



05 – 11 January 2025

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 05 JANUARY 2025

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.

THE EPIPHANY – MONDAY 06 JANUARY 2025

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.

TUESDAY 07 JANUARY 2025

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.

WEDNESDAY 08 JANUARY 2025

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.

THURSDAY 09 JANUARY 2025

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Reflect: This Epiphany season is all about understanding Jesus more deeply. Paul, in this famous section from 1 Corinthians, makes it clear that the message and mission of Jesus is completely foreign to all people, whether God's people or not. Any attempt to understand Jesus from a human perspective will fail, and we'll end up missing the point. This has happened all over the world, and throughout time, of course. Whenever we see churches supporting the agendas of politicians or corporate leaders – as happened in South Africa during apartheid, and as is often the case with prosperity preachers – we know that people are trying to understand

Jesus from the perspective of human values. Whenever we think that faith is a pathway to certain wealth, popularity, and security, we have misunderstood the call of Christ.

The idea of a crucified Messiah was anathema to the Jewish people who were hoping for a military liberator. The idea of a dying God was illogical to the Greeks who were influenced by their philosophers and thinkers. Yet, this is exactly what the Gospel asks us to believe and embrace. Dying to live; the first becoming last and the last first; children as the leaders; forgiving enemies – these are not the ideas that help us "get ahead" in human terms. But they are the ways to abundant life, if we are willing to believe them.

What "human" perspectives on Christ do you need to release today? What "foolishness" do you need to embrace?

Do: One of the reasons that worship has always included the arts and has always welcomed children, is that we need to be reminded of the importance of play. Both artists and children know instinctively that play leads us into new and surprising insights and wisdom. Today, try to make play – especially play that involves some foolishness – part of your worship of God.

Pray: God of foolish wisdom and strong weakness, teach me to find your truth in playfulness today.

FRIDAY 10 JANUARY 2025

Read: Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Reflect: Nicky Gumbel, the founder of the alpha course, once said, "What a pity to live your whole life and, in the end, find that you've missed the point." Today's reading resonates with that sentiment. The book of Ecclesiastes is traditionally believed to have been written by Solomon, the wise king of Israel, and many scholars still believe that the book contains many of his proverbs and reflections. Certainly, today's reading echoes what we know of Solomon's life. He had wealth beyond measure, wives and concubines in the hundreds, and a life filled with every pleasure he could imagine.

Yet, there's a tragic feeling to Solomon's life. In spite of his great wisdom, and all the good things he enjoyed, he largely lost his faith. He was drawn to experiment with the religions of his wives, and he

neglected to follow the ways of God. And in the end, his family, and his kingdom suffered for it. After he died, his son acted with such disdain for God's people, and with so little wisdom, that kingdom was torn in two.

There are so many messages in our world today telling us that we can be rich and famous if we just focus on our own pleasure and potential. Yet, in the end, Solomon realised that this kind of personal aggrandisement is like chasing the wind. It's only in the foolishness of God's ways of love and service that we really find meaning and joy.

Are there any places of "wind chasing" in your life at the moment? What can you do about that?

Do: The practice of simplicity – removing all that clutters our lives, be it "stuff" or unhelpful attitudes, or old grudges, or desires for things that complicate our lives and our world – is a liberating and healing one. So often when we get stressed the reason is because our lives have become cluttered. Today, identify any clutter in your life, and try to release it in favour of simplicity.

Pray: Teach me, O God, to live my life according to your simple wisdom.

SATURDAY 11 JANUARY 2025

Read: Psalm 29

Reflect: Tomorrow, in the Church Calendar, we remember the baptism of Jesus. This story, which is told very dramatically in some of the Gospels, gives us a glimpse of God's perspective on Jesus. In this moment, which marked the start of Jesus' ministry, the voice of God was a significant feature. It must have been deeply encouraging and strengthening for Jesus to hear God say that God was pleased with him, and to experience the Holy Spirit's presence so clearly.

Today's Psalm celebrates the voice of God. God's voice is powerful and majestic, bringing joy to the mountains and making the wilderness quake. The images of God's voice influencing creation are powerful and dramatic. Yet, as the Psalm ends, it's this same God who strengthens and brings peace to God's people. The point

in this Psalm is not to explain natural phenomena as being specifically controlled by God's command. Rather, it's about showing the creative and life-giving power of God's word. In the same way that God's voice strengthened Jesus for his ministry, so God's voice encourages and inspires us, if we will let it. This doesn't mean that we will hear God's voice audibly, but that God's voice speaks to us through the world around us, and within our hearts.

How can you allow God's voice to strengthen you today?

Do: If we think of prayer as a conversation with God – which is really what it is – then, as we bring our requests to God, we are also opening ourselves to hear God's voice in response. Today, as you pray for yourself and others, allow time for God's voice to speak in your heart, through other people, or through creation.

Pray: As I bring my requests to you, O God, so I wait to hear your voice.