

The Journey of the Wise Men
by the Rev. Eric H. Carswell
December 25, 2018

“...we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” (Matthew 2:2)

More than 2000 years ago, in the ancient land of Syria there were a number of men who patiently awaited the long prophesied coming of the Messiah. They studied the night sky looking for the star that would be the sign of His coming, as others before them had done for hundreds, even thousands of years. Over the centuries these wise men hoped to witness that promised star. On that first Christmas, the patient watching of these wise men was finally rewarded. There was no doubt in their minds once they had seen the star. The promised king and Messiah had been born. Upon making the necessary preparations, the wise men began the long journey to Judea to worship the newborn king and bring presents worthy of Him.

We have a sense that their journey was not one of external compulsion or a matter of internal guilt. The wise men bought their rich presents and journeyed the great distance that they did because they wanted to. The accomplishment of their quest, finding the young child, Jesus, worshiping Him and giving their presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh was as great a fulfillment as they sought. We can imagine the sense of peace they felt as they journeyed home. They received no external reward for their journey. They knew enough to recognize the importance of the infant Jesus' birth. Perhaps their faith in the Messiah and Savior, coupled with their finding Him not in Jerusalem as they expected, would have helped them to recognize that the newborn king would not appear before the world like other kings. His kingdom would not be of this world.

No, the quest of the wise men was not one of external compulsion or a matter of internal guilt. Likewise when we really understand what the Lord asks of us, we can come to see that a good life is more fulfilling than anything else we could imagine. Consider for instance, a completely foreign observer might think that all of our preparations for Christmas, including decorations, buying and wrapping of presents and visiting with each other, were a tremendous bother and sacrifice for us to make each year. An observer might think that our celebration was something we felt driven to. But does this ring true with our experience? Certainly there can be frustrations connected with Christmas and we might wish that some aspects of our celebrations were less fraught with tension or lack of time or other problems. But all in all don't we find great fulfillment in our celebration of Christmas? We don't celebrate Christmas as a matter of duty. If anything, for many people the difficulty of Christmas comes more from wanting to fit too much into their celebration--each different part of our celebration has such meaning and value for us that we don't want to do anything less--even though all together, Christmas may become a very busy a season.

Our celebration of Christmas carries its own fulfillment much as the journey of the wise men to Bethlehem carried its own fulfillment. Such is the Lord's plan for all the good things that He calls us to do. Some look at living a good life as a matter of oppressive duty. Certainly a person whose life is dominated by evil desires would think so. But from an angel's point of view, he always gets to do what he wants to and he feels great satisfaction from the variety of things he does each day. While we have a sense of this perspective from some parts of our lives, such as celebrating Christmas, few would claim that all of their life was one of equal fulfillment.

Each of us has parts of our lives that do not come easily or happily--parts that if we do get ourselves to do what is good, it is a matter of duty or guilt or fear of some consequence if we don't do it. Perhaps it is some part of the duties that life regularly places before us. Perhaps it is in some part of our relation with our spouse, our parents, our siblings, close friends, or co-workers. Many people have a difficult time dealing with other people's spiritual and natural failings. We can become impatient and angry over what we see as destructive choices, clear irrationality, irresponsibility, laziness or even lack of charity on another person's part. Our response to them can be one that vents our impatience or anger without trying to do that person good, but rather satisfy our own feelings. Trying to deal constructively with such a person may seem like an incredible burden--one that we would just as soon avoid.

So long as we live our lives looking down on others who don't seem as "adult" as they should be or dealing with them angrily, impatiently or by overriding them and dictating to them what they should do, we are like all the people who never noticed the Lord's birth when it first occurred so long ago. Our own lives will continue to go on with their daily frustrations and irritations--with many times when we either don't do the Lord's will or don't feel like we want to do our charitable duty. There is, however, a part in each of our minds that is searching the spiritual darkness of such states with a hope of change in the future. There is a part of our minds like the wise men looking for the star that promises the Messiah. This part of our mind is formed from some of the knowledge that we have gained from Lord's Word (see *Arcana Caelestia* 3249, 3762, 10177) and the star that is sought also represents something that we can learn from the Word (*Apocalypse Explained* 422:20, *True Christian Religion* 205) only in this case perhaps we should picture this star-like knowledge as the one or two most powerful passages or statements that catch our eye and bring about a change in what we have been doing. Just as the wise men's lives were profoundly changed when they saw the star that heralded the birth of the Lord, so our lives can be changed by certain fundamental insights.

But insight by itself, can be a passing state of mind. If mere intellectual curiosity had motivated the wise men's watching of the night sky, the star that proclaim the Lord's birth, would have been an interesting event--one to be discussed and debated, valuable perhaps to enhance one's prestige, but not enough to bring about a journey of many weeks or months. If mere intellectual curiosity had motivated the wise men's watching of the night sky, they would not have prepared their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and given them away to a young child they had never seen before nor would probably ever see again. If we truly have a part of our mind that is searching for the wisdom we need to lead our live better, it will not be content with mere intellectual insight. It will call our attention to the implications of what we have recognized. It will call us to act differently from what we have in the past. It may have us realize that our perspective and past actions in dealing with others have been at best poor, and at worst, just plain evil.

