

# Sunday Readings

## the Year of Luke



*On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother;  
and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their  
treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.  
(Matthew 2:11)*

**Epiphany of the LORD**  
Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2019

**notes**

1. The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

2. **Cover image:** Icon of the Epiphany of the LORD.

3. **Lectio Divina:** reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us:

*"In the presence of GOD, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask, for example: 'LORD, what does this text say to me? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What troubles me about this text? Why am I not interested in this?' Or perhaps: 'What do I find pleasant in this text? What is it about this Word that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?'"<sup>1</sup>*

The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this booklet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order:

*lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down.

*meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words.

*oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it.

*contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation.

This booklet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*.<sup>2</sup>

4. **Review of the Week** – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

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1 From paragraph 153 *The Joy of the Gospel* (Evangelii Gaudium) – Pope Francis (2013)

2 *Mt.18:20*

## EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

6<sup>th</sup> January 2019

### *revelation of the mystery*

#### ***introduction***

The full revelation of the meaning of our universe and every universe beyond, cannot be gleaned from observation of Nature alone. The manifestation of reality found in the Scriptures, is where we now turn. The GOD of the universe has revealed the Saviour of our world in the birth of a child. The arrival of the *magi*,<sup>3</sup> worries those in power. King Herod summons his scribes who remind him of the prophecy that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Quoting the prophet *Micah*, Matthew affirms that, for that reason – and in spite of appearances – Bethlehem is by no means ‘*the least of the cities of Israel*’.<sup>4</sup> The evangelist replaces the term meaning ‘*least*’ in the Greek version of the prophet *Micah* by another – the term Matthew himself will use later to speak of ‘*the least*’ in whom we meet Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Like Bethlehem, at first sight the poor and the forgotten ones seem insignificant. Yet they are hugely important because its through them that GOD, in Christ, comes to us.

#### ***first reading: Isaiah 60 : 1 – 6***

[ the gathering in of the dispersed ]

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.(1)  
For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.(2)  
Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.(3)  
Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.(4)  
Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.(5)  
A multitude of camels shall cover you,*

3 *Magi*: – wise men, or what we would call today, ‘astrologers’.

4 *Mi.5:1*

5 *Mt.25:31-46* – the last judgement scene.

*the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.(6)*

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century before the Christian era, the Israelites had begun returning to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. But hopes for a more settled life in restored Jerusalem were in vain. A significant minority found themselves marginalised by others who had also shared in the exile. A dominant, oppressive priesthood gained control. The marginalised had life squeezed out of them. Yet it is to them that the prophet addresses his word of invitation, to imagine a different world. Among this minority, a new liberated hope and a new kind of energy takes shape. The prophet invites them to dream of a future beyond their present harsh circumstances.

Isaiah's vision offers the suffering ones hope, security, and peace in their own land.<sup>6</sup> This dream of freedom and newness, applies especially to those who have been exiled, marginalised and made vulnerable. GOD's *power-for-life*, or *grace*, breaks with what has gone before. The sun is the symbol of this power; sign of the sure coming of newness just as dawn surely follows the darkness of night. The people of Jerusalem don't initiate the change. They're recipients of gifts and surprises that they might not want. But this newness is given precisely at the time of their vulnerability and grieving; and their mourning turns to genuine heart-felt praising.<sup>7</sup>

***response: Psalm 72 (71) : 1 – 2, 7 – 8, 10 – 13*** [ Prayer for guidance for the King ]

*Give the king your justice, O GOD,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.(1)  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.(2) . . .  
In his days may righteousness flourish  
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.(7)  
May he have dominion from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the Earth.(8) . . .  
May the kings of Tarshish*

6 Cf. *Is.65:17ff* – to think about the possibility of the new and peaceful Jerusalem, is to seriously contemplate attaining peace everywhere else on our planet!

