

# SERMON, ST. JOHN'S CHRISTMAS II

I would like to reread some key verses of today's Gospel in the King James version to highlight the powerful emphasis on **worship** that literally saturates the early 17th century version of the story of the coming of the Magi:

*Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to **worship** him.*

*Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and **worship** him also.*

*And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and **worshipped** him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.*

The late 20th century replacement of **worship** with the rather weak word **homage** in the NRSV version of the Bible is, perhaps, a sad commentary on the modern Church's loss of wonder, awe and mystery in the face of the Holy. The early 20th century German theologian wrote a magnificent book, one of my very favorites, called *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*. Otto argues that the defining element of the holy is the phenomenon he describes as the *numinous*, a great word which comes from the Latin *numen*, a word meaning "divine power" that is remarkably like the Hawaiian understanding of *mana*. The numinous is not based on reason or even sensory stimulation, but represents what Otto calls "the wholly other," and he describes it as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. You don't need to be a Latin scholar to understand the meaning of this phrase: the mystery that is both tremendous and fascinating. It's really nothing less than what Hawaiians call "chicken skin," and it's sadly missing from modern Western culture, including, to our great loss, the Church. We tend to be rather cerebral in our approach to God and seem rather timid in our worship, fearful perhaps of overt displays of genuine awe before the holy.

The Hawaiian people were masterful in their worship of the ancient gods. Samuel Kamakau tells us that, on Maui, Kane-hekili (Kāne in the Thunder) was worshipped as an *āumakua*, a family deity. He manifested himself magnificently as "Kāne breaking through the Heavens," Lightning flashing in the Heavens, and exhibiting the lively phenomena of thunderstorms, like we in Upcountry have recently experienced. Humpbacked forms are seen driving through the air on these occasions, such as the deity Nakoloilani or the humpbacked brothers of the goddess Pele. During these dramatic storms, all containers should be turned bottom side up and all persons must lie face downward and make no outcry, for silence is the law of Kane-hekili. Kane-hekili was worshipped with profound awe.

Kamakau tells us that at the time of the worship of Kāne, Kū, Lono and Kanaloa in the heiaus, the whole congregation assembled, then raised their hands as a sign that the true god was in the heavens, uttering their prayer in unison until its conclusion, then they lowered their arms. It is no wonder, then, that Hawaiians were shocked at the piety of the Missionaries, who shut their eyes and bowed their heads in prayer. Dibble's *Mo'olelo Hawaii*, published at Lahainaluna in 1838, describes how the Hawaiians asked, "Why is it that haole people lower their eyes in prayer? Surely it is because they are practicing *ānā ānā* (black magic)." The pietism of the Calvinists, for whom expressive displays of worship were offensive to their highly internal, moralistic, religion, was viewed by the Hawaiians, for whom ritual was the sign of true worship, as strangely irreligious. To Hawaiians, the whole of life was ritualized: offerings were made at an altar in the men's eating house, the hale mua, on a daily basis, sacralizing the space as a genuine heiau, a temple. The kapu system, whereby the *āi kapu* required that women eat different foods from men; the lunar calendar that determined specific occupations for each of the named days of the month; and the kapu moe that required commoners to fall flat on their faces in the presence of ali'i of the purest blood are all examples of the ways in which expressive forms of worship filled every hour of Hawaiian life.

So the Magi come to Bethlehem to **worship** a baby, really quite a preposterous act when you think about it. Even Herod the King intimates that he too wants to worship this baby. The Magi acknowledged by bowing before him that here was God, Love incarnate, the very "Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans" in our midst! What else can one do but bow down and worship and offer him the cream of our lives: gold for kingship, frankincense for divinity, myrrh for sacrifice. They worshipped and adored him and Christians ever since have offered him the glory and awe inspired by the greatest manifestation of divine splendour in the history of humankind. For there is no splendour more magnificent than the revelation of divine Love. Early Christians worshipped Christ Incarnate in extraordinary splendour: Procopius, in the 6th century described the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople as "a spectacle of great beauty, stupendous to those who see it," boasting "ineffable beauty, for it subtly combines its mass with the harmony of its proportions," and "it abounds exceedingly in gleaming sunlight. You might say that the interior space is not illuminated by the sun from the outside, but that the radiance is generated within, so great an abundance of light bathes this shrine all around." Worship in Hagia Sophia was absolutely glorious, as is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church to our own day. When emissaries were sent by Vladimir, Prince of Rus, to different nations to help decide which religion the Russians should adopt, they chose Orthodox Christianity as the ideal faith for their people because, they said, "We no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth, nor such beauty, and we know not how to tell it."

True worship, then, as the Kievan Rus demonstrated, is indescribable and not essentially an intellectual exercise. However, we in the modern West have made our faith more about thinking **about** God than about **adoring** God, which is at the heart of true worship. I am proud of the fact that historically the Anglican Church has been called "the Thinking Man's Religion," and I believe that we must never cease to inquire, question, even doubt, intellectually. However, to think only about the facts of God is like thinking solely about the physical attributes of a person we dearly love and not simply **loving** them. Worship is the offering of ourselves, pouring out the cream of all that we are in pure adoration, a mystical experience that doesn't leave our brains at the door, yet is primarily an expression of heart, soul and body. Worship is an **art**,

which countless examples of exquisite beauty expressed in the architecture, painting, mosaics, vestments and liturgical drama of churches display to the delight of our senses. In our own tradition, the best of our worship is particularly manifested through the vehicles of exquisite music and poetry.

Psalm 96 invites us to “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Let the whole earth stand in awe of him.” This sermon is a clarion call for us all to return to the “beauty of holiness,” and to cultivate awe and mystery in our worship of God, not only in church, but in our daily lives. We need just a little less intellectualizing (which is not necessarily the same as thinking and questioning) and more **just** worshipping and adoring this Infant of Bethlehem with the Magi as God’s pure Love, heaven’s true Wisdom, made manifest on earth. We need more Kāne Flashing in the Heavens, shimmering Byzantine mosaics, *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*, and “chicken skin” and a little less dour Calvinist introspection and intellectual hair-splitting. We are created to worship and worship is our destiny, as the Book of Revelation prophecies: we shall fall before the one who is seated upon the throne and worship, “casting our golden crowns upon the glassy sea.” We are called not to gaze downward in gloomy introspection, but to gaze heavenward in wonder and adoration.