

Three Pastoral Sermons on the Nativity, II: How to be Human, Now

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Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

What does Christmas mean for you? I will admit that I am very fond of Christmas. I like the parties, the excuse to commune with friends whom I don't see often enough. Even in this year, when we're not doing those things, I still like the decorations, and I like the music, and I like warm fires on cold winter nights.

Today is, of course, the third day of Christmas. I don't know about you, but even for me, things are looking a bit tired around the house. I have become less diligent about watering our Christmas tree, and a good many gifts remain piled on side tables, awaiting their proper distribution into shelves, cupboards, and drawers.

The popular sentiment at this point in the holiday season is one of fatigue, of egg-nog sodden weariness with Christmas cheer. And yet, by tradition, we have nine more days to go; the Christmas dénouement awaits. It is not until the Epiphany – January 6 – that we will mark the arrival of the Wise Men on the Nativity scene. The gospels do not specify that there were three of them, only that three was the number of their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden includes the Wise Men among the *dramatis personae* of his 1942 Christmas oratorio, entitled "For the Time Being." When nearing Bethlehem, these Wise Men express their own weariness with the holiday season:

The weather has been awful,
The countryside is dreary,
Marsh, jungle, rock; and echoes mock,
Calling our hope unlawful;
But a silly song can help along
Yours ever and sincerely:

At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
But have only the vaguest idea of why we are what we are
To discover how to be human now

Is the reason we follow this star.¹

The first bit is amusing and evocative, and saying “the weather has been awful,” is certainly a very English preoccupation.² The second bit of that stanza is, however, an Auden original, and it should give us pause. *But we have only the vaguest idea of why we are what we are / To discover how to be human now / Is the reason we follow this star.*

Their quest rings true for us, I think, even 75 years later: *To discover how to be human now / Is the reason we follow this star.* The irony that “Wise Men” have only the “vague idea” of why they “are what they are” should not be lost on us, especially those of us who think we have it all figured out, thank you very much.

The writer behind the popular advice column “Ask Polly” wrote in a book published a couple of years ago that “From the time we are born, the world tells us lies about who we are, how we should live, and what we should sacrifice to cross some imaginary finish line to success and happiness... Some of these poisons lie in the most unexpected places: among our principles and values, in our private hopes and dreams, in our fears and anxieties about how we should be living and what we might never achieve, in our long-held notions of what we do and don’t deserve and what we should and should not accept.”³ In other words, the world tells us lies about how to be human now, how to be – in Auden’s words – truthful, living, loving.⁴

Auden’s so-called Wise Men find no satisfaction in such lies, not really. If they did, they would not be looking, seeking, braving the disagreeable climate to follow a star whose promise they do not understand, which they can only intuit might offer a glimpse of something better than everything else they know. When, after offering their gifts to the Christ Child, the Wise Men return to their own country by “another way,” this is not a matter of taking the Baltimore-Washington Parkway instead of I-95.⁵ Their encounter with Jesus Christ has caused a revolution inside of them: it’s not that they pay no mind to old King Herod; it’s that they return home, changed men. They fell on their knees before the Lord Jesus: that’s what makes them Wise.

In this morning’s second lesson, St Paul writes to the Christian church in Galatia that “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent

¹ W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 28.

² T.S. Eliot’s 1930 poem “The Journey of the Magi” opens with a similar commentary on the weather, and Eliot was quoting a 1622 Christmas Day sermon preached by Lancelot Andrewes before King James I.

³ Heather Havrilesky, *What If This Were Enough? : Essays* (New York, Doubleday, 2018), xi.

⁴ Auden, *For the Time Being*, 27-28.

⁵ Matthew 2:12

the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God."⁶

A little later in his letter, Paul will describe for the Galatians what it looks like to receive "the Spirit of [God's] Son into our hearts": "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law."⁷

Those of us living in the 21st century don't usually ask many questions about Jewish law, as Paul's readers would have done. But, as the Ask Polly columnist reminds us, our world supplies its own orthodoxies, its own laws about who we should be and how we should live, its own laws of how to be human, now. At Christmas, the Word made Flesh who is Jesus Christ comes to us unbidden, to redeem us, to rescue us from the power of the lies of the world.

So what does Christmas mean for you? Why do you follow this star? If it's just the parties, and the satisfying melodies of the Christmas carols, and the pleasures of food and drink, that's well enough. There's nothing wrong with that.

But the Wise Men came, not knowing why, and left by another way. They left transformed, having found in the Christ Child the beginning of the answer to their question, of how to lead lives of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... that is to say: of how to be human.

This Christmas, Christ is showing you the way: the way out of confusion, the way into a real life and a full humanity. This Christmas, Christ is knocking at the door of *your* hearts. Will you receive him?⁸

AMEN.

⁶ Galatians 4:4-7

⁷ Galatians 5:22-23

⁸ See: "O little town of Bethlehem," verse 3.