7 [v.5] Isaiah's dream is for a people to have this *power-for-life* so easily and clearly entrusted to them, that other nations will be attracted to Jerusalem in the new era, bringing a complete ending to all marginalisations and exiles. In the new era, the wealth created by the new harmony, will be used in GOD's praise (v.6) and even the possibility of acting unjustly will become unthinkable (*Is.61:3*).  
[vv.1-6] These verses contain symbols of the Church's universality and underline the significance of the feast of Epiphany.

*and of the isles render him tribute,  
 may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.(10)  
 May all kings fall down before him,  
 all nations give him service.(11)  
 For he delivers the needy when they call,  
 the poor and those who have no helper.(12)  
 He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
 and saves the lives of the needy.(13)*

The speaker draws on imagery of a royal enthronement, rather than the appearance of light. For the psalmist royal power and longevity must serve the good of the people. Prominent among a ruler's obligations is responsibility to protect and liberate those who are not able to protect and liberate themselves. The Israelite notion of a healthy social order found expression in this view of how the ideal ruler might act.<sup>8</sup>

The monarch was designated to establish and maintain order in the midst of the persistent threat towards chaos and disorder; both cosmic and political. The king to which the speaker refers, isn't one with historical scars or one with raw power. This ruler is *the ideal David* as the real David should have been; and will now finally be. This ruler is a human agent, but a human agent who is completely available for the LORD's dreams, uncontaminated by any self-serving. This ideal ruler will be the source of prosperity, fertility, justice and well-being. Without such a one, the forces of death reappear.<sup>9</sup>

When such a ruler holds power, justice is understood as positive and aggressive action for life, especially for the marginalised (vv. 2,7,12,13). Justice has little or nothing to do with punishment, or with simple maintenance of the status quo. It is an active intervening to transform society. That transformation means on one hand, acting favourably towards the weak. On the other hand, it means acting effectively against abusive wrongs (cf. vv.12-13). Political and economic institutions must be subjected to active transforming interventions of this kind, if their structures are to promote the reigning of GOD who gives them their reason for being.

**second reading: Ephesians 3 : 2 – 3, 5 – 6**

[ Paul's ministry to the Gentiles ]

*Surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you,(2) and how the mystery was made known to*

8 The speaker doesn't refer to remembered kings; for example, David or Solomon, but about an anticipated ruler who will restore Israelite fortunes and well-being.

9 Israelite and Christian tradition see this is a portrait of the ruler referred to by Isaiah (Cf. *Is.60:1-6*).

*me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,(3) . . . In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:(5) that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.(6)*

While the context of *the letter to the Ephesians* is dramatically different, the passage makes a similar point to *Isaiah* (see first reading). Part of the mystery of the Epiphany is the mysterious inclusion of Gentiles among GOD's people. Submission to GOD's gift of light, carries with it the obligation to accept and proclaim the inclusion of all outsiders within this mystery.

Paul, or a later disciple, seeking to convey what Paul would have written had he been still alive, insists that GOD's reigning has both earthly and cosmic dimensions. The reading combines the same themes found in *Isaiah*,<sup>10</sup> the revelation or epiphany of GOD (*Is.60:3*).<sup>11</sup>

The Letter to the Ephesians was written at a time when Paul's work was complete and the unity of Israelite Christians and the non-Israelite Christians in the new community, for which the apostle had striven, was an accomplished fact. Matthew, benefitted from this achievement. Because of Paul's successful work, Matthew can use the story of the visit of the wise men from the East, to symbolise the universal dimension of the good news about God's victory over the power of death in Jesus.

***gospel reading: Matthew 2 : 1 – 12***

[ The visit of the Magi ]

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,(1) asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."(2) When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;(3) and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.(4) They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:(5) 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"(6) Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.(7) Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and*

10 Cf. *Is.60:1-6*

11 In Paul's case while he is on his way to Damascus, and his sharing this mystery of salvation with non-Israelites (see *Is.60:6*).

