

They Returned To Their Own Country

T. S. Eliot's brilliant poem *The Journey of the Magi* recounts the memories of one of the returned magi, who had visited the baby Jesus, some years after the event. He tells of the *hard* journey they had going, and the feelings and thoughts that he now had, all those years later. He is not disillusioned, bitter, he is not reacting against the positive experience that he once had ... but it was some years ago, and nothing quite like it has come again; and the land he lives in is alien, disinterested.

Sometimes it's like that, in the Christian life; one hears of people who had a very powerful experience with which their Christian life began (we might call it a 'conversion experience'), but nothing quite like it has occurred again, at least, not after the first few months. Then, they often face, or seem to experience, a long, hard, slog in which they are clinging on to memories, aided, perhaps, by a rational knowledge that what they have, or once embraced, actually tells them the truth about things – despite present feelings ... (when Prime Minister David Cameron famously said Christian faith was like the constantly emerging and fading of the ... some radio station's signal, when travelling in the Chiltern Hills, he was of course referring to religious *feelings* – well we all experience *that!*).

I have read that some Christian spiritual writers claim that powerful experiences, and answers to prayer, are very strong and frequent at the beginning of the Christian life, but not for much of the rest of it. Hanging on, in effect, is what many of us have to do for much of the time, and here, the presence of other Christians around us is so vital (was it C. H. Spurgeon who gave a friend a demonstration of this, by taking a single glowing coal from the fire, and seeing it cool and die, alone, on the fender?). Just like the magus in Eliot's poem, we also live in a *strange*, alien land, surrounded – at best - by disinterest.

But unlike the magus, we have Christmas each year, a time when, despite our feelings and any spiritual *accidie*, we can be brought, once again, powerfully to the knowledge that God came/has come into the world, and that here he has 'set up shop' (in traditional Bible versions, 'tabernacled'), never to depart, neither from our world, nor our lives, since whatever our own feelings and thoughts, he will never let go of us; and Christmas also teaches us a lesson from the *negative* side, it shows us the desperate, fraught madness of people frantically trying to scrimp satisfactions and pleasures from material, sensual, things alone, perhaps clinging to hopes, however good in themselves, for world peace and personal harmonies and joys. And Christmas also teaches us, annually, of another country, to which we will surely return, never to leave. Christmas worship – its carols, Bible readings, and liturgy – with all its magic, hints shyly at our true homeland, when travels to Bethlehem will cease.

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