

Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Team Ministry worship for individuals or families on
Sunday 31st January 2021 at 10:30 am

Collect for the day

God our creator, who in the beginning commanded the light to shine out of darkness:
May the light of the glorious gospel of Christ dispel the darkness of ignorance and unbelief,
Shine into the hearts of all your people, and reveal the knowledge of your glory
In the face of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
Who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God,
Now and for ever.

Hymn R&S 74

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near.
Praise Him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth.
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!
Hast thou not seen how thy desires e'er have been,
granted in what He ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;
Surely His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee;
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do...
He who with love doth befriend thee.

Prayer of Approach

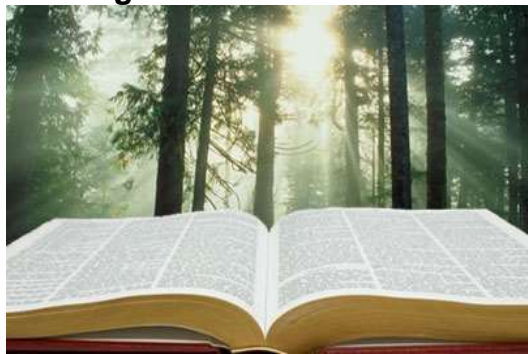
Praise the LORD.
"I praise you, O Lord. You are my God. You are my Creator. You are the Giver of Life.
You are my Redeemer. My Restorer. My Good Shepherd.
Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
With our whole hearts, we praise you, Lord.
We lift up our alleluias as people who gather to sing and proclaim.
As people who gather to confess and to remember Your redeeming work

As people who gather to read and tell of your mighty works,
of your faithfulness and of your grace.
God you call us to activate our hearts and minds to engage in worship
When we're here rather than letting ourselves be merely observers.
Loving Father and Mother let us move from being merely an observer
to an active participant in worship.

God of mercy, show compassion as we make our confession.
You command us to tell of your mighty deeds, yet we remain silent.
You call us to act faithfully, yet we are slow to respond.
We claim to be wise yet we know not your law.
Help us to obey and to love our neighbours
whom you command us to serve. Amen

Readings



Deuteronomy 18: 15–20 God offers us a prophet from among our own people

Psalms 111- Praise God for his wonderful works!

Mark 1:21-28 - Jesus throws out the unclean spirit

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13 – anyone who loves God is known by him

Reflection - by Douglas Spencer

Today, in the Church's calendar, is the fourth Sunday of Epiphany; the season of Epiphany starts on January 6th and continues until Candlemas on February 2nd.

Epiphany is the season in which we hear about the wise men and their gifts; we hear about Jesus presented in the temple; we hear about the wedding at Cana; and today in this reading from Mark, we're given this story about Jesus driving out an impure spirit.

So what are we supposed to spend these last three and a half weeks thinking about, when we hear these stories? What is the season of Epiphany actually for?

Imagine that you're watching a movie, or reading a book, one you haven't seen before. An epiphany (with a small e) is that moment when you realise what's really going on. Maybe you suddenly realise who the hero is. It makes you think back to earlier bits of the movie, and things you didn't understand back then suddenly make more sense. It's the moment when you think "ah, *that's* what's going on!" and that moment – when something that wasn't evident earlier is suddenly clear – is a delicious feeling.

And in the Church, this season of Epiphany (with a capital E) is an extended exercise in "so *that's* what's going on", right at the start of Jesus's ministry. It's about the Word of God being opened, revealing the true glory of the only Son of the Father.

In our opening prayers we used the Collect appointed for today. We prayed "*that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ may dispel the darkness of ignorance and unbelief*". We prayed, in fact, for an epiphany, in exactly this sense – we prayed that the whole world should see the light, should understand what's going on. Clearly the writer of this prayer shared God's plan that all of God's people should have their hearts filled with the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, and to have God's glory revealed to them.

The psalmist, today, talks about what's going on in the world. About how the love and power and righteousness of the Lord is behind everything that happens. "*I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly*", says the psalmist, who seeks to bring the knowledge of God's glory into the heart of the powerful and into the lives of the people. They talk powerfully about how God's righteousness and faithfulness and uprightness bring redemption for his people. Paying attention to the Lord "*is the beginning of understanding*", says the psalmist; "*all who follow his precepts have good understanding*". Now there's an epiphany for us!

