



09 January – 15 January 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

The first Sunday after Epiphany always focuses on the baptism of Jesus. This year Luke's version of this story is the main reading. You might notice that Luke gives a very sparse description of the events - just two simple verses explaining that Jesus was baptised and that the Holy Spirit descended and God's voice spoke words of affirmation. But, in the reading that is set for this Sunday, a few additional verses are included before the baptism account. Here we find John telling people about the One who was to come, and proclaiming him as the one who would baptise others with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The other readings that you may hear in church this week all reflect on this "baptism in the Holy Spirit" and how it touches followers of Jesus. This means that the Scriptures for this week are inviting us to be more than spectators of Jesus experience of baptism. They are inviting us to be participants in the baptism in the Holy Spirit that Jesus brings.

As we face the challenges of each day, as we wrestle with the great crises of our time, we cannot help but recognise that we need resources beyond our human abilities and wisdom. We cannot heal our planet with human effort alone. We cannot bring peace to the world through human wisdom alone. We cannot eradicate poverty or dread disease, and we cannot provide homes, sanitation, water and food for everyone on earth through human ability only. Even on a personal level, we cannot find abundant life in our own strength. We need love beyond our own to keep our relationships strong and healthy. We need generosity beyond our own to ensure that our families and communities can have enough to live. We need grace and forgiveness beyond our own to find ways to reconcile with those who have hurt us or have been hurt by us. The Good News this week, though, is that God has provided us with resources beyond our human capacities. God has made available to us divine wisdom,

strength, guidance, and love through God's Holy Spirit. This week our reflections will help us to be ever more ready to receive this amazing gift.

SUNDAY 09 JANUARY 2022

Read: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Reflect: It must have been tempting for John to accept the praise and devotion of the crowds. For a short moment he was the centre of attention for large numbers of people, and they began to wonder whether he might be the one they'd been waiting for. I wonder whether their speculative comments got into John's heart at all. I wonder whether he ever questioned if he'd misunderstood God's call and if they might have been right. If so, there is no sign of it in today's reading. Rather, we see John making a clear declaration that the one to come would be far greater than he. He could only baptise with water, but the Coming One would offer a baptism unlike any they had ever known – a baptism, an immersion, in God's Spirit and God's purifying fire. Then, when Jesus came, John happily withdrew into the background, knowing that his job was done.

John's baptism was one of repentance and forgiveness. It seems strange that Jesus would choose to receive such a baptism, but again there was a clear message in this simple act. Jesus had not come to rise over humanity, or to rule the people around him. Jesus had not come to be separate from humanity and their experience – even their sin. Instead, Jesus came to stand with us, alongside us, and to identify wholly with us, so that we would know that God was not distant from us. Also, Jesus came to show us that we would be called to share in all that he came to do, and so the power that was available to him – God's Spirit – would also be available to us.

How can you learn today from John's humility and clear sense of call, and from Jesus' companionship and gift of God's Spirit?

Do: "Come, Holy Spirit" is a simple but powerful prayer. It invites the Spirit of God to guide and direct us, to strengthen and purify us. It's not that God's Spirit is not with us unless we pray this prayer. It's that, in praying like this, we open our awareness to recognise the presence and power of God's Spirit. Go through today with this

prayer on your lips and in your heart, and be ready to receive a new sense of God's presence and power.

Pray: Come, Holy Spirit.

MONDAY 10 JANUARY 2022

Read: Ephesians 6:10-17

Reflect: We have to be careful, when speaking of "spiritual warfare". It's easy to make spirituality sound like a poor attempt to live like Harry Potter. This is not what the Scriptures intend. But neither do the Scriptures allow us to be naïve about evil. Whenever we seek to live as followers of Jesus, as citizens of God's Reign, we will face real evil in one way or another. It may be dealing with the shock and horror of a mass shooting in our community. It may be violent crime that touches someone we love. It may be the blatant evil and corruption of government officials, or the unethical gains of corrupt business leaders. It may be the modern-day slavery of human trafficking. Evil takes many forms and often grows so strong that it feels like a powerful, malevolent personality that seeks our destruction. But Paul makes it clear here that in the fight against evil, it's never people who are the real problem. It's the systems and structures – what he calls "evil rulers and authorities" – that uphold corruption, injustice, oppression, and the dehumanising of people.

