

Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.

Call to Worship:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. *(Isaiah 60 .1)*

Welcome to this reflection for the Feast of the Epiphany, the day on which we recall the Magi, or Wise Men, arriving to pay homage to the infant Jesus and bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh - symbols of glory, prayer and suffering.

Let us pray

Opening Prayer

God of gold, we seek your glory:
the richness that transforms our drabness into colour,
and brightens our dullness with vibrant light;
your wonder and joy at the heart of all life.

Lord of incense, we offer you our prayer:
our spoken and unspeakable longings,
our questioning of truth,
our search for your mystery deep within.

God of myrrh, we cry out to you in our suffering:
the pain of all our rejections and bereavements.
our baffled despair at undeserved suffering,
our rage at continuing injustice;
and we embrace you, God-with-us,
in our wealth, in our yearning, in our anger and loss.

Jan Berry (from Bread of Tomorrow, ed. Janet Morley, Christian Aid/SPCK)

Happy New Year! This year those words might jar a little. We said them this time last year, who could have known what the year held. A year of tragedy and suffering, bereavement and uncertainty. What does 2021 hold for us?

Of course out of the darkness of 2020 there were lights that emerged. Many communities came together in new ways to help each other, individuals and groups discovered creative skills, and we found that church meetings really don't have to be held in draughty church halls - but with a laptop in the comfort of your own home.

New Year is a time of beginning, like setting off on a new journey. The journey holds unknowns, there will be challenges, endings, beginnings and many a twist and turn on the way. Things may not turn out as we expect. The journey of The Magi was a little bit like that too.

Gospel: Matthew 12 .1 - 12 (NRSV)

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 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.' 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 "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." '

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Epiphany means "making known" and the arrival of the Magi, who came from far beyond the Jewish world, symbolises the Birth of Jesus being "made known" to the wider world. It was entirely understandable that they, not being aware of Jewish scriptures, should seek out the birth of a new born King in the palace where the King would live. They wouldn't have been expecting to be sent on their way, to different town, and find the child in an ordinary house - with an ordinary couple. Then their plans had to change again - re-routed on their homeward journey - to avoid the ire of Herod.

At the beginning of a New Year we are at the start of the journey too. What surprises will it hold? Where will be re-routed? The Magi journeyed with gold, frankincense and myrrh. We do we take on the journey?

Those first visitors

When those first visitors came to you, Lord,
they brought gifts to lay at your feet.
But it was they who left the richer for having seen you.
Our gifts are not those of kings
but we offer them now
with that same awe and expectation believing they, as we,
may be worthy to be used for your work in the world.
We are not as wise as we would like to be,
yet we offer you ourselves,
all that has gone before and all that lies ahead, in your service.

As we lay what we have
and what we are before you,
may our eyes look heavenward,
may our hearts rise in expectation
and may we, together,
be instruments of change and bringers of light in places of need.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Tina Kemp, Spill the Beans

As well as Epiphany, many churches will be holding Covenant Services at the start of the New Year. The Covenant Service started with John Wesley and is at the heart of the Methodist tradition, although the idea has even older roots. In the Covenant Service we respond to God's loving relationship with us, which God has freely given, by renewing our commitment to reflect that relationship by the way we live our lives. At the heart of the service is The Covenant Prayer.

The Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
exalted for you, or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.
And the covenant now made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

I've added some study notes about the Covenant Prayer to the resource site but I suppose what leaps out at people when they hear the prayer for the first time is the line "put me to suffering". It doesn't mean that it's God's will that we suffer. It has to be read with the rest of the prayer - our relationship with God embraces all aspects of life, easy and difficult. We place all that we are, and all that we experience, before God in prayer. In love we place ourselves ready to journey in God's service, accepting through trust in God all that lies ahead. I'm reminded of the words of the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard.

"The function of prayer is not to influence God,
but rather to change the nature of the one who prays".

Soren Kierkegaard 1813 - 1855

Last week I encouraged you to leave the decorations up until Epiphany. It will soon be time to take them down. At Epiphany and beyond we are called to continue to make known the Christmas message of God-with-Us as we journey on into the unknown but always accompanied by God.

