



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, January 16, 2005

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Epiphany Procession

at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Matthew 2:1-12

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TRAVERSING AFAR

Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Just over twenty years ago I sat in his room in the suburban Philadelphia hospital, conversing with the eminent classical scholar, Richmond Lattimore, whose translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the pride of Bryn Mawr College and remain venerable standards. Professor Lattimore was in his mid eighties, recovering from an operation.

For decades Dr. Lattimore had attended the church of which I was the fairly new rector, going along every Sunday with his devout wife; but he never joined her at the altar rail. It seemed he had certain reservations. In retirement years he had translated the four Gospels, the Acts, and the Book of Revelation from the New Testament, and he had treated us at the church to a charming lecture on the experience of translating Scripture. He had made a point of complimenting the evangelist Saint Luke for his elegant Greek.

In the hospital room our conversation took a turn that brought religious issues to the fore. Something made me take the plunge. "Dr. Lattimore, I know you don't receive Communion, but here I feel remiss in not asking you: Would you like me to bring you Communion?"

"I would love to receive Communion, but I can't," he said with a gentle smile. "Why not?" I said. His smile grew, "You see, I'm not baptized."

This was a revelation. His parents had been Quaker missionaries in China. I remember taking a breath before I asked, "Would you like to be baptized?" "Yes, I would," he said, smiling again. The earth seemed to move. Regarding his precarious health, I asked if he thought I should bring his wife along next time and baptize him simply in the hospital. "No, that won't be necessary; I won't die here this time," he said. It also became clear, now the subject was breached, that he wanted a public baptism in the church, not a private one. It was Lent; I thought, well why not mention it, so I suggested, of all things, the Great Vigil of Easter Eve. Now with a very broad smile, Dr. Lattimore responded, "That attracts me."

Then I could not restrain myself. “Dr. Lattimore [though he preferred it, it was difficult for me to call him Dick], I thought you had reservations about the Christian faith and the Church.” “I did,” he replied. “But you don’t any longer?” “No, not any longer.” “Please then may I ask you, when did they go away?” He was silent for a space; then, again with that smile and twinkling eyes, he answered: “Somewhere in Saint Luke.”

The great man was discharged from the hospital. The baptism was scheduled and prepared for. His wife was thrilled. The Church as usual was quite full for the vigil service. At the font, it was my turn as celebrant to say to Dr. Lattimore, who was baptized along with an infant, “Do you believe in God the Father...” His turn was then to take part in the Apostles’ Creed as his response, but instead, he closed his Prayer Book, clasped it to his breast, closed his eyes, turned his head up, and recited the entire creed with feeling. It was an experience of a lifetime for a young priest to witness. I should add that when the Bishop came to confirm him with our Eastertide confirmands, Dr. Lattimore gave me his emphatic permission to tell his story.¹

“We have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.” The ancient Magi used their Gentile arts and sciences to lead them on a long journey to worship the infant Christ. Journeys of that sort can be long; the pilgrims who make them are often changed by their pilgrimage. Dr. Lattimore was in constant proximity to the outward and visible signs of Christ; not more than twenty or thirty yards from the altar rail every Sunday. But long pilgrimages are made in terms of time as well as space, and spiritual distances are such that a few feet can be as far as the east is from the west, and a day can be as a thousand years.

My point is that the journey of the magi is mystical and representative; it includes us all. The Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ, is for all of us, but we each make our own pilgrimage in our own way. The magi, having followed the star, came to the crib in Bethlehem. John the Baptist, having consented to baptize Christ, heard the testimony of his divine sonship from heaven itself. Mary and the disciples, accompanying Jesus as a wedding guest at Cana in Galilee, saw Jesus display the glory of God in changing water into wine. Richmond Lattimore, the great Greek scholar, discovered Christ “somewhere in Saint Luke.”

Every one of us here is on the pilgrimage of life. Christ wills to make his Epiphany, his self-disclosure, to each one of us as his brothers and sisters in the flesh. May God give each of us the eyes of faith to see him.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹ Richmond Lattimore died in 1984. As Rector it was my privilege to conduct his funeral at The Church of the Good Shepherd, Rosemont, Pennsylvania, the Lattimores’ longtime parish home. The service was a Eucharist in which all baptized Christians were invited to receive Communion. Dr. Lattimore provided guidance, along with his wife Alice, in the details of the service, and he encouraged me to tell the story of his baptism in the homily for the benefit of the many members of the Bryn Mawr College community who attended the service.