

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

22 January, 2006

1. **Those who were advocates for Van Nguyen** who was executed in December cited his repentance and change of attitude as a reason for mercy; however the Singaporean government was adamant that the mandatory death sentence should remain. What a contrast that story is to that of the Ninevites (Jonah 3. 1-10) who were regarded as the supreme example of Gentile irreligion and infamy by their Jewish neighbours. Jonah's message of doom had an immediate effect on the Ninevites. They believed God, they repented, they turned from their evil and violent ways. And God showed mercy on them.
2. **God's mercy is the good news** which Jesus came preaching in Galilee (Mark 1. 14-20). The time has come for repentance, the time has come for the Kingdom of God. The good news comes in the person of Jesus through whom the forgiveness of sins will be achieved. The response of the four fishermen is immediate, just as the Ninevites' was.
3. **We pray that we will "hear the call to discipleship,** forsake our old ways, and proclaim the gospel of new life to a broken world" (Collect) Repentance and mercy need to be lived out again and again in our lives as individuals and in our communities. We live in a community which does not like to recognize sin—perhaps we no longer believe in mercy either. Yet this is a broken world which we see in our own imperfect lives, in unhappiness, jealousy, weariness and purposelessness, in discrepancies between rich and poor, and in the continuing warring of tribes and nations.
4. **Today's message of epiphany is a call to a second chance,** a new life, putting behind us all that is sinful, to believe that God is merciful and to look forward to a time when the kingdom of God is fulfilled. The first step to that new life is the response to Jesus' call to follow him.

THE NAMING AND CIRCUMCISION OF JESUS

1 January, 2006

1. **The priestly blessing (Numbers 6.22-27)** is much loved by many Christians. Numbers presents an idealized picture of the desert life of Israel focused on the worship of God. Yet even in these early days when God demands strict laws and holiness there is a sense that God has chosen them, loves them and blesses them. Psalm 29 picks up the mood with "What are we, that you should be mindful of us...?"
2. **I wonder if the Psalm was in the minds of the shepherds,** the lowliest of the working class, often regarded as outcasts in society. Why should the angel of the Lord appear to them? Why should they see the glory of the Lord? Why should they be the first to see the Christ child? What promise of salvation did God give to them in their poverty, hard-work and isolation? What are we that you should be mindful of us...? (Luke 2.15-21)
3. **Yet the Christ—child was born as one of us.** Like the shepherds he was born in humble circumstances. He was circumcised as they had been according to the Law. He came to share a life where poverty, oppression, opposition, and rejection were experienced. There is only one explanation for this—he came out of love.
4. **The divine child was truly human,** God come into the world to make his face shine upon his people, to be with us so that we might receive adoption as children of the heavenly Father and be heirs of his heavenly kingdom. (Gal. 4.4-7) This great mystery of God becoming flesh in Christ and dwelling among us is called the incarnation, the enfleshment of God, so that he could share with us in the most intimate and humblest way.
5. **"What are we that you should be mindful of us?"** In modern terms Jesus didn't come as a tourist, his life on earth was no 'exposure tour', he didn't come dispensing aid. He came as one of us, 'to live our humble life' God's countenance shines upon us, to bring light to the world and the means by which we too can be children of our heavenly father. "O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel" (AHB 240)

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

8 January, 2006

1. **Have you seen those Wallis and Grommit cartoons** where plasticene figures become animated to the point that they become real? Without the art of the cartoonist we would have only lifeless still pictures. "Animated" comes from the same Latin root as "animal" - *animo*—to give life to. Today is the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord and the first Sunday after Epiphany and we focus on the life-giving Spirit of God, not the appearance of life as in cartoons, but genuine, authentic, purposeful life.
2. **In Genesis 1.1-5 we hear the familiar words** of the beginning of the creation story, just five verses to focus on the animating power of God. "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep". The earth came to life and light came into the darkness with the "wind of God" and the word of God. Psalm 29 celebrates the animating power of God in song.
3. **In the Jordan River, the Spirit of God descends on Jesus** and God's voice affirms his identity and mission as the Son of God, filled with the Spirit's power (Mark 1. 4-11).
4. **The account of Paul in Ephesus** (Acts 19.1-7) is a dramatic illustration of the power of the Spirit to animate those early Christians and to make their attitude of repentance and belief a reality. Baptised in water and the Spirit their faith was enlivened with gifts for ministry.
5. **We can think we can do whatever we want** if our will power is strong enough, but it is only when we submit to God and open our hearts to receive his Spirit that his will can be done. Alcoholics know this—it is only when they submit and acknowledge that only a Higher Power can help them, that they can begin the road to recovery. In our baptism, we are baptised with water and the Spirit, we hear God's promises and know our identity and our calling. In opening our lives to God's animating Spirit we can do far more than we can imagine by ourselves. This Spirit-given life is not the animation of the cartoonist's puppets. It is the coming to us of the Spirit of life, abiding with us, living in us, giving us true life and authentic existence.

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

15 January, 2006

1. **What it means to be human is a great mystery.** It has been the subject of literature, and film. I can think of Shakespearean tragedies, the poetry of John Donne and Yeats, and the film *Bladerunner* where this subject is explored. It is frightening, awe-inspiring, yet amazingly special that God should know us each so intimately as the Psalmist speaks in Psalm 139. God knows each of us more intimately than our spouses do, or than parents know their children. We repeat these ideas in the Service of Holy Communion when we say the Prayer of Preparation (APBA p.119) He knows us inside out.
2. **How much more is God a mystery to us!** There seems to be a universal search to know God yet no one and no group of people can claim to know God fully. He is and always will be a mystery even though our lifetime can be spent on getting to know God more deeply.
3. **The season of Epiphany is concerned with the revealing of the mystery of God in the person of Jesus.** Philip was ready to hear Christ's call to follow him, Nathanael, one 'without guile' was prepared to enter into the relationship of a disciple of Christ. John 1.43-51) They entered into a growing relationship, a journey of discovery about Jesus who would reveal the Father to them. The knowledge of God would be sealed forever except for the one worthy to break the seal and reveal the secrets of God (Revelation 5. 1-10)
4. **It is in knowing God through Jesus that we discover what it is to be truly human** for in doing so we will discover that our purpose is to love God and worship him forever and to love our neighbours as ourselves May we pray with Richard of Chichester:
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend, and Brother,
May I know Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly,
Day by day. Amen."