New roads

When the star had stopped and they had seen the baby they took a new road.
When the decorations come down and we have heard the story
we can take a new road.
New roads can be scary.
New roads are exciting.
New roads are risky.
It is time to go.
Star-maker,
Light-bringer,
Holy Spirit of adventure,
come with us today on our road. Amen

Ruth Burgess

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. There's a written version on the resource site and page of study notes about the Covenant Service.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.

Call to Worship:

Mountains and rivers
Islands and oceans
Children and lovers
Rulers and nations
All who live
All who breath
Give God Glory!

Exciting God
Glorious God
Wise God
Righteous God
Holy God
Covenant God
Baptise us with love!

Ruth Burgess - 'Hay and Stardust', Wild Goose Publications

Welcome to this reflection for the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus. That's an event that happened when Jesus was an adult. We've jumped some thirty years from last week's focus on Epiphany when the Magi arrived with gold, frankincense and myrrh. But the events are closely related. They are both about God being made known in Jesus and, through the Holy Spirit, God being made known in us too.

Let us pray

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,
at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:
may we recognise him as our Lord
and know ourselves to be your beloved children;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

From 'Alternative Collects', Common Worship, Church of England

Here's a couple of ancient documents. My Baptism Certificate from way, way back in 1961 and a copy of Pelsall Parish Church's Magazine from May that year. Both record my Baptism on 16th April - my mom's birthday. If you've been baptised maybe you have your Baptism Certificate or other proof of baptism tucked away in a drawer somewhere - or maybe you don't.

Most Christian churches do practice baptism but not all. Quakers and the Salvation Army are among those that don't. Among those that do some baptise infants and children, and some baptise adults who've made a conscious decision to follow Christ.

Here at The Cotteridge Church we accept all, baptised or not, including to receive bread and wine. The Quaker presence in this area is important to acknowledge and some with Quaker backgrounds worship with us.

Discussions and disagreements about baptism have too often been one of the issues that divide churches. Maybe the churches spend too much time arguing about baptism? We sometimes forget that it is the Holy Spirit that incorporates us within the Body of Christ that is the Church, not a human action administered with water. Water and the Holy Spirit, the latter in this case represented by a dove, are in today's Gospel reading.

Gospel: Mark 1 .4 - 11 (NRSV)

4 John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.' 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

It's only a few weeks since we heard a version of that passage. Then it was from John's Gospel, today for Mark. Then the focus was on John the Baptist, today the focus is very much on Jesus. Mark knows nothing about the nativity - or if he did he didn't think it necessary to mention it in his Gospel. The beginning of his Gospel is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He's probably in his early thirties, a carpenter but also, it would appear, already a Jewish rabbi or teacher. Now he puts behind him those years that are hidden from us and embarks on a new journey.

Am I ready?

Am I ready?

Am I ready, Father?

Ready to face the world:
to start a new career
of shaping people's lives
as I shaped the wood
in the workshop.

Am I ready, Father?

Ready to face the factions
clamouring for a deliverer,
a healer, a miracle worker,
a fixer of all their problems.

Am I ready, Father?

Ready to confront the sickness and evil,
the arrogance of the professional
peddlers of religion,
the obtuseness of friends and family.

Am I ready, Father?

The dove of peace descends
and I rise from the waters,
cleansed, cooled and calmed.

I'm ready, Father.
Ready as I'll ever be.

Carol Dixon - 'Winter', Ruth Burgess (Ed), Wild Goose Publications

John's 'baptism of repentance' called for people to confess their sins. Christian belief is that, whatever Jesus was doing in those hidden thirty years up to this point, he had nothing to confess. Why then be baptised by John? Now at the commencement of his public ministry Jesus shows that in him - Emmanuel, God-with-Us, the barrier separating creation and creator - however you understand that - had been broken down. The Word-made-Flesh stands with his people. Jesus is baptised as a sign that he shares their humanity, and they can share new life in him.

Look what you can be

Jesus said, 'Look what you can be:
you can be all that you see in me,
if you are born again of the Spirit
that soared over Jordan.'

Jesus said, 'Feel the Spirit blow:
give away everything; let go
safe in the circling power of the Spirit
that filled me in Jordan.'

And beside that birth
all the rest is worth
straw in the fields after harvest.'

Jesus said, 'Bend to the Father's will
as the grass blows on a windy hill,
full of the life and grace of the Spirit
as I was in Jordan.'

