

Nativity 2005

Matt 2:1-12

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

The wise men came from afar to find “him who is born King of the Jews”. Led by no ordinary star, they rejoiced to find Him; they fell down and worshipped Him; they offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

What instruction there is for us in these simple actions by Gentile wise men! What an example they offer to us in their treatment of Christ the newborn King!

First, they come from afar. They saw His star in the East, and decided to find the One it heralded. Why? What motivated them to undertake a long, arduous journey to find a child king of the Jews?

Of course, it was no ordinary star they saw, which was one reason it attracted their attention. A star that moved, that stopped, that hid, that reappeared and moved again—until it pointed out one particular house in Bethlehem. No ordinary star that.

But even though the star was most unusual, that alone seems inadequate to explain their journey. Some have said that they may have been members of that same class of Babylonian wise men that Daniel and his three friends had been part of. If so, they may have known something of the Scriptures, they may have known some of the prophecies of the coming Messiah. Perhaps this was the case. In any case, God was drawing them, and their hearts were open. And they came.

Christ invites us to come to Him. He is near. Indeed, we can never find a place apart from Him, where He is not. As the Psalmist cries, “If I ascend into heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the

uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me..” No matter how much we try, we cannot escape His presence.

Christ invites us to come to Him, and He is near to us. But are we near to Him? That is the question. Though Christ is near, our hearts may be far from Him. We may have to come “from afar” to find Him.

Christ bids us come. He says, “Come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I shall give you rest.” He says, “Ask and it shall be given, seek and ye shall find, knock, and the door shall be opened unto you.” He never turns away those who come to Him. In the Gospels, the people He heals are always those who have come to Him first.

Indeed, He is near because He has first come from afar to meet us. What greater distance could there be than that which separates the eternal, invisible, uncreated, almighty, incomprehensible God from His temporal, material, and finite creation—except the distance between the holy, eternal, invisible, uncreated, almighty God and rebellious, sinful, impure, short-lived, corruptible man? Yet in becoming man, the eternal Son of the eternal Father has bridged that gap between Creator and creature, between the invisible and the visible, and through His blood has brought us cleansing from the sins that further separated us from God. The King has come, having made a great journey to meet with us. And now He calls us to Himself.

But how do we respond to Christ’s call to come unto Him? How can we draw near to Him as did the magi?

Since He is always present, always near at hand, to come to Him means to direct our hearts and minds to Him, to attend to Him, to pay attention to Him. We don’t have to make a long journey as the wise men

did. Our coming to Christ is as simple as getting in the car and driving a few miles to church. Our coming to Christ is as simple as getting up in the morning to stand before our icons to pray. Our coming to Christ is as simple as crossing ourselves throughout the day and asking His blessing on every work we undertake, and asking God's mercy on ourselves and those around us. The question is, "Do we come at His call? Do we draw near to Him?" If we don't, what excuse will we offer to Him on the day of judgment? How can we look Him in the face and say it was too much for us to do? After all, He came all the way from His glorious throne to the humble manger in the cave . . .

The magi came from afar, at great expense and effort, to find Christ. Once they had found him, they worshipped Him. Right there in the little house, they fell down and worshipped a small child.

They fell down and worshipped Him. This action on their part shows great perception. If they thought Jesus were merely King of the Jews, why come all that way? He had no jurisdiction in the East where they lived. And why worship a child found in the most humble of surroundings? This was no palace. How could He be king and live in a small, common house? And why worship an uncrowned king while a crowned king, Herod, reigned? Indeed, there were plenty of other kings and kings' sons in the world, with more being born. Yet they fell on their faces and worshipped the Christ child. They must have known somehow that this was more than a mere king, more than just another mere man with a claim to a throne.

When man comes face to face with God, worship is his proper response. It indicates his acceptance of and submission to the reality of this universe—that God has made it and us, and it is He who reigns—not chance, not the stars, not human might or wisdom. Not to worship Christ is to be in denial of reality. It is to be deluded. Worship is our

proper response to God, especially God who has humbled Himself to become one of us.

In the Orthodox Church, worship is the first thing, the one thing needful. Our worship is frequent. The Church appoints services for every day of the year. Even in parishes where the services cannot be served daily, worship can never be safely reduced to a once-a-week duty.

