



**A STAR**

From the eastern mountains, pressing on, they come,  
Wise men in their wisdom, to his humble home;  
Stirred by deep devotion, hasting from afar,  
Ever journeying onward, guided by a star.

No one knows who they really were, or how far they had actually travelled, these three mysterious men who navigated their way to a foreign land by the light of this bright new star. Wide deserts, narrow mountain passes, teeming towns and lonely dwelling places - they probably passed through all of these on their long and hopeful star-journey; travellers with a purpose, searching for truth.

We have been making a long star journey of our own - not following, but orbiting. All of us here on the planet Earth have just completed yet another full orbit of the sun. Clinging by the soles of our feet to Earth's gravity we have travelled more than 586 million miles in the past 365 days, making our usual journey through the solar system. We didn't have to navigate, the solar system has it all worked out, but where did it lead us?

We know where the Magi's star journey took them:

To Joseph's house in Bethlehem, with torches all a-flame  
Three kings who rode on camel back, turbaned and jewelled came:  
For Joseph's house in Bethlehem cradled a sleeping child:  
Three kings bowed low before his crib and Mary, mother, smiled.

These carols may not be familiar to you, because the feast of the Epiphany only gets one day of celebration now, and paradoxically, it is the day we traditionally use for dismantling our lights and stars and symbols for the celebration of Christmas, the birth of the Light of the World.

Yet the Epiphany carols describe the star - the journey of the Magi in ways which enlighten and inspire us. They give us images of color, riches, splendor:

And now they open treasures rare that Indian silks enfold,  
Of myrrh that sweetly scents the air, of frankincense and gold.

Every year we hear the explanation of Epiphany as the "Revelation to the Gentiles" - those of us who live in 'far off lands' and at 'the ends of the earth.' These three men, stand-ins for us at the Crib: they stand there in our stead as God-parents do, or Confirmation sponsors. They represent all of us in the far flung corners of the world, and all of us who live in far off times which they



could never have imagined, but I think that they are also very powerful symbols of Spred catechists. They are lights which we can follow.

Look at what they did.

They noticed the new star, studied its meaning. They were alert to the significance of this sign, willing to answer its call, to follow its lead. Every person who became a Spred catechist has been alert to a spoken plea or a bulletin notice, heeded it, considered it, and followed it up, setting out on a journey of discovery, a journey toward the light.

The Magi went together on their journey. Whether they all worked together and set out as a team, or whether they set out individually and then decided to pool their resources, we will never know, but they seem to have travelled together in agreement. There is strength in numbers, and safety, and co-operation, and supportive companionship. Even at the first Spred meeting we attend there is supportive companionship to help us undertake the task.

Co-operation is the very essence of our service as catechists; it is what makes each session possible and give the work a secure foundation within the community of faith.

Following the brightness of the mysterious star, the Magi crossed "field and fountain, moor and mountain" because they had found writings which linked with their calculations and gave them insight as to the significance of their guide: they knew what it was they were seeking: they knew it was someone of special importance to the future of their worlds. They wanted to reach this person.

The Eastern kings the star have seen  
they hasten on their way;  
The time they've watched and waiting been  
the dawning of that day, -  
The dawning of that day of grace,  
the gleam of Jacob's star,  
The Virgin's child of Jesse's race,  
whom prophets saw afar.

We may not have such difficult journeys to reach our Spred groups, but we set out in hope that we will see some glimmer of Christ's light to guide us further on our way.

When the Magi finally reached their real destination, they acted in a very different way than they had done with Herod.

Though Joseph's house in Bethlehem was meanly built and small  
Four kings were sheltered neath its roof, and one was Lord of all.  
In Joseph's house in Bethlehem, they worshipped and adored:  
Four kings within that house were met and one was Christ the Lord.

These men of intellectual importance submitted to a baby who as yet no learning, no speech: these men of importance submitted to an unknown infant: these men of wealth submitted to a child in a very simple home. When we reach our Spred groups, we do the same kind of thing. As we take off our coats we also lay aside our intellectual ability, our professional standing, our

**TO LEAD**

skilfulness, our social reputation, and we submit ourselves to the needs of those people in the group who do not enter far into these realms of life.

Coming into the session rooms, we change the pace and tone of our actions to match those of our friends whose needs are different from our own. We allow their needs to dictate what we do and how we do it. And we watch for signs which will help us to understand the significance of what we undertake.

That we do catch glimpses of the light of God's mystery is not surprising, since we are following the example of those first seekers of the Word: that we learn to recognise them as our group journeys onward together is a privilege and a gift. Unlike the Magi, we receive gifts when we gather together in the light of God's Word. It is when we gather in our special sacred place of prayer that we are most aware of the gifts that are offered to us, for there we clearly see the unique responses which are made by those whom the world thinks of as 'less able'. A reaction which is different from everyone else's, a gesture which has not been used before, even a sign or a turn of the head, can awaken us to a meaningful response. If we are alert to these responses, we find ourselves pondering them during the days that follow. Our awareness of their significance is deepened, faith is strengthened and our own journey is lit just a little bit more.

We come to treasure the presence of each person in the group. The journey to the Spred group becomes a journey toward the light. It becomes another kind of star journey. Not one of great distances or cosmic treasure, not one of renown or obvious signs, but one that takes us, nonetheless, toward a wonderful destination. T.S. Eliot in his poem, "The Journey of the Magi" has them start with "A cold coming we had of it..." and that is true of us too. When we return after the Christmas break, we are still in the darkness and the weather is usually terrible: little chance of seeing any stars through the mist or clouds or snow...but we go. We go because there are bright stars for us to meet, stars which call us forth. The stars which draw us onward on this journey are all the other members of our groups, whose shared efforts, shared responses, shared presence enrich the meaning of whatever we ourselves have to offer. The travel guides for this journey are, perhaps the people we would least have expected to be our leaders on the path of faith.

Lord Christ you have a secret word for each one's soul, though oft unheard;  
So guide our wandering steps we pray that in our hearts thy word may be  
Abiding, Abiding.

Maybe it is significant that at the end of the feast of the Epiphany we take down the stars and lights, the signs of our celebration of Christmas, because the message of the Christmas season is that while we celebrate and rejoice in the coming of Christ, and recall all those who were present, the time has come to follow our own stars. All those whom the Lord sends to cross our paths and change our direction just a little, enabling us to see the light better, see our way more clearly, and give thanks for the gifts we receive along the way. Perhaps the next time the Feast of the Epiphany comes round, we could all celebrate just a little bit longer and look for ways in which we can be inspired to look for the true Light in our lives.

As with gladness, men of old, did the guiding star behold,  
As with joy they hailed it's light, leading onwards, beaming bright  
So most gracious God may we evermore be led to thee.

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