Jesus said, 'What if it ends in death?
Give Him your praise with your latest breath;
enter the light and joy of the Spirit
as I did in Jordan.'

And beside that birth
all the rest is worth
straw in the fields after harvest.'

Roddy Cowie - 'Winter', Ruth Burgess (Ed), Wild Goose Publications

Francis Asbury, Methodist preacher, presbyter and bishop, was born in Hamstead, Birmingham in 1745 and grew up in Great Barr and West Bromwich. Drawn by John Wesley's preaching he became a local preacher himself while working as a blacksmith.

Then, at the tender age of 22, he was appointed by Wesley as a travelling preacher. At 26 he travelled to America, where he remained for the rest of his life. Ordained as a presbyter, he later became a Bishop of the Methodist Church there and is recognised as a founding father of the USA. But in 1795, at the age of 50, someone was clearly questioning his background and so he wrote to his elderly parents in the Black Country and asked;

“I should be glad if you would take the time of my baptism from the Church register, that I may know it perfectly”. *(Letter to his parents, 30th October 1795)*

Evidently they failed to provide details in their reply, probably because they knew no such record existed. Historians have searched the church records all over south Staffordshire and nearby and no record has been found to exist. If Asbury hadn't been baptised it certainly didn't impede his ministry - he brought the good news to hundreds of thousands of people. His was a life chosen and marked by the love of God, so to is mine and yours:

Bathed in God's Love

*God said,
'You are my dear child,
chosen and marked by my love,
pride of my life' (Mark 1 .11)*

I can barely believe it, God,
that those words, spoken of Jesus,
affirmed by John the Baptist
could possibly apply to my life.
I am such a half-hearted, fearful follower,
you can't possibly want someone like me
in your glorious kingdom of love.

Yet at my baptism I was chosen and marked
with the sign of the cross -
a symbol of just how far your love would go
for me - your wayward child,
unworthy companion of Christ.

Loving Father God, parent of all,
help me rise from the waters of doubt,
to new life with Jesus.
Let me feel your Spirit hovering close;
hear your words of hope;
and know I am forgiven, restored,
and bathed in your amazing love for me.

Carol Dixon, from 'Conversations', URC Prayer Handbook 2021

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

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Call to Worship

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down
and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path
and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

(Psalm 139 .1 - 3)

Welcome to this reflection where we'll hear about Jesus calling some of his first disciples. Jesus says 'Follow me' and they encourage one another to 'Come and see'. It's a journey that will both challenge and transform them as they seek out the truth about Jesus.

Let us pray

Opening Prayer

Living God,
in Christ you make all things new.
Transform the poverty of our nature
by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

From 'The Book of Common Worship', Church of South India

Anniversaries are always fruitful sources of themes for sermon writers. They are also treasured by stamp and coin designers. This year sees the issuing of a £2 coin to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the death of the author H G Wells. But the design of the coin has left the Royal Mint with, well I won't say "not a leg to stand on" because the truth is they have one too many legs!

The design of the coin shows one of the Martian machines from Wells' 'War of the Worlds' Wells describes a 'monstrous tripod' but the coin depicts not three but four legs. Add to that Wells 'Invisible Man' is shown with a top hat that in literature the character never wore. There's more. Around the edge of the coin is an inscription, "Good books are warehouses of ideas". There is a similar quote in a rather obscure book by Wells where a character says "Good books are the warehouses of ideals" where it's said as a suggestion that books are places where ideals can be hidden away - hardly the message the quote was presumably meant to convey.

Check your facts! Everyone who is entrusted with relaying information is told to do that and, on the face of it, with the internet available it should be easier today than ever. But what can we believe? How do we know what is true and what isn't?

Our Gospel reading today is part of the call of the first disciples. Jesus has just called Andrew and Peter to follow him and now he encounters Philip. But can they believe what they'd heard about Jesus? Could it be true that he's the Messiah? Surely not from Nazareth'. There's no internet for them to search, to find out the truth about Jesus they need to 'Come and see'.

Gospel: John 1 .43 - 51 (NRSV)

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' 46 Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' 48 Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' 49 Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' 50 Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' 51 And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

In the following poem the writer, Mary Hanrahan, a primary school teacher in the east end of Glasgow, ponders on what Andrew must have thought many years later when he recalled that day when he'd asked Jesus where he was living and Jesus' replied 'Come and see'.

