

What do you think this means?

As we prepare for the birth of Christ, what are we hoping for on our 'inward journey'?

What will/can we do to prepare for the 'journey'?

<p><i>"Advent: the time to listen for footsteps – you can't hear footsteps when you're running yourself."</i> Bill McKibben</p>

Closing Comments

Matthew's final words on the visit of the Magi invite us to travel 'by another road' (2:12). We are also invited to search for God in the humility of a fragile baby and to travel home, transformed. That 'journey' will take us to a new place. We need to journey with an open and challenging mind.

In Fr Karl Rahner's words, 'We are encompassed absolutely by God at the moment of our search as we journey through life by the light of the star.' Insights from occasional moments of deep prayer, from reading the scriptures, our sensitivity to listening to the 'noises' all around us, may be for us the star or the brilliant flash of light that leads us to the Child and his mother.



"The Lord is coming, always coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord"
Henri Nouwen

Closing Prayers:

*God beyond borders, we bless you for strange places and different dreams
for the demands and diversity of a wider world
for the distance that lets us look back and re-evaluate
for the new ground where broken stems can take root, grow and blossom.
We bless you for the friendship of strangers
the richness of other cultures
and the painful gift of freedom*

Blessed are you, God beyond borders

Into the love of the Holy Three

We place ourselves this day

Into the care of the Holy Three

**We place all that we have been,
all that we are
and all that we shall be**

Into the peace of the Holy Three

**We place all those things
that might trouble or cause us concern**

In the name of the Creator

We ask a blessing of calm on us

In the name of the Son

We ask a blessing of peace on us

In the name of the Holy Spirit

We ask a blessing of healing on us

*May the peace and love of the Creator be ours; the peace and love of Christ be ours, the
peace and love of the Spirit be ours, as we journey inward during this season of
reflection.*

Amen

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, sore footed, 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.

Homework: Two further Readings

1. Rev. Andrew Demotses (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America)

In the nativity narrative of St. Matthew, we are introduced to the shadowy and mysterious figures known as the Magi, or Wise Men, 'who studied the stars and came from the East to Jerusalem,' (2:1). If we are willing to reflect for a moment, I think that we can catch glimpses of ourselves in the journey of these men. In a deep sense, they reflect the many dimensions of our own individual journeys of faith.

It is not difficult to imagine the many real dangers of their long journey. The resistance of their families, the efforts of colleagues to discourage them, the unbearable heat, and freezing nights of the deserts they crossed, the danger of marauding thieves. And yet, they felt impelled to answer the call of the beckoning Star of Bethlehem, to worship the new-born King and lay their gifts at his feet. In this act of faith and obedience, 'how happy they were, what joy was theirs!' (2:9). And finding the child 'they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.' (2:11).

In this same way, that Star calls each of us to begin a lifelong journey to meet Jesus Christ, to acknowledge Him and make Him a part of our lives. In doing so, however, we need to acknowledge with honesty and forthrightness the difficulty of following Christ. But as with the Magi, we must undertake the journey knowing of its difficulty.

In the Christian life, discouragement comes in many forms. There is discouragement when it seems our prayers are not answered; when we work with honesty and integrity, but see others, who cut corners, prosper and advance; when we endure personal separation and loss, and when we need compassion and affirmation, and they are not to be found.

But through the mystery of faithful obedience, the Magi offered themselves and their gifts to Christ, transcending at that moment the difficulties and discouragements of their journey. And having met Christ they were changed men, and went home by another route, symbolizing their confidence and trust in the new direction their lives had taken. And to the wise men and women of every age, this same opportunity is given each Christmas when the star returns again, to shine anew in the heart of each of us.

2. The following reflection is by Sr. Catherine Looker, SSJ, D.Min., Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia.

