



02 January – 08 January 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

This week our meditations focus on the celebration of Epiphany on 6 January. The word 'epiphany' speaks of a moment of sudden inspiration or insight. The goal of this celebration, and of the Sunday's that follow it, is to take our insight into the incarnate Jesus deeper. To do this, the Lectionary offers two perspectives on Christ. Firstly, in the coming weeks, we will explore the way Jesus was viewed by those around him - John the Baptist, the disciples, the religious leaders, the crowds, and even God. Secondly, we will also be invited to recognise the various ways that God's glory was revealed in Christ. It's one thing to proclaim that God has become human. It's another thing to understand this human being, and to grasp his significance for our world. This is the work of Epiphany.

The Gospel reading for Epiphany, which we will read on Wednesday, is the famous story from Matthew of the magi's visit. This account is a doorway to understand the mission and message of Jesus more deeply. One of the aims of Matthew's Gospel is to convince its readers that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the "prophet like Moses" that the Old Testament promised. But it also works hard to show that Jesus is a different kind of Messiah from the one the people expected. His mission included both Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, insiders and outcasts. It expanded to embrace the nations, and the whole of creation. Jesus is a Messiah for all. As we begin our journey of understanding Jesus, this is a good, and challenging, place to start.

SUNDAY 02 JANUARY 2022

Read: Ephesians 1:3-14

Reflect: Paul's letter to the Ephesians gives an amazing summary of God's work of salvation. It begins with the awesome affirmation that God loved us even before the universe was created, and that

God had planned from the start to fulfil God's purpose for us and for the created order. This plan is for the entire universe to become one and whole in Christ (vs. 10). This unity and wholeness was first manifest in the way God made Jews and Gentiles one in the new Christian community. Then, in giving us God's Spirit, God filled us with God's life, and showed us that the promise of salvation is real, and that God's plan will come to be. It's amazing to think that everything God does is focussed on this plan of salvation for the universe, and that God invites us not only to know intimacy with God, but to participate in making God's love and life known to the world. It's even more amazing to think of how much God was prepared to sacrifice for the sake of this plan. Stop and reflect on this for a moment.

When we remember that God is at work in our world, and in our lives, to bring about this great, life-giving plan, it puts our struggles in perspective. It also gives us a tremendous sense of security and acceptance. We have no reason to doubt that God's love is infinite, or that we are welcomed into God's family. Our belovedness has been assured since eternity past, and it is assured into eternity future! This is a great reason to celebrate.

How can you stay mindful of God's life and love today, and live with an attitude of celebration?

Do: The Scriptures constantly call God's people to be mindful and to take note of God's presence and work. This awareness does not come naturally. It takes work, particularly the work of developing our spiritual sensitivity through the practice of stillness and meditation. Today, make some time to be still and reflect on the love and grace of God as they are described in today's reading.

Pray: I celebrate you, O God, and wonder at your amazing grace and love.

MONDAY 03 JANUARY 2022

Read: Luke 8:16-21

Reflect: On Sunday we celebrate a festival in the Christian Calendar known as Epiphany. An epiphany is a moment of sudden inspiration or insight. This celebration of Epiphany, and the weeks

that follow it, are meant to take our insight into who Jesus is even deeper. In today's reading Jesus invites us to become wise and insightful by listening to, and implementing, his teaching. Those who follow the ways of Jesus are like lamps that are placed in prominent places so that their light can fill the room. Those who obey the teachings of Jesus are considered to be his family. Once again, we are invited to recognise that we are also "little incarnations" of God. As Jesus is the light of the world, so are we. As the life of Jesus fills and directs us, so we are united with Jesus as the family of God.

Notice that Jesus calls us to pay attention to *how* we hear. It's possible to listen to his teaching, agree with it, even claim to believe it, but for it to have no impact on our lives at all. In this case, the wisdom of Christ just creates confusion for us – it's like our understanding is lost, because what we think and what we do are at odds with each other. But when we put what we've learned into practice, then we have really learned it and our thinking and actions become one. This is what makes us wise and enables us to reflect Christ to the world.

How can you be a lamp bringing light to the world today?