Come and See (Andrew remembers) (based on John 1 .38)

I followed him. It was not far away.
 Ordinary. In fact, rather frugal.
 And yet, looking back to that fateful day,
 his presence gave that house an almost regal air I sensed
 but little understood.
 The table well-wrought, a few simple chairs.
 I only learned later his skill with wood
 and wondered if lifeless timber bears
 his mark as much as I do. My life's core
 changed that day. There were other rooms but none so
 clearly etched in my memory. That door
 led to another world. I had to go
 on following him. Left my nets behind.
 He called us to fishing of a different kind.

Mary Hanrahan - 'Barefoot and Buttercups', Wild Goose Publications

Rumours no doubt were rife. They always are when someone's 'made a bit of a stir'. Jesus had arrived on the scene and John the Baptist had proclaimed him God's chosen one. Was Jesus the Messiah? There were those who said he might be.

Andrew was one of those who wanted to find out more and asked Jesus where he came from. Jesus said, 'Come and see'. Andrew did, and he took his brother Simon too. As we heard in today's Gospel reading they were soon joined by Philip and Nathaniel.

All the Gospels agree that the disciples responded to Jesus call, or their own curiosity, with out hesitation. They lift their fishing boats and nets, the tools of their trades and followed Jesus. Would we respond without hesitation? For those first disciples who did it would prove to be a long and rocky road.

Would I have answered (StF 674) *(A hymn by Herman Stuempfle)*

Would I have answered when you called,
'Come follow, follow me!'
Would I at once have left behind
both work and family?
Or would the old, familiar round
have held me by its claim
and kept the spark within my heart
from bursting into flame?

Would I have followed where you led
through ancient Galilee,
on roads unknown, by ways untried,
beyond security?
Or would I soon have hurried back
where home and comfort drew,
where truth you taught would not disturb
the ordered world I knew?

Would I have matched my step with yours
when crowds cried, 'Crucify!',
when on a rocky hill I saw a cross
against the sky?
Or, would I too have slipped away
and left you there alone,
a dying king with crown of thorns
upon a terrible throne?

O Christ, I cannot search my heart
through all it's tangled ways,
nor can I with a certain mind
my steadfastness appraise.
I only pray that when you call,
'Come follow, follow me!',
you'll give me strength beyond my own
to follow faithfully.

Herman Stuempfle (1923 - 2007)

Jesus instinctively knew the disciples better than they knew themselves. He judged that Simon with all his faults would be a rock of support. He knew that Nathaniel was trustworthy, although Nathaniel didn't know how he knew that! Andrew, who'd called Simon, and Philip, who'd called Nathaniel had already shown themselves efficient evangelists - spreading the gossip about Jesus and bidding others to Come and see.

And what did they see? In conversation, in sharing food and enjoying each other's companies they found out who Jesus was and, even just as much a revelation, who they were, beloved children of God. They decided to stick around for a bit and see what happened but, when Jesus invited them to join him at a wedding they couldn't imagine what they would see (John 2 .1 - 11). Water into wine was marvellous indeed, but what is even greater is the change following Jesus can bring to the lives of the disciples, and to us.

Maybe Nathaniel was changed enough to leave his prejudice behind and realise that something good can indeed come from Nazareth!

Approaching God

We turn to you, O God,
and find you already coming to meet us.

You inhabit our hopes
with creative love;

you hold battered lives
in scarred hands;

you catch us up
to dance towards fullness of life.

We meet you, O God;
life giver,
heart changer,
breath taker ...

Sustain us,
heal us,
renew us

this day
and for evermore.

Rachel Poolman, from 'Conversations', URC Prayer Handbook 2021

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Call to Worship

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

(2 Corinthians 5 .17)

Welcome to the reflection for Sunday 24th January 2021, as we draw towards the end of The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It comes to an end tomorrow, on what is the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul, an event that had mighty implications for the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us pray

Opening Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for calling us
into the company of those who trust in Christ
and seek to obey his will.
May your Spirit guide and strengthen us
in mission and service to your world;
for we are strangers no longer
but pilgrims together on the way to your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

'The Pilgrim Prayer' - Churches together in Britain and Ireland

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is more than a week. It's eight days, what's known as an octave of prayer. It always starts on 18th January and ends on 25th January, whatever days of the week they fall on. In some traditions of the Church the 18th January is the Feast of the Confession of Peter, when he acknowledged Jesus as Messiah, and 25th January is the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul.

