

## ***Sacredise Daily Worship***

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:

25 - 31 December 2016

### **Thought for the Week:**

Happy Christmas! Today is one of the most significant days in the Christian Calendar. Unfortunately we can easily miss how powerfully subversive and transforming this day really is – unless we're willing to open our lives and hearts not just to the Christ Child, but to the Reign of God which he brought into our world.

It is tempting to think of Christmas as nothing more than the first step in God's work of saving us from our sins so that we can go to heaven. But it is so much more than this. The Christmas story actually begins in Genesis 1 when God speaks creation into being. And it ends with a vision of a new world that is whole and one in Christ. It is because God has always been working to bring the entire cosmos into God's life and love that Jesus was born. The birth of Christ was not God's plan B to address the unexpected problem of sin. Rather the birth of Christ was the moment God had been working toward for millennia when God's Reign would become visible and active in a new and powerful way in our world. This means that Christmas is not just about the birth of a unique baby. It is about the rebirth of all things – including you and me.

This week we explore the powerful, transforming significance of Jesus' birth.

### **Christmas Day Sunday 25 December 2016**

**Reading:** Luke 2:8-20

**Reflection:** Luke spends a lot of time in his Gospel preparing for the birth of Jesus. It's like he wants to make sure that his readers understand as clearly as possible what God is doing. Then, when he turns to the birth narrative, Luke highlights features that drive his point home even more strongly. Today's reading is a case in point. Only Luke mentions the shepherds, but this is an important feature

of his narrative. Shepherds were outcasts in their world. Their work meant that they were unable to observe the law, and so they were unclean, and forbidden to worship in the Temple. Yet, it is to these poor, marginalised people that God's messengers appeared – out in the wilderness where no one else could see them! Then, after seeing the baby, these shepherds, who would not have been accepted as witnesses in a court of law, became the first witnesses to Jesus' birth.

The message of the angels is also significant, because the words they used were often associated with Caesar. He was the one who was said to have brought "peace on earth" and he was known as "Lord" and the "son of God". But, here Luke applies those titles to this child, born in obscurity, and witnessed by society's shadow people. Could anything demonstrate more clearly how different God's Reign is from those of human Caesars? But, the miracle is that, when outcasts and the poor are included and lifted up, and when the One who is most powerful is willing to lay aside power in order to include all people, then peace really is possible. Imagine if human leaders shared power this way! Imagine if human society learned to make a place for everyone this way!

Who are the outcasts in your world? How can you celebrate Christ's birth by extending grace and sharing power with them?

**Practice for Today:** One simple way to begin extending grace to those who are marginalised is to take notice of them – to make a point of really seeing them. When we notice people, and treat them with dignity, we may discover that we share healing and grace more significantly than we might imagine. Try this today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Open my eyes, O God, that I may see with your eyes those who are usually overlooked.

### **Monday 26 December 2016**

**Reading:** Psalm 148

**Reflection:** Yesterday we celebrated the incarnation - the act of God taking on human flesh. This is an important celebration, remembering a pivotal point in history. But, there is a danger in the Christmas festival. We may be tempted to see God's incarnation as

a once-off event in history that happened only in one person, in one place, and at one time. But, to view Christmas this way would be to miss the point. The miracle of Christmas is not that God was incarnated in one person, but that Jesus' birth removed the veil that stopped us from seeing God incarnated in all people and in all of creation. Once we see God taking flesh in Jesus, we cannot help but begin to see how God has chosen to embody God's Self in all of creation. "Where can I go from your Spirit?" says the Psalmist in Psalm 139, implying that the answer is "nowhere"!

In today's Psalm we read the same truth in a different way. This song invites all of creation – every created thing – to express God's praises. Why are the heavens and earth, the animals and the people, to praise God? Because God's glory towers over earth and heaven. In other words, God's revealed presence fills, and overflows from, everything that God has made. And it is God's presence that gives God's people strength and which keeps them close to God's heart. The birth of Jesus, then, is meant to be the sign that enables us to see and experience God's presence in all things – including within our own flesh. We are all temples of God's Spirit!

