

The Huffington Post compiled a list of what they named 'idiotic (but real) travel complaints.'

--"it's lazy of the local shopkeepers in Puerto Vallarta to close in the afternoons. I often needed to buy things during siesta time – this should be banned."

--On my holiday to Goa in India, I was disgusted to find that every restaurant served curry. I don't like spicy food."

--"Although the brochure said that there was a fully equipped kitchen, there was no egg slicer in the drawers."

--"The beach was too sandy. We had to clean everything when we returned to our room."

--"No one told us there would be fish in the ocean. The children were scared!" (retrieved March 27, 2017)

Today we have one of the most famous travel stories of all time. But artists probably have had more influence on our understanding of it than Matthew the Evangelist. Painters have shown us that there were 3 kings, one of them often dressed like a Muslim. Many depictions include one black king and some artists have portrayed them as representing youth, adulthood and the elderly. The hymn 'We Three Kings,' the first widely popular Christmas carol written in the United States, has helped to cement the interpretation of the gifts they brought as gold for Christ as king, incense for His divinity and myrrh as a sign of His future death and burial. The notion that their names were Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar began some 500 years AFTER the birth of Jesus along with the legend that they came from Persia, India and Babylonia. All of those ideas have their place in popular piety and thus real gospel worth even though they are not part of Matthew's story.

When we look at Matthew's text, we find none of these details fully corroborated. The assumption that there were 3 is based only on the fact that Matthew named 3 gifts – offerings which could have come from the hands of 2 people or a whole caravan which included women and children. Matthew did speak of the magi (magos is the singular) in the plural, so we know he intended us to think of more than one person, but he does not indicate what the gifts symbolized nor does he name the visitors or their places of origin except to say that they came from the east.

So what DOES Matthew really tell us – and why? Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus and the angels' message to Joseph. Until Chapter 2, Matthew hadn't even mentioned where Jesus was born and that news comes in connection with the visit of the Magi. Remember that Matthew was writing for a primarily Jewish audience – so he began by concentrating only on the fact that Jesus was a descendant of Abraham and David, 2 of their most famous ancestors. He then only mentions Jesus' birth in connection with the fact that it took place in Bethlehem in the days of King Herod.

Bethlehem had the curious and typically scriptural fame of being a very little place with a connection to a very big name in Jewish history -- it was the city of the shepherd-kind, David. The fact that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod tells historians that it happened before Herod's death in the year 4 BC, so our dating of the birth of Jesus is at least 4 years off. That detail also tells historians and Matthew's first audience that Jesus was born in a terrifying time of history. Jesus, the 'king of the Jews' was born during the reign of a ruler so despotic that he had even arranged the murder of his own sons because he feared they were plotting against him. Which prompted the quip at the time that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son. All of this

historical information provides the equivalent of ominous background music to the story what was about to come.

As Matthew tells the story, when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem they began to talk about the star and asked around about the newly born king of the Jews. This was Matthew's subtle explanation that the wisdom of the Gentiles goes only so far; the Magi knew that someone important had been born, but they had to turn to the prophecies of the chosen people to understand it more fully. Matthew also uses this story to contrast the religiously open Magi to the leaders of the chosen people who, although they could read the prophecies, exhibited little or no curiosity about the magi and what their star might portend.

The story goes on with Herod's fearful inquiry about the origins of the Messiah and his request that the Magi inform him of everything they learn. Throughout, Matthew is weaving a story that highlights the contrast between Jesus, the one born as king, and Herod, Rome's paranoid puppet king.

Matthew's infancy narrative will end with the holy family's flight into Egypt and eventual return to Galilee. In recounting this story, Matthew has woven a Gospel in miniature. He shows us that Jesus is the legitimate son of David, and more. He foreshadows the conflicts Jesus will have with both Roman and Jewish authorities who collude to defend themselves from the threat He poses to their exercise of power. The story both summarizes the Gospel and brings the Christmas season to a fitting end by reminding us that, like the Magi, we must seek signs of God's activity in our own moment of history. (all take from CELEBRATION, Jan 7, 2018, p. 15). I know that's a bit much for background – but it's so rich I couldn't resist!

