

## **Bible Readings**

### **Isaiah 43**

But now thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>3</sup> For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.

<sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in my eyes,  
and honoured, and I love you,

I give men in return for you,  
peoples in exchange for your life.

<sup>5</sup> Fear not, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you.

<sup>6</sup> I will say to the north, Give up,  
and to the south, Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from afar  
and my daughters from the end of the earth,

<sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.”

### **Luke 3**

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, <sup>16</sup> John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

<sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

<sup>18</sup> So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. <sup>19</sup> But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup> added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son;<sup>[c]</sup> with you I am well pleased."<sup>[d]</sup>

## **Sermon.**

## **Lightbulb moments.**

Today is officially known as the first Sunday of Epiphany. Epiphany itself is the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, and it commemorates three different events in the life of Jesus. The word epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning manifestation and it commemorates three different times Christ was made manifest or revealed to the world.

The first of these is the visit of the Magi, the wise men from the Christmas story. Matthew's gospel tells us they came from the east, possibly the Parthian empire based around what is now Iran. After a detour to meet King Herod they eventually reach Bethlehem and present the infant Jesus with their three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And it's these three gifts that are the epiphany, the revealing of who Jesus is

Gold is a symbol of kingship. The main role of a king, or at least a good king, is to provide for and protect his people. The wealth of the king is the wealth of the nation, and the king is expected to use his wealth, his gold for the benefit of the people. Today the government, on the king's behalf, collects taxes from all of us, and spends it on the things it thinks we need. Whether the government spends wisely isn't what we're thinking about today. The point is that's the main duty of the king and it's represented by gold.

So, Christ's kingship. The magi see a star rising in the east and travel in search of the one born King of the Jews. Pilate at Jesus's trial asks Him if He's the king of the Jews and places a sign saying He is over Him at the crucifixion. Jesus' message to the people is centred on the arrival of the kingdom of God. The Messiah was expected to come and restore the Kingdom of David as God's chosen and anointed leader of His people.

The gold reveals Christ as king.

Frankincense is a symbol of priesthood. Incense was used by priest in the temple at Jerusalem as part of their worship. One of the recipes for incense we have is from Exodus chapter 30: <sup>34</sup> The Lord said to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), <sup>35</sup> and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; <sup>36</sup> and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet you; it shall be for you most holy. <sup>37</sup> When you make incense according to this composition, you shall not make it for yourselves; it shall be regarded by you as holy to the Lord

Frankincense was mixed with offerings presented at the temple, Leviticus chapter 2 tells us: When anyone presents a grain-offering to the Lord, the offering shall be of choice flour; the worshipper shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it, <sup>2</sup> and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. After taking from it a handful of the choice flour and oil, with all its frankincense, the priest shall turn this token portion into smoke on the altar, an offering by fire of pleasing odour to the Lord.

So frankincense marks Christ out as a priest, the book of Hebrews talks of Christ as our high priest in chapter 4: <sup>14</sup> Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The frankincense reveals Christ as priest.

Myrrh is a symbol of healing.

Myrrh has several uses, including as a perfume and an ingredient of incense, but the one we're interested in is its use in medicine. Myrrh has both antiseptic and painkilling properties. Today you can find it, I'm told, in toothpastes and mouthwashes, and some antiseptic creams. During His earthly ministry Christ performed many healing miracles, and they like the myrrh point to a deeper healing. If you think back to the days of covid we all had to sit in our houses and not mix with anyone because of the disease. If you tested positive for covid you had to separate yourself from the other people in your household. On a spiritual level we have a disease, sin, that separates from God, as covid separated us from loved ones, and as leprosy in Jesus's day forced sufferers to live outside of the village. Christ comes as a healer to heal us, end our quarantine, and allow us to rejoin God's community, God's family. The prophet Isaiah looking forward to Christ's crucifixion said, he was wounded for our transgressions,

crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed. (53:5)

The myrrh reveals Christ as healer.

Gold, Frankincense, myrrh. King, priest, healer.

The second revelation of Epiphany is what we had in our reading, Christ's baptism.

At His baptism Jesus is revealed as the Son of God. Our reading from Luke tells us that after He was baptised, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

John the Baptist's message was all about the one who would come after him whose sandals he wasn't worthy to untie, following the baptism John's gospel says (ch1:29)  
<sup>29</sup> The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Why did Jesus need to be baptised, good question. Our baptism is a mark of a change, a symbol of moving from death to life, from exclusion from God's presence to rejoining His community, His fellowship, His family. We pass from one thing to a new thing and begin a new life. In the same way Christ's baptism marks a change from His private life in Nazareth to His public ministry.

King, priest, healer, Son of God.

The third revelation is at the wedding in Cana, Jesus's first miracle according to John's gospel which tells us (ch2:11) Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Revealed His glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Jesus and His disciples, along with His mother, are attending a wedding and the wedding host runs out of wine. Jesus is reluctant at first but at His mother's prompting tell the servers to fill 6 stone jars with water and serve it to the guests. The water is changed into wine. From what the gospel says about the size of the jars there would be enough wine for between 900 and 1000 bottles.

The important thing to note is what the stone jars were used for. They weren't ordinary storage jars; they had a ceremonial function. They held the water that was used for ritual washing, the ceremonial moving from being unclean to clean. You'll remember Jesus disciples got into trouble with the pharisees once for eating with defiled or impure hands because they hadn't washed them properly. The stone jars represent that older, symbolic purification by washing with water, but now Christ has come, He purifies us by His blood.

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood.'

Writing to the Ephesians Paul says (2:12) <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

The blood of Christ, represented by the wine at communion, purifies us and brings us back to fellowship with God in a way the water could only do symbolically.

Epiphany reveals Jesus as king, priest, healer, and the Son of God, who has the power to purify.

Having had Jesus revealed in His glory, how do we respond. Having seen that Christ is the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world, what do we do.

Having had Him revealed as king do we accept His protection and provision, and in return serve Him. Or not.

Having had Him revealed as our high priest do we ask Him to intercede with the Father for us. Or not.

Having had Him revealed as our healer and purifier, do we allow Him to make us clean so we can enter into fellowship with the Father. Or not.

The Christ revealed in Epiphany calls us to fellowship with Him and the Father and the Holy Spirit. It's up to us how we respond to that call. Do we choose to enter that fellowship by offering Him ourselves in love, service, and worship.