How can you open yourself to experience God's presence in your world, and in your own body, today?

**Practice for Today:** The prayer of invocation – the simplest of which is, "Come, Holy Spirit" – is not a request for God's presence to be where it previously was not. It is a prayer that we should become aware of God's presence that is always with us, but which we do not always perceive. Today, as you remember the birth of Jesus, ask God's Spirit to make aware of God's presence within you, and in your world.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Show me, Holy Spirit, the presence of God within me, and in the world around me.

### **Tuesday 27 December 2016**

**Reading:** 1 John 5:1-12

**Reflection:** The Christmas message, which is affirmed by today's reading, is that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh, and that, in him, life can be found. The writer of this letter draws on three witnesses:

the water of Jesus' baptism, at which God spoke and affirmed Jesus as God's Son; the blood of Jesus' death; and the Spirit of truth. These three witnesses testify that when we look at Jesus, we see what God is like – and the picture that is revealed is of a God who willingly takes on human flesh and dies in order to bring humanity into the life of God.

Once we have accepted this truth about Jesus, we are called to make a response. Firstly, we are invited to come to Christ and receive life from him. This is not just about life beyond death, but includes the gift of vibrant, abundant life here and now. Then, secondly, we are called to respond to God by loving God and by loving others. Jesus' death revealed that God's very nature is love, and so, if we desire to experience God's life, we must embrace love. Life and love are inseparable. Our celebration of Christmas, then, is not just about singing some songs and giving gifts. It is about allowing Jesus to connect us intimately with God and pour God's life into us, and, through us, to the world – every day.

How can you open yourself to love and life a little more today?

**Practice for Today:** In order to love God and to receive God's life, we need to open ourselves constantly to get know God better. The practice of praise, in which we meditate on God's qualities and nature, expands our knowledge of, and connection with, God. Today, engage in mindful praise and open your heart and mind to a deeper connection with God.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** I praise you, God of love and life, for inviting me into intimacy with you.

### **Wednesday 28 December 2016**

**Reading:** Matthew 18:1-14

**Reflection:** Usually, the first Sunday after Christmas focuses on the massacre of the children in Bethlehem by King Herod (this year is different because New Year's Day falls on a Sunday). This is how the empires of this world operate – children, the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, and, in many cases, women are expendable. So, it was nothing for Herod to wipe out a whole village of children in order to protect his throne. But, in God's reign, we see a very different

picture. In today's reading Jesus teaches that children are the greatest in God's Reign, and that anyone who wants to experience God's life, must become like a child. Verse 4 particularly emphasises the humility of children, and calls us to a similar attitude. Then, Jesus goes on to speak about how children are to be protected and welcomed – because when we embrace the children around us, we embrace Jesus himself.

This teaching is then followed up with the parable of the lost sheep. Notice that Jesus connects this story with his teaching about children. God does not want a single child to be lost, but will go to great lengths to bring them into God's care and love. The implication is that we should have the same concern for the children in our world. No wonder God chose to enter human flesh as a child!

How can you show God's love to the children in your world today? And how can you embrace the humility of children in your journey as a child of God?

**Practice for Today:** Children pray easily and without guile or self-consciousness. And they love to be prayed for. Somehow, when adults pray with children, the children sense the care and love, of God and of the one praying, and find security and joy in it. Take some time to pray with, or for, the children around you today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Teach me to welcome children in your name, Jesus, and to free the child within myself.

#### **Thursday 29 December 2016**

**Reading:** Jeremiah 31:15-22

**Reflection:** Yesterday we made reference to the massacre of the children in Bethlehem, which is described in Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew's account, the author quotes today's reading from Jeremiah. But, it's a strange passage to associate with Herod's attempt to execute Jesus. The prophet Jeremiah writes to describe the grief and mourning of God's people when they are conquered and carried off into exile. But, he doesn't end there. He goes on to speak a promise in God's name – a promise that the weeping will come to an end, that God will restore God's children and bring them back to their own land, and a promise that, no matter what God's

children have done, they remain God's children. This passage is followed by the promise of a new covenant in which God's law will be written on the hearts of God's children, and in which they will know deep intimacy with their God.