In our daily lives we may not face the "great evils" that have been mentioned above. But we will face the "little evils" of manipulation, greed, addiction, stereotyping, condemnation, and dishonesty. And the only way to deal with these issues is through the resources of God's Spirit - God's armour. Truth, faith, righteousness (which can also be translated as justice), the Gospel, salvation, God's word – these are the tools we need to overcome the evil within us, and then to participate in overcoming evil in our world.

How can you "put on God's armour" and fight the evil in your own heart and in your world today?

Do: The set reading for today stopped at verse 17, but verse 18 speaks about prayer as part of the "armour" we need. Today, whenever you encounter evil take time to pray and ask for God's Spirit to strengthen you to overcome it.

Pray: Wherever I may encounter evil, O God, I pray for your Spirit to empower me to overcome it.

TUESDAY 11 JANUARY 2022

Read: 1 John 5:13-21

Reflect: It's unfortunate that terms like "eternal life" and "death" have come to refer exclusively, for many Christians, to what happens after we die. There is no question that life continues beyond the grave, but while the Scriptures do address life after death, they are far more concerned with the life we live this side of the grave. The phrase "eternal life" can also be translated as "life of the ages" which refers to the age of God's Reign, God's new order for the world. Eternal life is not something we experience only after we die. It's available to us now. And "death" doesn't only happen when our bodies stop working. Many people are physically alive, but essentially dead, with no real life in them at all. I believe this is what the writer of this letter means when he speaks about the "sin that leads to death".

Some things that we do may hurt others or us, but they don't have a lasting impact on our lives or our world. We quickly learn to change how we live, and we move on. These sins do not lead us to death, but, in a way, actually lead us deeper into life, because they show us what needs to be changed in our lives. There are, however, other things we may do that leave a lasting negative effect on our lives and the lives of those around us. These sins are deeply destructive, very difficult to overcome, and almost impossible to change once we've allowed them to get hold of us. They lead us to the living death of those whose lives are forever broken. John's teaching in today's passage could seem to give us license to judge those who sin in ways that "lead to death", but I don't believe that is John's intention. Rather, he simply seeks to make us aware that some actions leave irreparable scars, which require far more than just a few words of spoken prayer to overcome them. But, thankfully, in Christ there is always hope!

Today, ensure that your sin does not lead you into lasting brokenness by acknowledging it, confessing it, and asking for God's Spirit to help you change it.

Do: Confession is not an "empty ritual". It is a helpful and healing practice that teaches us to be aware of our own brokenness and sin, and helps us to find ways to overcome our worst selves. Today, whenever you become aware of harbouring attitudes, thoughts, actions or words that do harm, confess them, receive God's forgiveness, and allow God's Spirit to convict and change you.

Pray: Gracious God, I confess my sin to you, and thankfully receive your forgiveness and the strength to change.

WEDNESDAY 12 JANUARY 2022

Read: Luke 11:33-36

Reflect: Luke's version of this famous saying of Jesus links together the ideas of "light" and "seeing". But it also goes further than that. While Jesus stresses how important clear sight is – it gives light to our whole being – he also speaks about the impact of this clarity of sight on how our lives impact the world. When we see clearly – with the light of God's Spirit – our whole lives are filled with light, and no darkness is able to fill us. Then, our whole lives become radiant with the light of God.

This metaphor can be understood in many ways, but one of the most important is in terms of how we choose to live. It's tempting to "just live" and not think too much. Self-reflection and working to understand other people and the world takes a lot of effort. It is tiring, and, in many ways, it complicates things because people are not easy to understand, and neither is the world. But, when we live an unexamined life (as Socrates called it), our eyes are dark and unseeing, and we are unable to navigate our way to our best possible life. If, on the other hand, we are willing to allow God's Spirit to teach us and guide us in our reflections, and if we are willing to do the work of living mindfully, we learn to see more clearly, and we are able to navigate the difficult paths of life with greater grace, compassion, joy, peace and love.

How can you open yourself to the searching light of God's Spirit and allow the Spirit to give you clear sight?

Do: One of the best ways to see clearly is to take the time to step back from life and meditate, reflecting on how we are living, and how

we believe we should live. This prayer of *examen*, practiced under the guidance of God's Spirit, leads us into a clearer vision of our world and ourselves. For some people, journaling these reflections makes the practice even more effective. Set aside some time today for the prayer of *examen* and for some journaling.

Pray: As I seek to see more clearly, O God, please guide and teach me by your Spirit.

