

# We Have Come to Worship Him

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

Sunday, 3 December, 2023

## Children's Talk: The Gifts We Give

I want to talk about gifts. Christmas is a time when we think a lot about the gifts that we are given. But this morning we are going to talk about the gifts that we can give to other people, and not just other people, but even the Lord. At the first Christmas, there were men who came to the Lord to give Him gifts. They are the Wise Men. They actually had to work hard to find the Lord, but they were determined to give Him the gifts that they had brought:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;  
For out of you shall come a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2:1-11)

I have here samples of each of the three gifts that the Wise Men gave: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Each gift was extraordinarily precious and even expensive. Each gift also had a special meaning to it. So let's talk about the gifts that we give. There are three special kinds of gifts that we can give this holiday. We can give them to the Lord; to our parents; to our brothers and sisters; and to our friends.

The first gift is the gift of love. What do you love about the Lord? About your parents? About your brothers and sisters? About your friends? The second gift is remembering the Lord's commandments. How does the Lord say you should behave towards Him? Towards your parents? Towards your brothers and sisters? Towards your friends? The third gift is good deeds. What kind thing can you do for the Lord? For your parents? For your brothers and sisters? For your friends? Sometimes it is hard to give these gifts. But try to see if this holiday you can practice giving love, faith, and kindness to the people around you. *Amen.*

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How hard is it to worship the Lord? In many ways not hard at all. You are here right now in a church building, having done exactly that. Surely worshipping the Lord is not a difficult thing. Yet there is more to worship than the motions of our bodies and the words of our mouths. Worship, true worship, runs deeply into our daily lives and into our hearts and minds. Worship requires sacrifice and life change. Worship is something that cannot be measured in prayers and rituals but rather in the actions and choices of a life well-lived. It takes a journey to arrive at true worship, but when we do arrive, it will have been worth every sacrifice.

We turn to the story of the Wise Men, a story I'm sure most of us are familiar with. What might not be so familiar is how much of their story revolves around worship. These Wise Men came from the lands to the East of the land of Israel, from a place that still knew the ancient signs indicating the birth of the messiah, a new king of the Jews. We read in the Gospel of Matthew,

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

The stated purpose for why the Wise Men had left their homes and travelled to a foreign land is so that they could worship this child who had been born a king. We might think they could have worshipped from where they were; after all, isn't that what we do? The furthest we travel to worship the Lord is from our homes to the church building on a Sunday morning. But no, the Wise Men felt the need to leave behind their homes, and to seek for the Lord, not knowing even if they would find Him.

This search is an important lesson for us and our own worship of the Lord. Not that our worship is any more sincere if we have travelled five kilometres or five thousand. But if we are not actively seeking the Lord in a spiritual way than we really have no one to worship. How much seeking and searching have you done to find out who this Lord is that you worship? When you say your prayers do you default to the standard 30-year old, brown-haired, bearded man in a white robe? Or have you gone deeper to try to understand who this God is for you? What His real character is like? Have you struggled to understand what He thinks of your prayers, and what He wants from you? Have you tried to meet Him as He really is or just as you would like Him to be? You cannot worship what you do not know. If all you are worshipping is an image, a picture taken from popular culture, then you still have a journey to go on to find the Lord and discover who He really is for you.

And so the Wise Men did not simply stay at home and worship the Lord from afar. They set out to find Him, and on this journey they were guided by a star. A star isn't really much to go on. It does not illuminate the path like the sun or even the moon, and it doesn't provide any warmth. But it is enough. It is sufficient to navigate by. So what do we need that will point us in the direction to guide us to knowing and worshipping the Lord? It doesn't have to be a lot. A little truth from the Word, for example, will go a long way. Take for instance the truth that God is love. It's three simple words that take hardly any effort to memorize or believe. And yet from this starting point we can make huge strides in coming to know the Lord. If God is love, what does it mean when it feels like God is forbidding what you love? How do you embody His love? What about when love seems limited and insufficient? Just knowing that God is love doesn't necessarily tell you who the Lord is, but it is a starting point which, like a guiding star, can lead you to knowing the Lord deeply.

