

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 5 January 2025 - Epiphany

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Isaiah 60. 1-6; Psalm 72. [1-9] 10-15; Ephesians 3. 1-12; Matthew 2. 1-12

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Revd Dr David Newton, Diocesan Director of Ordinands

I wonder, was Herod right to be fearful of this baby, born king of the Jews, or was his fear misplaced?

Jesus never sought Herod's throne, he never gained political power, and was executed a criminal. And so, in one sense Herod, amidst the trappings of Roman power, really had nothing to fear at all. But in another sense, this new king was about to turn heaven and earth upside down. A new kingdom was breaking in, one against which the power of tyranny could never ultimately stand.

Whether misplaced or not, Herod's fear led him to commit one of the greatest atrocities recorded for us in the New Testament, the event usually called the 'slaughter of the holy innocents'. (Recorded for us a little later in chapter 2, but important to mention none the less). Out of fear of this baby, out of tyrannical and paranoid fear, Herod had all the boys in Bethlehem who were under two years old put to death.

For many of us, our minds cannot but turn from thinking about Herod to the tyrants of our day. I write this shortly after the collapse of Assad's regime in Syria. Whilst much was already known about the brutalities of that regime, the personal stories that have been coming out since have been stomach churning.

Was it out of fear of losing power, that he ruled his nation with an iron fist? Perhaps fear is the deep root of most tyrannical acts, a perception that brutality is the only way to keep power, to cling tightly to what one has; crush dissent, trample minorities, enforce a singular perspective.

In Bethlehem, as the full force of such brutal power was on display, as the darkness covered the earth (so our passage from Isaiah puts it) a small flickering light was shining somewhere in Egypt, hidden by parents who had every reason to fear, and yet instead displayed great love to this gift wrapped in swaddling.

Matthew's Gospel records for us two radically different visions of power and authority. One is based on fear. It is driven by fear, and it rules by fear. The other, is based on love.

The Nativity Scene, at its heart, and even more so with the Magi included, is nothing other than a picture of love. Of course, we can think of the love within the holy family. But on this day, and perhaps more importantly, we see in the Nativity Scene, love bursting open the door to let in these strangers from foreign fields. These foreigners were not compelled to come, rather they were drawn by the light, for they saw something in this baby of what was to be.

Drawn by the light, these magi saw in Jesus a vision of a new kingdom and a new way. They saw the fulfilment of Psalm 72 (the Psalm for the day) in which is envisioned a king who rules with justice and equity. They saw too the possibility of a kingdom without borders and without barriers (which our reading from Ephesians emphasises). In Jesus, they saw the possibility of a new kingdom built on love – that seeks justice for all, that seeks to find a place for all, in which there are no outsiders and in which no one is excluded.

Is this not what our Nativity Scenes visually show us? A baby in a shed, surrounded by animals, a few smelly shepherds and now some wealthy foreign mystics as well. What is this image if not an image of a very different kind of kingdom built on a very different kind of power?

A vision of a different kingdom and a different form of power is not enough though. In the end we also need to know which will win through. Is there nothing more powerful than brute force, tyrannical power? The rest of the story of Christ gives us the answer. Fear cannot win out. Only love can.

In the face of the fears of Herod (whoever or whatever he might represent on the small or global stage) we are called to be people who follow a very different king, knowing that this king's reign will never end. May we live in the light of this Epiphany. Amen.

Ways to Engage all Generations

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder what your favourite part of the story/passage is?
- I wonder who your favourite character is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder how you feel about Herod / the Magi?
- I wonder where you are in this story?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?

Suggested intercessions

God of wonder and mystery,
God of the stars and the universe,
God of winding ways and straight paths,
we gather today with gratitude

for the gift of your constant presence,
your trustworthy guidance,
and your daring risk-taking with us.
You dare to love us despite our inability to respond fully.
You dare to care for us, despite our challenge in caring for others.
You dare to walk with us, despite our fickleness.

On our own journeys

toward the stars and guiding points you put before us,
you continue to lead us forward,
guiding us by the teachings of Jesus
to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in your loving shadow.

As we struggle with the political wrangling of this world,
the wars waged for both justice and greed,
the violence committed daily against the innocent,
let alone the pain of broken relationships and loss,
you remain steadfast in your care and devotion
for your entire creation throughout the universe.

We pray for peace in this world, Lord,
the kind of peace in which we celebrate diversity,
are joyfully challenged by adversity,
and share in the joy that is to be found everywhere.
We pray for those who are lonely,
that you might lead us to reach out and be friends.
We pray for those who are hungry,
that you might lead us to offer sustenance.
We pray for those who are lost,
that you might lead us to give hope and direction.

We pray for the countries of the world,
that we might find a way to work together to lift one another up.

We pray for our leaders
that your Spirit might guide them

to set an example for our country and the world
to work together rather than against one another.

We pray for our Church
that we may seek to build up this body
and seek to repair the theological divisions that are tearing us apart.

And we pray for ourselves,
that we might continue on this journey,
learning the lessons you offer,
seeking the fullness of your perfection,
and live as you would have us live.

These prayers and hopes we offer
in confidence and gratitude of your love and presence...

~ written by [Rev. Eric Ledermann, University Presbyterian Church, Tempe, AZ.](#) Posted on [LiturgyLink](#). <http://www.liturgylink.net/2013/01/03/epiphany-prayers-of-the-people/>

Suggested hymns/songs

As with Gladness

Brightest and Best

O Worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness

We three Kings

Activities to accompany the service:

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- reflectionary.org – lectionary-based resources
- engageworship – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@ lectionary resource)