Do: We have become so focussed on the idea of evangelism as speaking to people and getting them to agree to certain ideas. But, for Jesus it's always about how we live. Evangelism is not about words, so much as about the message of our whole lives. The goal is not to "convert" people to a religion, but to enable people to encounter Christ in us in such a way that they, too, begin to orient their lives around Jesus' teaching and mission. Today, try to proclaim Jesus by letting your light shine in small acts of grace and compassion, rather than by preaching or persuading.

Pray: Help me to shine your truth through the way I live my life, Jesus.

TUESDAY 04 JANUARY 2022

Read: Acts 7:44-53

Reflect: Last year we visited Stephen's story a few times. We learned how he was chosen to be one of the deacons who were

appointed to distribute food so that the apostles could focus on teaching and prayer. We learned how he was arrested, tried and executed by stoning, making him the first Christian martyr. Today we listen to a small section of the sermon Stephen preached at his trial. These words were responsible for his death. Stephen did not "sugar coat" his confrontation with the religious leaders, and his challenge made them angry, resulting in the sentence of death. But, of course, this sequence of events was an important part of Paul's journey to faith. Stephen's witness sowed a seed into Paul's heart, it seems, which finally bore fruit on the road to Damascus.

In this section of Stephen's sermon, the focus is on David's desire to build God a Temple. Although the Temple was finally built, Stephen reminds the religious leaders that God needs no Temple. The reason Stephen points this out is that he had been accused of saying that Jesus would destroy the Temple, and he was addressing the idolatry which had arisen around the building. On Wednesday, as we celebrate Epiphany, we will reflect on how the incarnate One came not just to the Jews, but to all nations. Today, Stephen's declaration that heaven is God's throne and earth is God's footstool is a reminder that God does not fit into our boxes of nationality, religiosity, or locality.

How can you open your heart to embrace the world as God's home, and all people – especially the ones you struggle to love – as loved by God?

Do: One of the reasons we are called to pray for all nations is because this reminds us that God loves, and is concerned for, all people – not just us. This is the Good News of Epiphany, and the truth that all Christ-followers must embrace. Today, offer prayers for all the suffering and rejected people of the earth.

Pray: God of the nations, may your grace and love bring healing to all people who are rejected and suffering.

WEDNESDAY 05 JANUARY 2022

Read: Jeremiah 31:7-14

Reflect: The words of today's prophecy from Jeremiah were written to the exiles who had been carried away to Babylon. They are words

of promise and restoration. God calls the people to celebrate because they are going to be returned to their home, and the life they will find there will be peaceful, abundant and just.

Notice two things in this prophecy. Firstly, notice that those who are brought home are not just the wealthy or important, but also the weak and the vulnerable. God's promise is not just for a connected few, but for all. Secondly, notice how the nations are called to witness this restoration of Israel. Although God's people have done nothing to make this happen, their return to their homeland is a witness to the nations. It reflects God's compassion and commitment to God's people and enables Israel to become – as the nation was always called to be – a people that is blessed to be a blessing. Through them all nations are invited to join the celebration and enjoy the blessing.

Tomorrow's celebration of Epiphany is all about God's blessing being offered to all nations and all people. Those who have already experienced God's call and God's promises are to invite others to experience the same gift. Today, give thanks for the blessings God has given you, and think about ways to share those blessings with others.

Do: The twin disciplines of thanksgiving and giving combine to give us a sense of abundance, peace and joy. When we take time to recognise all the goodness we enjoy, we can't help but give thanks, and when we give thanks, we are reminded of the goodness we enjoy. Then, as we look around us, we can't help but seek the same joy for others, which automatically leads us to be generous with our time, talents and treasures. Why not try to experience this virtuous circle for yourself today?

Pray: As I thank you, O God, for the blessings I enjoy, show me how to share them with others.

THE EPIPHANY - THURSDAY 06 JANUARY 2022

Read: Matthew 2:1-12

Reflect: These "wise men" (or, more accurately, sorcerers) who visited Jesus raise a number of questions for us. To begin with they would never have been permitted to worship God in the Temple.