But the Wise Men were not just trying to learn about the Lord. They were seeking a King who would be worthy of their worship. They wanted someone that they could place over them, to be in charge of their lives. Even the word here used for “worship” does not just mean pray to; it implies fully bowing down like a dog before its master. Indeed, when the Wise Men did find the Lord, they did not simply kneel. We read,

...when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. (Matthew 2:11)

In the western world we are fairly uncomfortable with this kind of display of complete submission of one person to another. We tend to feel that it insults their innate worth as an individual human being. Yet if there is one person who is worthy of this kind of adoration, it is of course the Lord. In fact, without humbling ourselves this way, we cannot possibly worship the Lord. The teachings of the New Church explain why it is that such humility is needed in worship:

...humility and submission are the essentials of worship; for without them worship is not worship, only bodily actions which are an imitation of those made by people engaged in true worship. Such actions have no life at all in them. Life from the Lord flows only into a humble and submissive heart, since it is fitted to receive. And it is fitted to receive because when a heart is truly humble no self-love or love of the world stands in the way. (*Secrets of Heaven* §8873)

As long as love for ourselves is vying for our attention over love to the Lord, we cannot worship the Lord. We might come to church; we might kneel in prayer; we might do all sorts of worshipful things; but we are not worshipping the Lord if we do not put His will above our own. Like the Wise Men, we have to be seeking someone who we cannot just worship, but who we can worship as a King, as someone whose word is law in our lives.

The Lord does not twist our arms into this kind of worship. He is not a self-centred dictator who needs our praise. Whether we choose to have Him at the centre

of our lives or not is entirely up to us. That is one reason why we need to seek Him out and make Him our King as the Wise Men did. That does not mean however that it is inconsequential whether we submit ourselves fully to Him. While the Lord is not a self-centred dictator, He does call us to come to Him in worship. He urges us to accept Him not just as a wise counsellor or friend, but as a King to obey in all things. Viewed from a human point of view the Lord's attitude seems arrogant perhaps, but from His point of view He actually has our best interests at heart. He knows that if we are to be able to grow spiritually, we must prioritize Him over all of our own selfish desires. This choice is the one true path to eternal happiness. This concept is explained in the teachings of the New Church:

It is said that the Lord alone is to be worshipped. Anyone unacquainted with the nature of true worship of the Lord may think that the Lord loves to be worshipped and desires glory from people, like someone who grants another person what he requests because that other person pays him respect. Anyone who thinks like that has no idea at all of what love is like, let alone of what God's love is like. God in His love does not desire worship and glory for His own sake but for that of man and his salvation. For humility exists in those who worship the Lord and give Him glory, and from those in whom humility exists the proprium or what belongs to self departs. And so far as this departs, the Divine is received; for the proprium or self, being evil and false, is the one thing that stands in the way of the Divine. This is the glory of the Lord, and worship of Him exists to that end. (*Secrets of Heaven* §10646)

God urgently presses us to worship Him because of His deep love for us.

So far we have seen the need to not be passive in our worship of the Lord, but to actively grow in our knowledge of Him and pursue Him. We have also looked at the need to look for a king in the Lord, someone that we can submit entirely to so that He can remove our own selfish desires and replace them with selfless ones. In some ways these things are prerequisites to worship. What actually makes worship is shown in the specific gifts that the Wise Men brought with them and offered to the Lord (see *Secrets of Heaven* §9293, *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* §23). Gold stands for the love that must be at the heart of all worship. Without that inner love

worship is empty. It is a love not just for the Lord either, but a love for those that He loves, in other words, a love for all of humanity. In worship, we offer love to the Lord and a love to our neighbor. The second gift, frankincense stands for faith in the Lord. Frankincense was used as part of the incense and burnt offerings that carried prayer to Jehovah, and as such it can be an image of our own faith and trust that we send to the Lord in prayer and in study of His Word. Without faith, our love cannot be directed to any goal, but faith points the way so that our worship has a purpose. In worship we need to think of how we might best serve the Lord and our neighbor and how best to keep His commandments. The last gift is myrrh which stands for the actual application of love and truth in how we treat others. I won't now go into why myrrh stands for this, but suffice it to say that it follows naturally from the previous two. Putting the truth into practice might seem like something that comes after worshipping the Lord, but the reality is that worship is only complete when we keep the Lord's commandments. If you come to the Lord in prayer with a loving heart, and bring to mind your faith and trust in Him, but then do nothing to serve others, then you have not truly worshipped. As the prophet Hosea said,

For I desire mercy and not sacrifice,  
And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6)

All of our external rituals of worship are meaningless if we do not worship the Lord with our words and actions in our daily lives.

So how hard is it to worship the Lord? Not really hard at all, and yet it does require work. It requires the seeking of the Lord in the Word and soul searching to find how He appears to us. It requires the humility to submit ourselves and all of our wants to His wants. It requires worship on all levels: the worship of a loving heart, the worship of faith, and the worship of life. This is how we worship the Lord. After all,



that is the purpose of our life: that we might see His star, and come to worship Him.

*Amen.*