

Church of the Crossroads
Epiphany
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WHAT MADE THE WISE MEN WISE?

Matthew 2:1–12

For every person who is wise, there are probably nine hundred and ninety-nine who are merely clever. I might add that a good part of the reason the world is in such a mess is that there is so much cleverness out there, including the clever person so many of us see in the mirror.

Speaking of cleverness, we do not have to look very far to see it. We need only consider the technological revolution. *Hawai'i Business Today* (1/5/98), in an article about Bill Gates, reports that among other devices, we can now produce “pens, watches and everyday things that can tap into the Internet and show real-time tidbits of information, like news headlines, weather updates or sports scores.” So now we can go through the world with an I-Pod stuck in our ears and a wristwatch that can supply us with all the information we need. The cleverness of human beings does not stop with technology. Consider a Vice-President who urges a nation to go to war under false premises, only to make it possible for his own corporation (Haliburton) to profit from that same war. Now, that’s clever.

Clearly, clever people are educated people, but it is also true that education alone cannot make a person wise. William Sloane Coffin once said in an Epiphany Sermon that “the wisdom of those who are not educated is matched only by the folly of those who are.” (1/10/82)

Perhaps it can be said that the cleverness of people, which is so obvious in our culture, is an end result of the Age of Reason inaugurated in the 18th century by the likes of Diderot, Voltaire, and Kant. The Age of Reason flowered in what came to be known as the Enlightenment. In its celebration of reason, the Enlightenment succeeded in convincing human beings that reason alone could bring about the world we desire. As a consequence, religion was relegated to a separate place in human experience. Religious faith became something practiced on Sunday mornings by fewer and fewer people, while science and reason dominated the rest of the week.

Of course, ethically speaking, reason has gotten us nowhere. Even Hitler was clever in creating his perfect plan to exterminate the Jews. He even went so far as to think up the idea of burning the bodies of those who were put to death in the gas chambers so that there would be no trace of evidence that the gas chambers existed in the first place!

Increasingly, those who are wise, rather than simply clever, are beginning to understand that in spite of reason's promise to produce the good society, reason has been found to be bankrupt as a basis for ethical behavior. Or, as Curtis White in his book *The Spirit of Disobedience* argues, we still find ourselves paying homage to reason and cleverness, even though we now find ourselves in a spiritually bankrupt society in which ethics has been set aside in favor of greed and superficiality and selfishness. In our world, he says, it has become hardly possible, except on a personal level, to practice the golden rule Jesus taught: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." On a personal level, we might be able to practice the ethic taught by Jesus; now, however, on a societal level, we can no longer claim to do so. It would be best for us to cease and desist from any attempt to refer to our society as a Christian society. It would also be best for us to stop believing that rational thought can be the basis for ethical behavior.

What Curtis White is calling for and what the Christian community should hope for is a new search for the deeper dimensions of life. And this is precisely what made the wise men wise.

The wise men were wise because they sought after the meaning and deep purposes of life. They were not satisfied with just being clever. As educated as they were, they searched the heavens for a sign and they found a star and the star led them to a manger in Bethlehem. In order to get there, they had to bypass the cleverness of Herod and not lose sight of their quest. Their intent was not to go to Bethlehem in order to study the child, but to worship. Their search was for life's deepest meaning.

It is said that after worshiping the child, they returned home "by another way." I like that. They re-entered their lives with a new understanding, that at the very center of life's meaning there is to be found a God who in love comes to be with humankind, and who in turn invites humankind—you and me—to leave our cleverness and our belief in reason behind and become the loving human beings we were created to be.

This requires a kind of death—the death of our reliance on our cleverness, the death of our selfish ways, the death of all superficiality. It is not an easy transformation. T. S. Eliot wrote about how difficult it is in his poem *Journey of the Magi*. At the close of the poem, one of the magi, years later back at home, reflects upon his experience.

*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.¹*

Seeking to be wise, we take the journey towards Bethlehem and God's love for us and for the world. There, we discover that we need to change (it is, truly, a kind of death), and once we do change, we find ourselves no longer satisfied with the world as we find it. In the poem's terms, we are no longer at ease in the old dispensation.

W. H. Auden captures the same theme in his prose/poem, *For the Time Being*. At the close of the poem, the narrator speaks:

*Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—*

¹ T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 69.

*To love all of our relatives, and in general
 Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
 As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
 To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
 Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
 Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
 The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
 The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
 And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
 Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
 Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
 Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
 Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
 Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry
 And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,
 And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.
 It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets
 Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten
 The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen
 The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
 The time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.²*

How quickly, it seems, that we can leave the wonder and mystery of Christmas behind and return to our rational, clever society “where Euclid’s geometry and Newton’s mechanics would account for our experience.” Yes, for those of us who have seen the Child, “the time being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.” In such a time, the task is, surely, to hold fast to God’s love for us and for all, which has been shown to us in the birth of the Child, and by God’s grace embody that love more and more in our lives and in the life of our world. That by God’s good grace we can do. Wisdom herself demands nothing less.

² W. H. Auden, “*For the Time Being*,” *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945) 465.