Our worship is extravagant. Every Orthodox service is a candlelight service. Every significant Orthodox service requires incense. Every Orthodox service requires vestments. Our services are held in temples that have been beautified and consecrated to create a space set apart from the world for worship, space that calls us to worship and helps us worship.

Every worship service calls for the attentive participation of those present. We cross ourselves. We bow. We venerate icons with our lips. We fall prostrate on our faces. We sing hymns extolling our God. We look longingly on the icons and contemplate what we see. We smell the sweet incense, which is an offering and honor paid to God and His holy things and represents to us both the presence of the Holy Spirit and the fragrance our true prayers are to God. We are invited to “taste and see that the Lord is good, and we eat His Body and drink His blood.

Too often, we go about all this by habit, by rote, without attention or awareness of what we are doing or why we are doing it, or perhaps with even some vague resentment that it is all too much trouble. But every sign of the cross, every bow, every kiss, every prostration, every hymn, is being offered as worship to the child born in Bethlehem, whom the wise men came from afar to worship. And every sign of the cross, every bow, every kiss, every prostration, every hymn should *consciously* be offered to Him, as though we were standing directly before Him and paying

homage to Him face to face. And, in fact, we are standing before Him when we gather in His house to worship or when we stand in our icon corner to pray. But we enter into all this extravagant activity of worship, we do all this to help us worship with our *whole* man, with *all* our heart, with *all* our mind, with *all* our soul, with *all* our strength, not just a part. As we sing at the Divine Liturgy: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name.”

The wise men not only came and worshipped—they also brought gifts. They did not come empty-handed. And the gifts were rich: Gold—the most precious metal then known. Frankincense—an incense, which was offered to the gods. Myrrh—used for embalming, and also a sweet fragrance. Rich gifts fit for a king.

Part of our worship is giving that which costs us something. King David said, “I will not offer unto the Lord that which costs me nothing.” We are to bring gifts fit for our King.

First, we offer Him our time. Time is precious, for “time is money” as they say. Our time on earth is limited. We expend that time on what is precious to us. When we pray, when we are present at divine services, we spend time on Christ our King. We make an offering to Him of the very stuff of our lives—time.

We also offer Him our money. Bringing our tithes and offerings into God’s house is part of our worship. It in itself is an act of worship. We do not come before God empty-handed. With the wise men, we bring the first and best part, not our leftovers, to honor Him who is our Lord and King.

Corporately, at the Liturgy, we offer the wheat and grapes which man’s labor and intellect have transformed into bread and wine. We offer this

bread and wine back to God to be transformed into Christ's body and blood. We also offer our voices raised in song, joined together in the common worship of the Church as we confess our God and King.

We also come to offer ourselves unto Christ our God as living sacrifices. Under the Old Covenant, an animal being sacrificed was killed on behalf of the worshipper and its blood poured out. Sacrifices inherently were dead. But under the New Covenant, we are to be living sacrifices, holy and acceptable unto God. And we come together and join in worship to renew that offering of ourselves to Him. We need to renew our offering of ourselves regularly, for though we place ourselves on the altar in offering to God, we all too often find that we have slipped down and moved away from the altar when our offering of our selves gets painful or inconvenient, or we simply get scared or distracted by other things.

Ultimately, God doesn't need our time, our money, our hymns, or our bread and wine—but we desperately need to offer them unto Him. It is for our good we make these offerings, not for God's good.

Ultimately, God doesn't even need us. But He wants us. He loves us. And He loved us so much, that even after we had fallen away from Him and gone into a far land, He put aside His kingly throne and glory and humbled himself to be born as a helpless child of the young Virgin Mary—for us and for our salvation; to convince us that He still wants us, no matter how far we've fallen, no matter how distant we've removed ourselves from him, no matter what we've done; to bring us back and to unite us to Himself and make us His heirs, His children, and participants in His Kingdom—if we be willing. It is this great condescension of His to us, His becoming man while remaining God, that we celebrate today.

If we would be wise, let us follow the wise men's example. Let us come to Christ—no matter how far away we have removed ourselves from

Him, for He has come even further to call us to Himself. Let us fall down before Him and worship Him who became man to make us one with God. And let us offer Him our gifts—not grudgingly, but willingly, joyfully, bountifully. And not just on this day on which we celebrate His birth but throughout the year and every year for the rest of our lives. For He is our King and our God who is born this day in Bethlehem, and to Him belong all glory, honor, and worship, together with His Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Christ is born!

Priest Justin Frederick