They were Gentiles, and their occupation of divination was forbidden in the Hebrew law. Yet, they are among the first worshippers of Jesus. Then, there is the curious way they came to Jesus – following signs in the heavens and being led by a star – and how they left – being warned in a dream of Herod's evil intentions. It's interesting how clearly they seemed to hear the "voice" of God, while Herod – the king of God's people – was deaf to the new thing God was doing. This story quickly blurs the lines we like to draw concerning who is "in" and who is "out" from God's perspective.

The message of this story is strong and clear, though. The birth of Christ, although it happened in a hidden corner of the world, was not just a gift to one group or nation. It was a gift to the entire world, and anyone who is willing to listen, to watch, and to be open to God's voice can experience God's grace and love.

How can you be more mindful of God's presence in your life today?

Do: As the magi show, it is not just the Scriptures that reveal God to us. Sometimes God speaks through the natural world (the ancient Celts called nature the "Second Bible"). Sometimes God speaks to us through other people. The issue is not whether God is speaking. It's whether we're listening. Today, in every person and situation, listen for the voice of God – especially where you don't expect it.

Pray: Like the magi, O God, I choose to listen and watch for the signs of your presence.

FRIDAY 07 JANUARY 2022

Read: Daniel 2:1-19

Reflect: One of the biggest mistakes the people of God made in the early years of faith was to believe that God's presence and purposes were limited by geography and ethnicity. Initially people believed that gods were local, and that when two groups of people clashed, the victory of one group over the other demonstrated the superior power of their god. The Old Testament is full of such perspectives on events. Then, when the Temple was built, the people of Israel began to learn that God was the God of all the universe, but they still believed that God was, in some way, linked to the Temple. So, when the Temple was destroyed and the people carried into exile, they

thought that God had abandoned them, and that they no longer had access to God's presence and power. The prophet Daniel, however, and many of the other prophets of that and later times, proclaimed a different view.

The story in today's reading is dramatic. The king has a dream, and, in order to ensure he gets the correct interpretation, insists that his wise men tell him what the dream was before they explain it. When they can't do it, he orders their execution. But Daniel, the exiled Hebrew, manages to save himself and the others by fulfilling the king's request. If God's people were in doubt of God's presence, this story would have encouraged them in their faith. But it would also have expanded their view of God, because in this story it is a pagan king who hears God speak through his dream, and who recognises the significance of what he has seen and heard. Once again the Scriptures invite us to celebrate a God who embraces all and works through all. Notice how concerned Daniel is, not just for his own wellbeing, but that of his Gentile colleagues. This is a Christ-like attitude of love.

Today, find ways to celebrate the God who will not be contained in our categories.

Do: When we offer our praise to God, we are opening ourselves to new understandings of God's nature and purpose. Today, allow your praise to expand your faith and allow you to recognise that God is not limited by human categories.

Pray: I praise you, O God, for your love and presence which fills all and embraces all.

SATURDAY 08 JANUARY 2022

Read: Psalm 72

Reflect: Can you imagine a king, a president or a prime minister who fulfilled the requirements of their job in the way that this Psalm describes? As we reflect on the Epiphany celebration, we are reminded of one example of a king who embodied the spirit of this song. The magi who came to worship Jesus were powerful men, but they willingly humbled themselves and worshipped the child because they knew that they were witnessing something new in the

world. This king was, in a way that they could not yet comprehend, completely different from any other that had ever lived. Even just the fact that his family would welcome shepherds and foreigners with kindness and gratitude set them apart from much of the exclusive dividedness of their world. Then, when Jesus grew and began to proclaim the Reign of God, his message was all about building a world of peace, justice, equality, prosperity, and love – just as this Psalm describes it.

No king has ever actually created such a world, and no monarch has ever succeeded in leading his or her subjects into such peace. But, as we seek to understand who Jesus was, and what God's Reign is all about, this Psalm gives us a good picture. But it's more than just a helpful way to understand Jesus. It's also the hope for which we long, pray, and work in our own lives.

How can you participate in ensuring that the poor are treated fairly, the world is abundantly prosperous for all, and the weak and needy are rescued?

Do: Simple acts of kindness and generosity go a long way to bringing God's justice and peace into the world. Today, try to treat everyone you meet with kindness, forgiveness and generosity. Notice the difference it makes to you and to them.

Pray: As I dream of a world of peace and justice, O God, may my life reflect that dream today.