THURSDAY 13 JANUARY 2022

Read: Acts 8:18-24

Reflect: Simon was a Samaritan sorcerer who had exerted great influence over the people in his community by the magic he performed. But, when Philip began to preach the Gospel, the people believed and were baptised - including Simon himself. He was amazed by this new encounter with God, and followed Philip around. Then, when the apostles came and began to lay hands on people for them to receive God's Spirit, Simon was even more impressed and he wanted to be able to do the same. So he offered the apostles money for them to teach him. Peter was, of course, deeply offended by the offer, and rebuked Simon, who quickly repented.

We all know the temptation of viewing God's Spirit as a commodity that we can "purchase". We are all tempted from time to time to try and find short cuts to God's grace and blessing. We may not try to use money, but we often try to bargain with God, promising greater devotion and service if God will just give us what we want. We also fall into the trap of trying to get God "on our side" in manipulating other people to do what we want. Whenever we do this, we cheapen God's grace, and we resist the deep work of transformation that God seeks to do in us. Faith is not about getting what we want, it's about becoming who God created us to be – people whose lives manifest the justice, love and grace of God's Reign.

How have you tried to bargain with God recently? How can you submit yourself a little more to God's transforming work today?

Do: It is, unfortunately, all too easy to allow our faith to become about what we can get from God. But this does not lead us to our best lives. Today, try instead to dedicate yourself to God, asking

what God wants from you. Then, in every moment you can, follow God's guidance and see how this impacts your life.

Pray: What do you want from me today, O God?

FRIDAY 14 JANUARY 2022

Read: Jeremiah 3:19-25

Reflect: Two metaphors are used for God's relationship with God's people in the first two verses of today's reading. The first is the relationship between parent and child, and the second is the relationship between spouses. The Scriptures often use these metaphors because we know and understand these relationships, and they can be doorways to understanding God's love for us. This is part of the reason why, as we will read on Sunday, Jesus' first miraculous sign in John's Gospel was the changing of water to wine at the wedding in Cana. When we reflect on how we love our children and our spouses, we can catch a glimpse of how God loves us. It also helps us to understand the message of today's reading.

The people of God were on a destructive path. They had turned away from the ways of God, and had begun to practice the worship of idols, which often included sexual orgies. The prophet Jeremiah called this a "delusion", and it resulted in the loss of everything for God's people. But, in God's love, God continued to call the people back to God's ways of integrity and grace. Today, we face the same delusional temptations – to follow the ways of our own wisdom, or of pleasure and immediate gratification. And many of us know the pain and loss that results from following this course. When God calls us back to God's ways, this is because they are the ways of life – of joy, peace, connection and love.

Today, make time to reflect again on the ways of God as revealed in the Scriptures, and renew your commitment to follow them.

Do: The Bible is given to us, not to be a legal constitution that binds and imprisons us, but a guide that leads us into deeper relationships with Jesus. It is this relationship that leads us into the ways of life. Today, take time to listen to the Scriptures and allow them to lead you deeper into connection with Christ.

Pray: Speak to me through the Scriptures, Jesus, for I long to follow your ways.

SATURDAY 15 JANUARY 2022

Read: Psalm 36:5-10

Reflect: At the wedding in Cana (which is the main reading for tomorrow), John's Gospel tells us that Jesus revealed God's glory. This means that, in this act, Jesus showed us what God is like. The picture of God that we see in Jesus is much like the picture we see in this Psalm. God's love is unending, and God's faithfulness is unshakable. But notice that God's love and faithfulness are given not just to some people, but to "all humanity", and not even just to humans but also to animals – essentially to the whole of creation. God is a God of extravagant, all-embracing love, and God's commitment to the created universe is complete and whole-hearted.

Furthermore, God becomes for us the light by which we see, according to verse 9. This means that, as we recognise and open ourselves to God's unending love, we begin to see God, ourselves, others, and the world through the eyes of God's love. Of course, this changes everything for us and fills our lives with grace, compassion, openness, and a willingness to connect and serve each other. That's why the final prayer in verse 10 is for God to give justice to those with honest hearts. This is both the gift of receiving justice, and the gift of living justly for the sake of others.

Today, meditate on God's unending love, and allow it to change how you see and how you live.

Do: The practice of praise, as in this Psalm, opens our hearts and minds to perceive the nature of God more clearly. When we praise God, we cannot help but recognise how amazingly loving and faithful God is. Why not fill your day with praise today?

Pray: God of unending love and limitless faithfulness, I praise and celebrate you.