The Lord promises us that when we minister wisely to the spiritual poverty, hunger, nakedness, sickness, and imprisoned states of mind that we see in those around us, even those apparently least deserving of such consideration, we are ministering to the Lord Himself. Learning how to minister wisely to the states of spiritual need we meet is a challenge and perhaps an even greater challenge is developing the insight that reminds us that the foibles and more serious flaws of others arise from this spiritual poverty, hunger and so on. We need to be reminded that the Lord is present before us in this person needing to be served when previously we would have thought we just dealing with an unreasonable adult or whatever.

The wise men prepared gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to present to the baby Jesus. These gifts are an image of all the good things that we can do for another--"every good from first to last" (*Apocalypse Explained* 324:9). The gold is an image of celestial good or deep expressions of love. The frankincense is image of spiritual good or actions or words that arise from wisdom, and the myrrh is an image of all of the tangible ways we can serve another in this world (ibid, *Arcana Caelestia* 1171:5). When we turn our minds to how we can genuinely serve what is good in another person, we can recognize a wide variety of ways to accomplish our goal. Different situations will call forth different gifts that we can appropriately give.

Unlike the simple shepherds who tended their flocks just outside of Bethlehem the night of the first Christmas, the wise men had a long journey to make before they could present their gifts to the Lord born into the world. So likewise in our lives, there are parts of our mind that are already near to the Lord's nascent presence within us and others that are quite distant though also called to be in His presence. The Lord has much to teach us each day that we live in this world. He has many parts of our mind that He would lead to Himself, as the wise men were led first to Jerusalem which is an image of the ideas we can learn and their source in the Word (*Apocalypse Explained* 422:20) but this was not where the newborn child was to be found. Jerusalem, when governed by Herod, could provide instruction, but we, like the wise men, must spiritual travel further. Bethlehem was their real goal and it represents not so much an intellectual insight as it is wisdom motivated by love (*Arcana Caelestia* 4594). Like the wise men traveling on a long journey, some parts of our minds will draw near the Lord only very gradually.

As we consider the parts of our lives that are far distant from the Lord and yet should come into His presence, we might feel weighed down with the prospect of the spiritual journey that must take place within our lives. When we consider the gifts of good will and wise service that the Lord calls us to give to those whom we feel least like benefiting, we may have parts of our mind that resent the sacrifice such gifts are going to require. When these thoughts arise, we can turn our mind's eye back to the wonder of the wise men's part in the Christmas story. They did not take their journey with loathing or resent the expense of the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that they carried to the newborn king. The wise men journeyed the great distance that they did and bought their rich presents to the Lord because they wanted to.

So too there is a part of our mind--perhaps a small part, like a few people compared to the world population--that can become the focus of our thoughts as we consider the spiritual journeys that the Lord calls us to undertake. This part of our mind can remind us of the nature of heavenly life. It can help us to realize that serving the spiritual needs in those whom we meet is what a part of us really wants to do and that in the long run, it is greatest source of true peace and joy. Just as we can know that all the preparations and activities of Christmas are not just some chore that we unwillingly allow to interfere with normal routines, so too we can realize that daily opportunities throughout the year to feel the blessings of the Christmas season are not an undesirable burden, but rather are a source of great joy.

The Lord would like the good news of that first Christmas day to fill our whole lives. He is the Creator, Savior and Redeemer for each of us. He works with infinite love, wisdom and patience to lead us ever closer to Himself. May we pray for a strengthening of the part of our minds that is like the wise men--the part that looks daily for signs of the Lord's coming. And may we pray that many times in the coming year that this part of our mind journeys forth like that of the wise men

so long ago, echoing their words--" ...we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him." AMEN

Lessons: Matthew 2:1-12 *Arcana Caelestia* 9293:3

Matthew 2:1-12

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

³ When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

⁵ So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ⁶ *'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'*"

⁷ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

***Arcana Caelestia* 9293:3**

Wise men from the east came, and they offered gifts to the new-born Lord - gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:1, 11.

"Gold, frankincense, and myrrh" means all forms of the good of love and faith offered to the Lord, "gold" being forms of the good of love, "frankincense" forms of the good of faith, and "myrrh" forms of both in external things. The reason why "wise men from the east" offered them was that among some in the east there remained from ancient times the knowledge and wisdom of the people of old, which consisted in their understanding and seeing heavenly and Divine realities within things in the world and on earth. For it was well known to the ancients that all things had a correspondence and were representative, and therefore had a spiritual meaning, as is also evident from the gentiles' oldest books and their monuments. This was how they knew that gold, frankincense, and myrrh meant the forms of good that should be offered to God. They knew also from their prophecies, which were those of the Ancient Church, that the Lord would come into the world, at which time a star would appear to them, about which also Balaam, who likewise was one of "the sons of the east", prophesied. "A star" furthermore means concepts or knowledge of internal goodness and truth, which come from the Lord.