*search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."(8) When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.(9) When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.(10) On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.(11) And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.(12)*

Matthew says the events that he narrates happened, 'during the reign of king Herod'(vv.1-2). That's saying that Jesus was born into a reign of tyranny.<sup>12</sup> It was a common expectation at that time, that the Messiah would come to rule. That's the background to the Magi asking for, "*the king of the Jews*" - meaning *the Messiah*.<sup>13</sup>

The tyrant Herod summoned a committee (vv.3-4) and as happens in committees, there were most likely hidden agendas surfacing. Someone, in all this discussion, knew the Scriptures – about the Messiah being born in the small town of Bethlehem (v.6). Herod uses his talent for deviousness (vv.7-8); his intentions only becoming clear once the Magi have left the scene (vv.13-23). He wants to deny the ending of the old order. Matthew presents an enraged ruler, who was prepared to take any steps he could to perpetuate what has in fact already ended. The old way had already gone – and with it goes Herod's rulership.

The Magi receive their revelation through created nature (v.9). Endowed with an insight they recognise the importance of *the Star of David* (vv.10-11). Although they hasten to Jerusalem to pay homage, the full revelation of the Messiah cannot be gleaned from nature alone. It is a secret found in

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12 There were three Herods. Herod the elder, Herod his son, and a grandson Herod. Herod the elder – the one ruling at the time Jesus was born – had ordered two of his sons to be strangled on suspicion of conspiracy and he also killed one of his wives. At the time of Jesus' birth he killed more than three hundred public servants on another suspicion of conspiracy.

13 The Magi were wise men who were often priests and sometimes they became rulers, but they were primarily philosophers and people devoted to the study of the sciences, especially the knowledge of the stars. Perhaps they would be more like what we would call scientists than wise men. And they also taught a religious doctrine - that of Zoroaster. The star they speak of could have been a comet. We know that at the time of Christ's birth there was a great comet we call Halley's. It could have been any other celestial phenomenon. It might have been only a way of speaking peculiar to the East, comparing the Messiah with a star! It is possible that this whole passage from Matthew is a fiction – an imaginary story that he chose to insert here. But it could have happened this way.

the Israelite Scriptures, which are the special revelation that GOD has given to the Israelite people alone. The wise men from the East, learn from the Israelite Scriptures, GOD's plan of salvation, before they find the Messiah and pay homage to him.

The Israelites who have the Scriptures and who could plainly see and hear what a long line of GOD's prophets had said and done, are unwilling to worship the new-born ruler. The wise camel-men from the east, accept, and pay homage. But the ruler of Jerusalem and his committee of chief priests and the scribes of the people, do not believe. Rather they go off on their high-horses (or camels) and conspire against this so-called "*king of the Jews*", and will seek to put him to death.<sup>14</sup>

**items for sharing:**

- *GOD's salvation is intended not only for the Israelites, but for all whom the Scriptures call, 'the nations' or the 'gentiles'. Consider the people we know who would welcome the good news announced in today's first reading: Comment on **Isaiah 60 : 1 – 6***
- *The letter to the Ephesians describes this intention as GOD's secret plan, something GOD was cooking up all along. The 'secret' has been out for a while and Christians inherit a new vision of reality. Comment on **Ephesians 3 : 2 – 6***
- *The Magi from the East, symbolise the non-Israelite world coming to Jesus, the Israelite, to pay him homage and to discover joy. Forget about camels for the moment, and consider our own experience of truth and goodness, as we have discovered it from sources outside the Christian community. Comment on **Matthew 2 : 1 – 12***

**prayer:**

*LORD GOD of the nations,  
we have seen the star of your glory rising in splendour.  
The radiance of your incarnate WORD  
pierces the darkness that covers the Earth  
and signals the dawn of peace and justice.  
Make radiant the lives of your people  
with that same brightness, and beckon all the nations  
to walk as one in your light.  
We ask this through Jesus Christ, your WORD made flesh,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
in the splendour of eternal light, GOD for ever and ever. Amen*

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<sup>14</sup> The announcement of the birth of the Saviour is beyond the narrow confines of any one experience of religion; is beyond any particular church community's ownership; is beyond any singular culture or tradition's control – is *good news* for all peoples, animals, plants, and the very material of the universe itself.