Peter and Paul. Between them they have come to represent something of the breadth of Christian tradition. Peter, whom the Roman Catholic Church see as the forerunner of the line of popes through the ages, and Paul whose doctrine of Justification by Faith has influenced much of Protestant thought. The Church though is much wider than Roman Catholic and Protestant - those two merely scratch the surface of the Christian tradition.

Paul, whose feast day we observe tomorrow, was responsible for the spread of the Gospel around the Mediterranean in the first century. But our story starts in the most unpromising way. Think back to Boxing Day.

Boxing Day is properly called St Stephen's Day. Stephen is given the honour of having his feast day so close to that of the birth of Jesus because he was the first known Christian martyr. In other words someone who was killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. He was stoned to death (Acts 7 .54 - 60) and, as they did so, the crowd laid their coats at the feet of a man named Saul. He was much more than a curious onlooker - he saw his role as being too destroy what he believed was a heretical sect within Judaism. A verse or so later we are told:

*"Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house;
dragging off both men and women; he committed them to prison" (Acts 8 .3).*

Not content with doing this in Jerusalem, Saul decides to travel to Damascus to destroy followers of Jesus there too. It is while he is travelling there that things take a dramatic turn.

Acts 9 .3 - 19 (NRSV)

3 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 5 He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' 7 The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' 11 The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' 13 But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' 15 But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; 16 I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' 17 So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

That account, from Acts of the Apostles, was written by Luke who became a travelling companion of Paul's as they journeyed around the Mediterranean telling all the Good News about Jesus Christ. Did I say Paul? Well yes because it was sometime after the events we've just heard that Saul changed his name to Paul. From vehement persecutor of the church, to becoming a baptised believer in Jesus Christ. His change of name is the smallest of the immense changes his life has undergone.

From this stage on Paul sets off on a series of missionary journeys around the eastern Mediterranean. It is Luke, in Acts of the Apostles, who tells us most of what we know about the journey's themselves. About taking the message of Jesus Christ to new places, and discovering that in some communities it was already there. But if Luke gives us the travelogue, Paul has gives us another legacy.

Paul wrote letters to the Christian communities that he'd already visited and to those that he hoped to visit. Written to specific communities the contents have since shaped much of Christian theology.

It's important to remember though that Paul writes each letter to address particular issues in those first century communities. I'm sure he'd be disappointed, maybe shocked, if he knew that two thousand years later some of his teaching, specific to those communities and that time, were still being applied to the church.

Some things though don't change. In one of his letters Paul revealed that the Christian community has been divided since the very first days. In his first letter to the church at Corinth he wrote:

11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 12 What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' 13 Has Christ been divided? (1 Corinthians 1 .11-13)

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity those verses remind us that divisions in the church are as old as Christian faith itself. But seeking unity is not the same as imposing uniformity. We can keep the richness of our traditions. God in Christ speaks to, and is encountered by, each of us in different ways. All of our journeys are different.

The unity that God in Christ calls us to is unity of witness to, and service of, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Prayer on the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul

Almighty God,
who caused the light of the gospel
to shine throughout the world
through the preaching of your servant Saint Paul:
grant that we who celebrate his wonderful conversion
may follow him in bearing witness to your truth;
through 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.

Common Worship - Church of England

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. Material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is still on the resource site so take a look. As always there's a written version of this reflection on there too.

Until next week: Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

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Call to Worship

The Lord is the strength of my life
The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world,
A light no darkness can quench.

Winter's cold grip has been with us this week. The presence of snow has meant there have been plenty of beautiful sights to photograph, and opportunities for other creativity too. Whenever it snows there's always something of a festive feeling. The landscape reminds us of Christmas cards. And why not? We are still, just about, in the season of Christmas and Epiphany. That comes to an end on Tuesday, the 2nd February, which is the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple - also traditionally known as Candlemas. More about that in a while. Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
light of the nations and the glory of Israel:
make your home among us,
and present us pure and holy
to your heavenly Father,
your God, and our God. Amen.

