



29 December 2024 – 04 January 2025

### THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

This week we have been celebrating the incarnation – God becoming human. It's one thing to proclaim that God has been embodied in human flesh, but it's a completely different thing to understand what that means for us today. If the incarnation is nothing more than an interesting quirk of history, it really makes no difference to our lives. But of course, the incarnation is far more than that. If we can believe the radical idea that, in the man Jesus, God was present and active in our human world, then that says an awful lot about God and about us. It tells us things about who God is and what we can expect from God, and it tells us things about who we are as human beings, and what we can expect of ourselves.

This week you may have heard about the boy Samuel who was dedicated to God and who lived in the Tabernacle with the old priest Eli. You may also have heard about when Jesus was forgotten in the Temple when he was twelve years old. If you put these two stories next to each other, you can't help but notice some parallels. Both Jesus and Samuel were dedicated to God from their birth. Both boys were very comfortable in the worship centres of their time. Both grew wise and strong and gained favour with people. And both came to influence God's people greatly. While there is one significant difference between the two – the Gospels proclaim Jesus as God in human flesh – there is a clear message in this resonance between the two boys: Jesus was not really different in his humanity, his experience of life, his need to grow and learn, from the rest of us. His divinity did not make him somehow "supernatural". When the creeds proclaim that Jesus was "fully human" they mean it.

It is important that we understand the humanity of Jesus, but also learn what his humanity says about his divinity. This is the tough challenge of this week.

**SUNDAY 29 DECEMBER 2024**

**Read:** Luke 2:41-52

**Reflect:** It's tempting to make more of this scene than the passage suggests. Notice that Jesus is not portrayed as "teaching" the religious leaders. Rather he listens and asks questions (verse 46). People are amazed at Jesus' answers and his understanding, but that is always the case when someone so young demonstrates insight and wisdom beyond their years. As Jesus spoke with the teachers in the Temple, this was not a case of God speaking and teaching the human leaders. Rather, it was a case of a boy with a passion for God and a keen mind seeking to learn as much as possible from those who were respected teachers. Later Jesus would challenge the Temple's leaders in many ways, but first he had to grasp the law and understand it deeply in order to fulfil it as he was called to do. Although this child was, in some way we may never fully understand, God, he was also very human – just a child who wanted to learn. And as he grew, he remained obedient to his parents until the time came for his ministry to begin.

When we make the mistake of overemphasising Jesus' divinity, we run the risk of believing that he wasn't really human – at least not like us. But, if Jesus wasn't human, then nothing of his life has any real value for us. For our humanity to be transformed through Christ's teaching, life and death, Jesus must have been fully and completely human – just as we are. And that means that in Jesus we see what human beings can become, if we will only embrace the way of love as he did.

How can you allow Jesus to teach you how to be human today?

**Do:** The model that Jesus offers us here is invaluable. Although he had come to fulfil the law, to challenge women and men to become all that God had created them to be, Jesus did not begin by preaching. He started with listening and asking questions. This is always the way to growth and insight. Today, make listening and asking questions – of the Bible and of other people – a focus of your day.

**Pray:** What do you require of me today, O God?

## MONDAY 30 DECEMBER 2024

**Read:** 2 Chronicles 1:7-13

**Reflect:** The writer of Chronicles probably wrote shortly after the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon. The challenge of that time was how to avoid the mistakes of the past that had resulted in the exile in the first place. For the Chronicler, the answer to that question lay in the restoration of Israel's worship. When the Israelites were faithful and followed God's wisdom, they had prospered. But, when they had allowed idolatry, injustice, and foolishness to shape their lives, they had experienced destruction. So, the writer of Chronicles took his readers back to the time of Israel's greatest glory – the time of David and the early part of Solomon's reign.

Today we read of Solomon's request for wisdom, which so pleased God that he received not just the wisdom he asked for, but wealth, power, and prestige as well. However, as Solomon's story unfolded, his wisdom seemed to run out. He allowed himself to be led into idolatry by his many wives, and he shifted from his initial concern that he govern his people well to a self-centred, self-aggrandising pride. This is in stark contrast to Jesus, who, in bringing God's Reign into the world, chose humility, self-giving, and faithfulness to God from his birth all the way through to his death and resurrection.

The way we begin does not predict the way we will end, unless we work consistently to stay true to God's purposes and priorities. How can you renew your commitment to God's ways today?

**Do:** A commitment to Christ, and to the way of Jesus, is not a once-off decision. It needs to be a moment-by-moment experience, in which we choose, in every situation and interaction, to embrace the wisdom, grace, love, and justice of God. Today, in whatever circumstances you may find yourself, try to be mindful of choosing the Jesus way in every moment.

