

“O Christ, What Shall We Offer You?”

Whereas all too often the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord ends soon after December 25 (or January 7), having feasted upon turkey, exchanged gifts among family and friends – then tossing out the Christmas tree, sometimes as soon as “Boxing Day.” In reality, the celebration of Jesus’ birth continues well into the New Year as the carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas” reminds us.

As we continue to celebrate our Lord’s birth, permit me to share with you an early childhood memory of Christmas.

As the youngest in my family, my sole task on Christmas Eve was to keep watch for the first star in the night sky and to announce “God’s star shines!” With this my family would gather around the table and sing the ancient carol “Boh predvichnyj” (God Eternal is born to us) and then begin the Sviat Vechir, that is, the traditional Christmas Eve Supper with its twelve lenten dishes specially prepared for the occasion.

[At first I suspected that the task assigned to me was a sneaky way of keeping me occupied and out of trouble as a young boy; however, having checked it out with friends my age, I quickly learned that it indeed was a valid Christmas tradition practiced for generations!]

A star. The Star. The Star of David. The Star of Bethlehem.

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage’.... And there ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Mt 2: 1-11).

The Wise Men from Persia clearly recognized the heavenly King born on earth. Led by a star, they arrived in Bethlehem bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And when they found the Christ-child lying in a manger, they adored him, the Eternal God.

The gifts of the Magi are of particular significance.

The gift of gold is a recognition that Jesus is the king of Israel, of the entire universe, and of the Kingdom of God to come.

The gift of frankincense signifies that Jesus is indeed God, since incense is used for worship, and we worship the One True God.

And the gift of myrrh, which was used to anoint bodies for burial purposes, reminds us that Jesus, already at his birth, is the one who has come to die as a perfect sacrifice for the people.

In these gifts, therefore, are contained all they mysteries of Christ. They point to the purpose of his coming to earth: royal king, divine God, and perfect sacrifice.

What about us? What gifts might we offer our King and our God?

Well, the verses taken from the Byzantine vespers for the Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord offer us some insights:

“O Christ, what shall we offer you for your coming on earth in our humanity for our sake?

“Every creature that has its being from you gives thanks to you: the angels offer hymns of praise, the heavens give a star; the magi present their gifts, and the shepherds their wonder; the earth provides a cave and the desert a manger.

“As for us, we offer a Virgin Mother!”

Gold. Frankincense. Myrrh. A virgin mother. Indeed gifts fit for a King.

And today, as we continue to celebrate the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, what gifts might you and your family offer the newborn Christ? Faith? Love? Hope?

Christ is born! Let us Glorify Him!