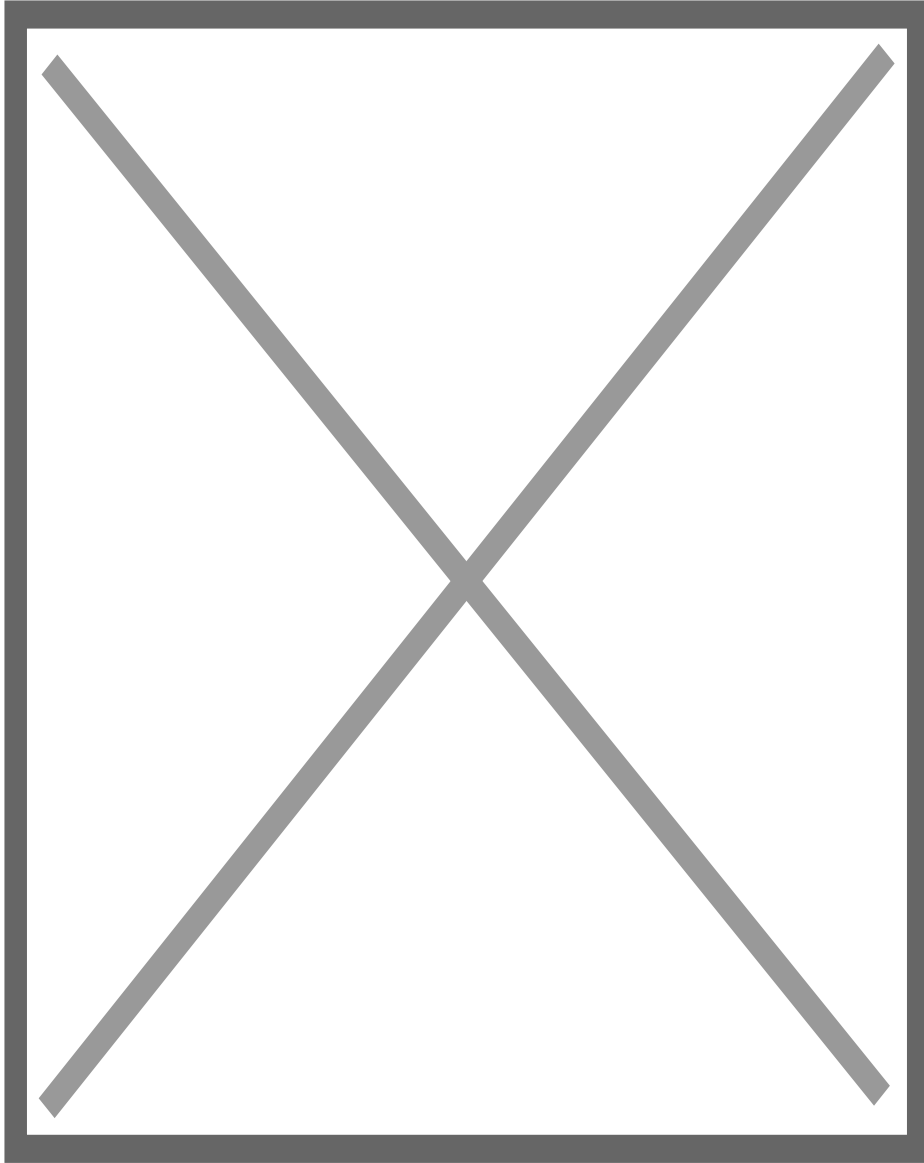


Imagining the Magi

To be God's people is to be caught up in parable, in story and storytelling.

by [Rachel Mann](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

Published on January 2, 2026



Century illustration (Source images: Getty & Creative Commons)

In 1622, Lancelot Andrewes, the bishop of Winchester, preached a nativity sermon that has echoed down the centuries. Most famously, it had a profound impact on T. S. Eliot's classic poem "Journey of the Magi," the first line of which is lifted almost verbatim from the sermon. Toward the end, Andrewes describes the Magi's journey thus: "Last we consider the time of their coming, the season of the year. It was no summer progress. A cold

coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off . . . the very dead of winter.”