Second, so what does this story have to say to us? This is John Shea's reflection on the wise men: They call us Wise Men/ but we are not smart in the usual ways./ We cannot make a chair./ Our soups are regrettable./ We forget important facts./ How long, again, can camels go without water?/ Big pictures rouse us -- / how all things are held together/ even as they look apart,/ how an unseen logic directs/ apparently random events./ For us, nothing is at it seems./ Appearance is not truth./ Conjunctions, symmetries, balances between heaven and earth capture our detective attention./ A star moves across the sky/ and we are in the saddle,/ convinced the birth of the predicted has occurred./ This fascination with deeper meaning/ is how we choose our gifts./ We bring gold – for he will bring people into their true worth./ We bring incense – for he will reconcile people to God./ We bring myrrh – for his death will be a path to new life./ We know who he is./ In finding him, we found ourselves/ That is why we are in your creches./ We hope our discovery spurs the search that lurks beneath your surface/ beneath the practical plans/ and minor achievements/ that promised you more than they were able to deliver./ The truth is the child is waiting to be found – if you know how to look./ How do you search for meaning? (CHRISTMAS POEMS, p. 50-52)

So how do we search for meaning in life? And where does that lead us? At about the time we become aware of the world around us and are able to reflect upon it – we begin to understand that it's a pretty big mystery. We have unanswered questions at either end of life, and the part in between is not simple either. If we try to dominate the details, we will find life to be a frustrating and unsatisfying experience from start to finish. We have to surrender to the fact that we are on a journey toward somewhere, someone, and we'll get there sooner or later. Those are not the most precise directions we could have, but they are, for the person of faith, enough.

Because the one thing we are sure of is the ONE we are following. If we follow Christ's way, we cannot be lost. If we trust in His plan, the unpredictability of worldly variables will not shake us. As Goethe said: "We never go so far as when we don't know where we are going!" But from a faith perspective, we can quote King Alfred, who said "To see thee, O Christ is the Beginning and the End./ Thou goes before me and thou bearest

me. Thou art the journey and the Journey's End." (THE LONG WALK, HOMILETICS, May-June 2011, p. 22) We are stones being built into a design we cannot see from our end of the quarry. The weight of our own destinies may at times be burdensome to us, but not to the builder who knows precisely how to shape and place us. In His hands, we will assume the perfect contour for our position in the structure, and where we wind up could not be more right. Letting go, even for a humble stone, requires confidence in the force of gravity. How much kinder, wiser, and more loving is the force that shapes us. (Adapted from ALICE CAMILLE, in PREPARE THE WORD, April 24, 2005)

Third, when we read the story of the magi we are reading our own story – our journey to God. Like the magi, we are called to God from far off places; we must struggle through the deserts and ask of others the way. Like the magi, we must make our way through indifference, hostility and politics until we find the God we are to worship as Savior-King. Our journey's path moves us through childhood, through youthful strength marked by a lot of anxiety and on through the maturity of age, through the occasional festive days as well as through many, many mundane and uneventful ones. Our journey will take us through heights and through misery, through virtuous times and through sinful failures, through love and through disillusion. On and on our path stretches out before us, on and on from the morning of life to the evening of death.

Although we know that God is the goal of our pilgrimage, the way to God sometimes seems all too far and all too difficult. Nevertheless, and by God's own promise, sincere seekers are enabled and empowered to find God. Says Karl Rahner: "in grace God wills to be not merely the one who is always a little farther beyond every place that the pilgrim travels, but rather, to be the one who can REALLY be found, eye to eye, heart to heart, by that small seeking creature with the eternal heart whom we call the human being." Isn't that beautiful? We are creatures with eternal hearts called human beings – seek a God who WILL be found!

And that's why we are forever on a journey – the journey of the human heart to God. We need to forget – but not regret – what we must leave behind. Because the journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step, so we set out with hearts made bold by prayer and eyes made sharp and clear with hope. We also need to realize that as we make the journey that moves us nearer and nearer to God, we are, thereby, also drawing nearer and nearer to one another. So we need to be good to our fellow travelers on the way – so that when we celebrate this feast once again next year, we may all have moved nearer to the God who wills to be found and who is not only the goal of all our life's journeying, but also our guide, light, companion and our sustenance along the way. Happy traveling my fellow pilgrims! AMEN (Adapted from Rahner, THE GREAT CHURCH YEAR, citation not given)