**Pray:** I ask for your wisdom, O God, and for the faithfulness to choose your wise ways in every moment of my life.

## TUESDAY 31 DECEMBER 2024

**Read:** John 8:12-19

**Reflect:** Today we get a small glimpse into what Jesus' divinity tells us about God. In John's Gospel Jesus makes seven radical statements about himself. They are known as the "I am..." statements, because they all start with the words "I am". The way Jesus expressed these two words in the Greek makes a startling point. He used a strange form of speech that resonates with God's words to Moses in the Old Testament. When Moses asks for God's name, God's reply is "I am that I am". In the ancient Hebrew, which had no vowels, God's name is expressed in four letters: YHWH (known as the tetragrammaton). We usually pronounce this name as "Yahweh" or "Jehovah" in English. The way Jesus said, "I am" was intentionally designed to associate him with this name of God.

In today's reading Jesus claims that he is the light of the world. It is light that enables us to see. It is light that creates colour. Then, when Jesus is challenged by the religious leaders, he responds confidently, ending with the statement that they would know God if they knew him. The simple truth here is this: God is like Jesus. As light helps us to see what is hidden in darkness, so Jesus helps us to see the mystery of God's nature. If we ever hold on to a picture of God that doesn't look like Jesus, we've missed the mark. God is to be understood through the character and actions of Jesus.

How can you allow Jesus to lead you into a deeper understanding of God today?

**Do:** When we take time to really "see" Jesus, to focus on who he was and what he did, we are learning more about God. One of the best ways to practice this focussed attention is through praise. As we praise Jesus, we learn to see and understand him better – and through him, God. Try it today.

**Pray:** I praise you Jesus, Light of the world, for the way you reveal God to me.

## NEW YEAR'S DAY – WEDNESDAY 01 JANUARY 2025

**Read:** Matthew 25:31-46

**Reflect:** This week, as we have explored what the incarnation of God in Jesus means for us, we have encountered the very ordinary humanity of Jesus, and we have recognised how Jesus reveals God

to us. Today at the start of a New Year, we are confronted with another startling truth. It is not only Jesus who incarnates God. Jesus is unique in his relationship with the Father, and in the way God was incarnated in him, but there is a sense in which we are all "little incarnations" of God.

Genesis tells us that we all have God's breath (Spirit) within us and that we are all created in God's image. Now Jesus, in this very challenging parable, teaches that when we serve others, we are actually serving him. Mysteriously, Jesus is embodied in the poor and weak, the vulnerable and marginalised. There is a strong call in the scriptures to recognise that the incarnation is not just about one miraculous event long ago in history. The incarnation is about how we see and live in the world. When we live with an "incarnational" worldview, we see God everywhere and in everyone, and we treat people and our planet as though we were serving God directly. When we place God in some far-off heaven, and we make the incarnation an event that is separate from us, we can far more easily write others off, and ignore the consequences of how we treat them and our world.

As you begin a New Year today, how can you commit to looking for Jesus in the faces of others throughout the year?

**Do:** The challenging message of today's parable is that when we serve others, we encounter Jesus in them. Service is a way to encounter and connect with God. Today, at every opportunity, serve God by serving those around you – and let today set the course for how you treat others throughout this year.

**Pray:** Give me the strength and grace to serve you, Jesus, by serving others.

#### THURSDAY 02 JANUARY 2025

**Read:** Proverbs 1:1-7

**Reflect:** The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings and parables that have been found helpful for millennia. Many of our common adages originate in this book. At the start of a New Year, it's always good to reflect on the values and purposes by which we will choose to live in the months to come. This introduction to

Proverbs indicates that the book is designed for exactly this kind of decision-making. Its purpose is to teach wisdom and discipline – the two skills that are so desperately needed if we are to navigate the world in healthy and life-giving ways. The final declaration of this short section of the book is that such wisdom is found in the fear of God. This is not fear in the sense of terror or anxiety. The original intention of this word is reverence or awe. In other words, as we open ourselves to encounter God and respond in awe and reverence, that's when we are learning wisdom.

So, how are we to encounter God in this way? Jesus boldly proclaimed that when we see him, we are seeing God. So, as we open our lives to Christ, as we allow Jesus to reveal God to us, and as we follow the ways and teachings of Jesus, we grow wise and disciplined, and our lives become whole and life giving.

How can you allow Jesus to lead you deeper into God's wisdom today?

**Do:** Whenever we gather for worship, we invoke God's Spirit to strengthen and teach us. Whenever we need wisdom, we can also invoke God's Spirit to strengthen and teach us. As we invite God's Spirit to work within us, the Spirit reminds us of Jesus' life and teaching and inspires us to follow Jesus more closely. Today, whenever you need wisdom, call on God's Spirit.

**Pray:** Come, Holy Spirit, teach me and strengthen me as I seek to follow Jesus.

#### FRIDAY 03 JANUARY 2025

**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.

## SATURDAY 04 JANUARY 2025

**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 (which is what the word "martyr" means) 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 Sunday, 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 the nations of the earth is because it reminds us that God loves, and is concerned for, all people. 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.