Common Worship: Additional Collects, Church of England

Late in 1942 the Battle of El Alamein was fought on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. British and Commonwealth forces, and other allies, defeated the forces of Nazi Germany and Italy. Winston Churchill believed that it marked a turning point in the Second World War. But he warned against premature euphoria by saying,

*'This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end.
But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.'*

Final victory of course was only gained more than two years later.

Today Britain and the whole world are at war in another way. Jointly trying to defeat a virus. Since the end of last year there have been an armoury of vaccines to help in the fight. When the first vaccinations began in early December there was signs of euphoria. It was of course premature. Since then there has been another peak in infections, but vaccinations are our current hope. Unlike El Alamein maybe this is more than the end of the beginning. Hopefully, just maybe, this is the beginning of the end for the pandemic.

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which is observed on 2nd February, is an end of a beginning. It is the end of the Nativity accounts in Luke's Gospel.

Luke tells us that it was a Jewish custom for parents to take a first-born male child to the Temple in Jerusalem and designate him as holy. When Mary and Joseph do so they encounter two people in the Temple who recognise the significance of who this baby is.

Simeon and Anna recognise that in Jesus Christ God's light has come into the world in a new way. There's a sense of thanksgiving, but certainly not of euphoria, because the road ahead will be rocky and painful. Christ will be the light in times of darkness.

Luke 2 .22 - 38 (NRSV)

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The sacred Jewish scriptures had foretold that God would send a Messiah, God's anointed one. For whatever reason Simeon and Anna recognised that, in the tiny baby whose parents had brought him to the Temple, God's promises were being fulfilled. But ahead lay a rocky and painful road - not just for Jesus but for his followers and those he challenged. The reality of what lay ahead was summarised by Simeon when he looked at Mary and told her - "and a sword will pierce your own soul too". How she must have remembered those chilling words when she saw her Son dying alone in agony on the Cross.

Simeon and Anna were elderly and would not live to see the fulfilment of God's plan in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Indeed Simeon's words are words of contentment that he can now die in peace knowing that he has witnessed the end of the beginning of God's plan. The incarnation has happened, The Word made flesh, God-is-with-Us.

Many people, who perhaps come to church only at Christmas, fail to link the baby in the manger with the man on the Cross. They do not recognise that God's gift to the world, an all giving love greater even than death itself, was only completed at Easter.

Lent, and the road to the cross, is only a fortnight away. Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, is 17th February this year. A beautiful Christmas hymn, by the Methodist Minister Geoffrey Ainger, links the manger with the Cross. A very fitting hymn for The Presentation of Christ.

Born in the night,
Mary's Child,
a long way from your home;
coming in need,
Mary's Child,
born in a borrowed room.

Clear shining light,
Mary's Child,
you face lights up our way;
light of the world,
Mary's child,
dawn on our darkened day.

Truth of our life,
Mary's Child,
you tell us God is good;
prove it is true,
Mary's Child,
go to your cross of wood.

Hope of the world,
Mary's Child,
you're coming soon to reign;
King of the earth,
Mary's Child,
walk in our streets again.

Geoffrey Ainger (1925 - 2012)

For a sung version click below:

<https://youtu.be/PRyOaoMo6CA>

We must not leave Jesus in the crib. Luke tells us:

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom;
and the favour of God was upon him.

Luke 2 .40

He becomes an adult, living, dying and rising again, to fulfil the purposes for which he came. That by his life, death and resurrection we may know that God's love is a flame that can never be extinguished.

When we reach our end, it will be only the beginning . In the midst of turmoil and death - Jesus lives!

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Father, now we bring to an end
our celebration of the Saviour's birth.
**Help us, in whom he has been born,
to live his life that has no end.**

Here we have rejoiced with
faithful Simeon and Anna.
**Help us, who have found the Lord in his temple,
to trust in his eternal promises.**

Here we turn from Christ's
birth to his passion.
**Help us, for whom Lent is near,
to enter deeply into the Easter mystery.**

Here we bless one another in your name.
**Help us, who now go in peace,
to shine with your light in the world.
Thanks be to God! Amen.**

Adapted from 'Times and Seasons', Common Worship - Church of England

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. There's a written version of this reflection on the resource website and a link to a sung version of 'Born in the Night'.

Until next week: Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!