This seems to be a very different scenario from that in Matthew's Gospel in which a cruel king massacres children in order to destroy a potential rival to his power. What connects the two passages, though, is God's promise that God will restore God's children, that God will make a new covenant with them, and that nothing can take them from God's hand. In Jesus, all of these promises are fulfilled, because he rules with compassion, forgiveness, and justice, unlike Herod, and unlike the rulers of our world. The Reign of God is a restorative, healing, and life-giving reign, and it is revealed most powerfully in the Christ child who challenged the kingdoms of this world and won through love.

How can you see the promises of God's reign being fulfilled in your life today?

**Practice for Today:** One of the most powerful spiritual practices in the Bible is lament. When we lament we bring our grief and anger honestly to God, we cry out to God for help and comfort, we remember the ways that God has acted in the past, and we express our trust and praise to God, holding on to God's promises. Do you need to spend time in lament today? Or do you know someone else for whom you can do this?

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Hear my grief as I cry out to you, O God, and as I remember and celebrate your acts of restoration.

#### **Friday 30 December 2016**

**Reading:** 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

**Reflection:** The apostle Paul knew what it was to suffer for the sake of the Gospel. He was beaten, imprisoned, left for dead, shipwrecked, and finally executed. Yet, he refused to be silenced, and he refused to give up his work for the sake of Christ. He was determined to spread Jesus' message as far as he could. He knew that his life had been captured by something far stronger than death, or than any human systems of power or control. He also knew that,

when persecution was insufficient to make him change his course, that this would speak louder than any sermon, and that it would help him to draw others into God's life. And so he rejoiced even in his suffering.

It takes a great dream to make women and men endure such trials willingly. For Paul, there was the dream of a world in which God's love and justice prevailed, and in which all people could live in peace and harmony and sufficiency. This dream is always threatening to those who do not want to share their power or lose their access to unlimited wealth. But, Paul also held to the dream of a life – a glory – that went beyond the grave. He knew that death was not the end, but that the life he found in Christ would last into eternity, and he longed for others to know this life as well. Life now, and life beyond death – these two dreams are unstoppable, and they bring true healing and freedom to all who are captured by them.

How can you open your heart a little more to the dream of God's life today?

**Practice for Today:** No matter how tough our circumstances may be, when we give thanks – as Paul constantly did – we find strength and joy even in the midst of our struggles. Today, no matter what you're facing, try to be thankful at all times.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** For your unquenchable life, now and into eternity, I thank you, O God.

### **New Year's Eve Saturday 31 December 2016**

**Reading:** 1 Kings 3:5-14

**Reflection:** If you could have anything you wanted, what would you ask for? As we stand on the threshold of a new year, you may feel like you wish God would make an offer to you like the one God made to Solomon. But, in a sense, God already has. The Psalmist tells us that when we delight in God, God gives us the desires of our hearts. Solomon knew that he would need God's wisdom to be the leader God wanted him to be. At this point in his life, he still delighted in God, and God gave him what he wanted – because it was what God wanted!

Sometimes we fall into thinking that if something makes us happy, it can't be God's will for us, but the truth is that God desires nothing more than to give us abundant life – a life of love, joy, and peace. But, God knows what gives us this kind of life, and it's often not we think it is. It's not having everything we want. It's giving as much as we can. It's not being served. It's serving. It's not comfort and luxury, it's sacrificing ourselves for something that we believe in and that makes a difference. Study after study has shown that these things – the desires of God's heart – are what really make us happy. This is why God asks us to delight in God first. Because once our hearts are focussed on God's delight, we will want what God wants – and that's what really brings us life.

How can you train your heart to want what God wants today? What would you ask God for, then?

**Practice for Today:** The way we train our hearts to want what God wants, is by spending time in deep connection with God. When we make regular time to meditate on who God is, when we pray, reflect on Scripture, and worship, our hearts are trained to love what God loves. Today, use these practices to train your heart.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As delight in you, O God, my heart learns to love what you love.

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