

Thanks to You, O Father of light, for sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to establish a kingdom of grace and forgiveness among *all people* on this earth. By Your Spirit *as You did for the magi* make us new creatures in heart, mind, soul, and sentiment, and teach us to *worship You with the new song* of this new kingdom with rejoicing and gladness, through Jesus Christ. Amen. (Reading the Psalms with Luther, CPH, Ps. 96, p. 229)

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 saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him."** When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel." Then **Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him."** After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And **going into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.** And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

In Christ Jesus, the only King worthy and even capable of eternal worship, dear fellow redeemed:

It is natural for us to think of the wise men from the east as those, who bore all the way from their distant homes gifts to present to the newborn King of the Jews – the long awaited Christ. But their highest form of worship was not giving Him gifts, rather it was that they came all that way to receive priceless gifts from Him. For you see, the **Highest Act of Worship Is Seeking to Receive from the Lord's Christ.** (*Book of Concord, Tappert ed. p. 128*)

### I

Throughout history, tyrannical kings have not usually been worshipped, but certainly revered with fear. Acts of feigned reverence no doubt were shown to them. Costly gifts like given to the Christ-Child were also received by them, but these were not given

out of joy and appreciation for the tyrant in office, rather it was done in the hopes of paying the tyrant off so no evil would befall the giver.

Interestingly Herod, a tyrannical despot himself, indicated to the wise men that he personally desired to worship this newborn king of the Jews. But as we all know, that was not his true intention. Herod's intent, after finding out who this supposed rival to his throne was and where He was to be found, was to put Him to death.

The word translated "worship" is found three times in our text and could simply mean the reverence shown a dignitary like a king. It would appear however that throughout the New Testament it describes divine worship, that is, worship of God. It is not strange for ancient kings to claim divinity for themselves. Nebuchadnezzar surely did in the Old Testament and the Roman Caesar in the New also claimed such a blasphemous designation for himself. But again in the context of Herod consulting the chief priests and the scribes of the Jewish religion, this act of worship by the wise men was truly to be a divine worship, not just a kingly reverence.

Again the three gifts that had been carried with them were gifts fit for a mighty king to be sure, but the wise men knew they were coming to worship not just an earthly king with their obligatory gifts, but the King of kings. While we do not know exactly how the wise men came to know that the star, which appeared for them, was the star of the Christ Child, they obviously knew and what is more, they knew the significance of this Holy Child was not just for the Jews but for the whole world of human beings, that is, all sinners.

These gifts of homage were in response to this greatest of all Kings and what was promised them through Him. These gifts were not intended to be given in exchange for the gifts from the Child. Nor were these gifts prepared as repayment for the gifts to be received. These gifts were true acts of worship; tokens of gratefulness for that which is beyond exchange or repayment.

They are like your gifts you bring to God's house regularly; as many of you did today, my fellow worshippers of the Christ Child. You know and believe that what Christ Jesus gives to you, namely, forgiveness of all your sins, His everlasting holiness granting you everlasting life, and His shed blood for your eternal salvation, are pure gift, not items for barter or trade, but pure charitable gifts given from heaven to you with no strings attached. Remember who you were and where you came from. You were slaves of sin and hell, you had nothing of value to offer God. Paul writes in 1Corinthians – "You are not your own; you were bought at a price." In exchange for your enslavement Christ gave you His freedom. In exchange for your

deserved cursedness of sin Christ gave you His blessedness. Or as Paul describes it in 2Corinthians: “for your sakes Christ became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”

## II

So as much as we associate gifting with the story of the wise men, the gift of all gifts that was received and could never be repaid is the gift from God the Father of His Son for all sinners. This is what comprised true worship, that is, trusting in the blessings received here and now from God in His Son, namely forgiveness, life and salvation. After all, as we say in our Lutheran confessions: *“forgiveness of sins ... sought in Christ ... is the highest worship of Christ.”* (p. 106 “Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions”, CPH, 2005.)

Now Herod’s suggestion of worship was pure deception, as you well know. Yet when it would come time to order the slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem, he no doubt made a case for it based on his own self-worship. He very likely found support among the chief priests and scribes, who had been troubled with Herod at the announcement of the wise men and whom he had consulted earlier about the location of Christ’s birth. How would the twisted sinful mind reason? Perhaps something like this: *“Most honorable King Herod, king of the Jews, if word of this newborn king gets around, the Romans will be on our necks again ... there will be bloodshed. ... if you have even a suspicion of where this child is, you had better (act decisively), otherwise our land will be ruined.”* (Luther, “Christmas Book” ed. Bainton p. 73)

This is in keeping with Jesus’ words spoken later on to His disciples: “The time is coming, that whoever kills you will think that he is doing God a service?” False worship can justify even killing the Christ. As it would later do before the Roman Governor Pilate.

So it is true even to this day, false deceptive worship is declared right and holy and the true worship of receiving abundantly from the gracious hand of God is declared to be false and destructive. We call our times of worship *“divine services”* because at such times the sinner receives forgiveness from God through His Word and Sacraments. Even in the Creed we join in reciting the acts of God has done in our behalf, not our acts done for Him.

The sinful nature loves to imagine that it can actually give to God as an act of worship earning His good pleasure. But that is the characteristic of all false worship. If our gifts given at worship are given grudgingly then it reveals an ill motive, a heart similar to that of Herod. But if we give as a joyous response of thankfulness for all God has done for us in His Son, it is true god-pleasing worship.

It was right and proper for these believing wise men to take Herod at his word when he expressed a desire also to worship the Christ Child. They had no reason to believe otherwise, even though suspicion may have been aroused when neither Herod nor the religious leaders accompanied them to Bethlehem. So God found it necessary for their safety to warn them in a dream not to go back to Herod as he requested. In true obedience to God's Word, they went home via a different route.

Oh that your worship here among us remains pure, so that as sinners you always eagerly desire to receive God's eternal gifts to you in His Son and never become tired of these His ways of blessing you. Then your falling down on our knees whether at the Communion rail or alongside your beds will be found acceptable by the one true God who sent His only begotten Son to save you by saving all. In humility receive from God's abundant grace double for all your sins and worship Him aright. Amen.