We're told that the glorious gospel of Christ dispels the darkness of ignorance and unbelief. So let's turn to today's gospel reading, where Mark records what happens in the synagogue at Capernaum. Jesus, being Jesus, has turned up in a new place, has gone to the place where the Word of the Lord is heard and discussed, and is bringing light and understanding into those discussions, and it's really clear to the people who hear him that he knows what he's talking about. "*The people were amazed at his teaching,*" says Mark, "*because he taught them as one who had authority.*"

Of course as soon as someone starts bringing Light to a discussion, the Darkness seeks to disrupt things. And the situation in this story from the synagogue at Capernaum is no different. Here Jesus is teaching the people, and the people recognise Jesus's authority – and immediately, "*just then*", in Mark's words, a herald of the Darkness interrupts. A man possessed by an impure spirit cries out: "*What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?*" and in response Jesus is having none of it. He silences the impure spirit and calls it out of the man it was possessing, so that the truth and light of God's word, and the understanding of it, may be shared uninterrupted and unpolluted. And as Mark records, "*News about [Jesus] spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.*"

Here's the thing. We can read the words, and we can study them, and we can say to ourselves "ah, so that's what's going on", and feel good about our understanding of events in first-century Capernaum, and then wander off and get on with our lives.

Or we can let "*the light of the glorious gospel of Christ [...] shine into our hearts and reveal the knowledge of God's glory*".

I've been thinking about events on January 6th 2021, at Epiphany, in Washington DC.

See, for many weeks, following Trump's defeat at the polls, the outgoing President had stoked the fires of darkness, falsely claiming that the election had been stolen from him and encouraging ignorance and unbelief to possess his followers. And on January 6th, some of those followers invaded the place where truth and reason are supposed to dwell, and called out "what do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us?"

And these events provoked an epiphany for many people, a point at which they realised how damaging that wilful ignorance and unbelief had been, and just what unchecked misinformation and evasion could achieve.

Thankfully, that impure spirit has been cast out and, while it hasn't been silenced, it is being seen for what it is and the opportunity for reasoned discourse grounded in the truth has been restored, and long may it continue as such. Because, as I wrote on the day of the inauguration, "of course it's not all over, there's much work still to do".

And as things go in the good governance of the USA, so they go in the progress of the Gospel of Christ in the world. Because we've spent this season of Epiphany, as every year, thinking about how, in the words of today's collect, the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ dispels the darkness of ignorance and unbelief; how, in the words of today's psalm, the Lord is extolled in the council of the upright and in the assembly; how, in the words of today's Gospel, Christ's amazing new teaching is delivered with authority. May news about him spread quickly over the whole region?

I thought I'd finished there, but it turns out I have one more thing to say. See, we have one strong advantage in this battle between the Light and the Darkness. The purpose of the light is to bring understanding and wisdom to those who receive it, while the purpose of the darkness is to obscure those things. One of the key things that distinguishes those who have received the light is that they've had an Epiphany – they understand what's going on.

There's a delicious turn of phrase at the beginning of the Gospel of John that captures it: in John 1:5 it says "*the light keeps shining in the dark, and darkness has never put it out*". In other translations, it says "the light overwhelms the darkness; the darkness has no idea what's going on."

Because this is not an equal struggle. The lesson of the season of Epiphany is that the light, and the wisdom and the knowledge that it brings, will always be better than the ignorance and falsehood spread by the darkness.

I know which side I'm picking. Praise the Lord.

Hymn for reflection R&S 97

King of glory, King of peace, I will love Thee;
and that love may never cease, I will move Thee.
Thou hast granted my request, Thou hast heard me;
Thou didst note my working breast, Thou hast spared me.

Wherefore with my utmost art I will sing Thee,
and the cream of all my heart I will bring Thee.
Though my sins against me cried, Thou didst clear me;
and alone, when they replied, Thou didst hear me.

Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise Thee;
in my heart, though not in heaven, I can raise Thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort to enrol Thee:
even eternity's too short to extol Thee.

Prayers of Intercession

God of our impressionable world, we pray for the leaders of the nations,
that they would be wise, just and compassionate as they exercise their authority.
Give them a sense of humility and grant them perspective to accompany their vision.
May they not mistake power for justice or order for well-being?
When they are called upon to make decisions hold them close to you
and may they learn to be instruments of unity and your peace.

We remember, especially, those in power in Russia – and those protesting at the imprisonment
of Alexei Navalny.

We remember the governments in the Netherlands, in the United States, China and here in the
UK, praying for all leaders as they discern the way forward
amid the difficult social and economic challenges of the pandemic.
May your truth be known, in all the world

We pray for your Church – around the world and in our own community,
we pray for creative ways to serve and to share,
we remember places that do not have enough vaccines to go around.
We pray for courage and integrity as we listen and pray, for urgency and daring as we respond
to the needs around us. May your truth be known, through Jesus who loves us all.
We bring to you in loving concern the people close to us*(Please name them here)*

Hymn R&S 38

Thou whose almighty word chaos and darkness heard and took their flight,
hear us, we humbly pray, and where the gospel day sheds not its glorious ray.
Let There Be Light!

Saviour who came to bring on thy redeeming wing healing and sight,
health to the sick in mind, sight to the inly blind, now to all humankind.
Let There Be Light!

Closing Prayer and Blessing

Generous Lord, in Your Word and our reflection we have glimpsed the light of your love:
Help us so to live out our days that we may be signs of your wonders in the world;
And may the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be with us always.

Amen.