It is an exquisite, evocative picture that reflects Andrewes’s rich imagination. It effortlessly translates the Magi’s journey into a cold English winter. It confirms Eliot’s claim that in Andrewes, “we find . . . that breadth of culture, an ease with humanism and Renaissance learning, which helped . . . to elevate [his] Church above the position of a local heretical sect.”

I often worry, for good or ill, that the modern church risks retreating into a crummy, inward-looking sect. When I do I remember Andrewes’s ease with imagery, his learning and his breadth of culture, and I try to embrace it as the very vocation of the church. I would like to think such a vocation flows from faith in Jesus. For surely the church is the inheritor of a kingdom of precious fields and priceless pearls, of lost sons and widows who sweep the house in search of a lost coin. In short, to be God’s people is to be caught up in parable, in story and storytelling. We are people who dare to puzzle, question, and make things new in the realm of the imagination.

Yet I sense there is a struggle in hand over the mood and mode of what it means to be church. In my small section of it, there is, as we shrink in size and influence, so much anxiety. The focus has moved from developing priests to creating leaders; there is an understandable desire to analyze the problem and game out a solution. This is not bad in and of itself, but when leadership theory dominates, so do quite narrow images of what it is to be a minister. Spreadsheets and leadership styles have their uses, but I cannot believe the people of God are made for flowcharts of salvation.

To follow Christ is to be part of a community that negotiates the sheer wonder and mystery of life and, more than that, the challenge of living in and through the Word made flesh. Christ is the one who invites us into story, into simile, analogy, and metaphor. He dares us to have our imaginations stretched out of shape, that we might picture a little more of a world whose truth is not captured merely in statistics.

Those who follow Christ, then, are invited into what might be called the realm of *Allos*. *Allos* is a Greek word, from which we derive *allegory*: it’s a figurative way of speaking of a thing. *Allos* is also the root of *other*—of the alien, the outside, the beyond the pale. The God who calls into parable leads us away from the obvious and familiar, out beyond the walls of safe imagination and living.

I suspect Andrewes’s sermon style is off-putting for modern tastes. He loves puns and pedantry. His sentence structure can be tortuous. Nonetheless, his learning and sensitivity to language should inspire us. He was one of the translators of the King James Bible, and while it may not be as accurate or as precise as many modern translations, what a storehouse of language and imagination it is.

Andrewes’s picture of the Magi’s journey, with its talk of “summer progresses” and “cold comings,” does require translation into a modern context. No king—not even Charles III—undertakes a “progress” anymore. Nonetheless, Andrewes’s vision of a tricky, wintry journey of the Magi remains extraordinarily resonant. It captures a truth about the Christian vocation: the journey to meet the Christ Child is difficult, and it will tip our realities upside down. The ways to Christ “are deep,” but ultimately they are worth it.

Theologian Ulrich Luz says, “In the pleasant lounge, the hope of the kingdom cannot be understood.” To live in the current age invites, almost by definition, anxiety and stress. It is just so complicated. Church people will find it tempting to become dependent on techniques and approaches drawn from other institutions (management theory, statistical analysis, and so on) to cope. It is equally tempting to find a pleasing, easy safety in a church that is more like a sect—narrow, monocultural, with the questionable reassurance that everyone “is like” or “looks like” me. A monochrome holy huddle.

There is no promise of salvation, however, in becoming a technocrat for God or one of those hectoring sectarians who tell us that unless we convert to their ideology we're going to burn in hell. There is no abiding truth in trying to be what Eliot calls a "sorcerer of emotional orgy." The bolder path lies in attending, as Andrewes did, to the one who sparks imagination and troubles our complacency: the Word made flesh.

When we do that we discover that God is in the facts of living, and sometimes those facts are vile and troubling, but sometimes they are joyous. The challenge is to discern the difference. I find I have a better chance of doing so when, like Andrewes, I take the risk of imagination and bring a sense of play and wonder to bear. To let God stretch the bounds of possibility through parable, imagery, and story. When I do that, I find myself walking into the richer, troubling field of God's grace, where forgiveness, hope, reconciliation, justice, and love abound.