The wise travellers from the East, who brought gifts to the Christ Child, displayed great life skills anyone can emulate throughout the year. In the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12, the story of the visit of the Magi has captured the hearts and souls of spiritual seekers throughout the ages. These three Wise Men from the East, though not specifically named in the scriptural text, have come to be known as Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior as they carry their signature gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the new-born Christ Child. How many of us remember the delight we took as children in moving these royal travellers ever closer to the manger in our home Nativity scenes in anticipation of the Feast of the Epiphany! A wonderful family ritual for sure, yet no less compelling for us to consider how these travellers might continue to lead us ever closer to Christ throughout the year. In particular, the Magi display significant qualities for any spiritual traveller to emulate, especially in the development of their skills and gifts:

- Keen observation
- Ability to follow directions
- Quality of presence
- Active participation
- Discernment

All five of these life skills for the spiritual journey can be considered important. The Magi exhibit mastery of each, particularly exemplified in the discernment they showed. Discernment is the capacity to sift our everyday experiences and trust when we are following the lead of God and when we are not. Given the number of 'signs' in today's world that call for our attention and commitment, we might rightfully wonder how we can actually know when we are indeed following God's lead. Even when we discern what we consider to be the right path, how do we get there? Whom do we trust? Or do we try to do it alone? To help us come to some deepening clarity, we take a reflective look at the story of the Magi's visit and see what these wise companions might teach us about acquiring some of the necessary traveling skills needed for our spiritual journey in today's world.

One of the most important observations may be to see that we have been created by God with life and purpose. We need to claim the idea that God desires a personal and loving relationship with each of us. We are invited to see our lives as a woven tapestry of faith that gives testimony to our unique relationship with God. For example, we may want to ponder: What are we really seeking in life? What gives our life meaning and purpose? It is evident that these three wise travellers of old had been actively waiting for a significant period of time for a sign in the heavens to guide them. They were prepared to see the sign. There is a sense of activity and purpose in their seeking, and so when the

time was right, they took steps to follow the light and to inquire further about where they might find and worship Jesus as the new-born king of the Jews.

For 21st century spiritual seekers, the challenge of finding God in our lives may seem less dramatic than that of the Magi, and yet no less daunting, in our quest to find God's presence in our everyday experiences. Could we consider that a sign and star might be as simple as a phone call from a friend or colleague, a word of advice from a parent, an employment opportunity that seems to beckon even though it doesn't seem to be our dream job at the moment? The important thing to notice is where these signs and stars lead us so that we can take the very next step in front of us with the assurance that we are not alone when we are following the lead of God whom we have come to trust.

But do we have faith that God will lead us and show us the way if we keep paying attention, as the Magi did, at all stages of our journey? What we are called to do, flowing from our growing skill of observation, is to notice each of the signposts on the path and follow the directions that can lead us to life and freedom by paying closer attention, pondering our next steps, praying for God's help, and putting one foot in front of the other. These steps may be helpful in moving us forward if we feel called by God to make some kind of significant life change that might involve varying degrees of struggle, confusion, and uncertainty. Whatever the situation may be, we may be feeling invited to trust the reliable signposts on our path. That way we can take the necessary next steps that will give some momentum to our choices.

The wise travellers found the Christ Child in humble surroundings in the manger, and it is precisely there that they opened and shared their gifts in deep reverence since they had been so 'overjoyed at seeing the star' (v.10). This star had led them to the house where 'they saw the child with Mary his mother' (v.11). This gift of quality of presence can, at first glance, seem to be so simple for us to understand. Yet how often might we wish that we were somewhere else? When we compare our lives with the seemingly better and more desirable situations of others, we can experience a restlessness of spirit. This can cause discontent and unhappiness since we are under the illusion that our true happiness is yet to come in some other and better place. Perhaps what God most longs for us to know is that, when we discern that we are following God's lead in our life situation and vocation, we are exactly where God wants us to find our true happiness and abundant peace.

So often spiritual seekers of all ages and ways of life think that God must want something spectacular and beyond their reach in order to prove that they have some kind of worthwhile gift to share. Can we dare to believe that God wants us to be happy in our giving from the depths of who we are?

The Magi had heard and intended to follow King Herod's earlier request: 'Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage' (v.8). And yet, the three wise travellers later heeded their dream exhorting them to do otherwise. Since the Magi deemed the message in the dream to be of God, they subsequently allowed their next steps to follow this dream, even if it meant causing displeasure to King Herod. This kind of fluidity of spirit seems essential to good discernment, especially when there are contrasting voices clamouring for our attention and choices. In order to attain this level of discernment, it might be worthwhile to ask: How do we 'return home' after our encounters with Christ, and yet allow ourselves to be forever changed by these encounters? How do we keep growing in our spiritual

journeys? How do we keep learning about ourselves in ways that hold the potential to deepen God's call to holiness as we find our way each day of our lives? As the Magi can well testify, our return trip home indeed finds us transformed beyond our imagining, since our journey to draw ever closer to Christ Jesus renders us changed for a lifetime.

