

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

DAY 1

“We observed his star in the East” (Mt 2:2)

Raise us up and draw us to your perfect light

Readings

Zech 4:1-7	I see a lampstand all of gold
Ps 139:1-10	Your right hand shall hold me fast
2 Tim 1:7-10	This grace... has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus
Jn 16:7-14	When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth

Reflection

In this fragile and uncertain world, we look for a light, a ray of hope from afar. In the midst of evil, we long for goodness. We look for the good within ourselves, but so often we are overwhelmed by our weakness that hope fails us. Our confidence rests in the God we worship. God, in his wisdom, enabled us to hope for divine intervention; but we had not anticipated that God's intervention would be a person, and that the Lord himself would be the light in our midst. This exceeded all our expectations. God's gift to us is a 'spirit of power, and love'. Not by relying on our own strength and ability are we drawn forward on the way to this perfect light, but rather by God's Holy Spirit.

In the midst of humanity's darkness the star from the East shone. In it we see a light that penetrates the depths of the darkness that separates us from one another. The star's light was not only an illumination at a particular historical moment but it continues to shine and change the face of history. Throughout the ages, and ever since the star first appeared, the world has come to know through the lives of Christ's followers the hope that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. These give witness to God's work in history, and to the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Despite the vicissitudes of history and the changing of circumstances, the Risen One continues to shine, moving within the flow of history like a beacon guiding all into this perfect light and overcoming the darkness which separates us from one another.

The desire to overcome the darkness that separates us compels us to pray and work for Christian unity.

Prayer

Lord God, illumine our path by the light of Christ who moves before us and leads us. Enlighten us and dwell within us. Guide us to discover a small manger in our hearts where a great light still sleeps. Creator of light, we thank you for the gift of that unfading Star, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. May he be a beacon for our pilgrimage. Heal our divisions and draw us closer to the Light that we may find our unity in him. Amen.

DAY 2

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” (Mt 2:2)

Humble leadership breaks down walls and builds up with love

Readings

Jer 23:1-6	He shall reign as king and deal wisely
Ps 46	He makes wars cease to the end of the earth
Phil 2:5-11	Who... did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited
Mt 20:20-28	The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve

Reflection

Jeremiah denounces the bad leadership of the kings of Israel who divided and scattered the people. Theirs was a leadership that destroyed nations and drove their citizens into exile. In contrast, the Lord promises a shepherd-king who will ‘execute justice and righteousness in the land’ and gather together the members of his flock.

Our world craves good leadership and is constantly seeking someone who will fulfil this desire. Where can one find such a leader? Only in Christ have we seen the example of a king or leader after God’s heart. As we are called to follow him, we are also called to emulate his way of servant-kingship in the world and in the Church. In Christ we encounter one who does not tear down and divide but builds up and makes whole for the glory of God’s name. His rule is not self-serving and he does not use force. Rather in Him we encounter a loving, humble servant who does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. He is one who comes to serve, rather than be served, and his followers are called to do the same.

Today, the Middle East is experiencing the loss of its people to exile as ‘righteousness and justice’ are becoming scarce commodities not only there but throughout the world. Yet we have a hope that will not be shaken even if ‘the nations are in an uproar’ and ‘the kingdoms totter’ around us.

Leaders, both in the world and in the Church, have responsibility to bring together rather than to scatter or divide the people of God. So much division in the world and in the Church is caused by the desire for position, power and self-advantage. The more faithfully Christians emulate the servant leadership of Christ the more division in both the world and the Church will be overcome. As we work for righteousness, justice and peace for the wellbeing of all, we witness humbly to the shepherd-king, and draw others into His presence.

Prayer

God, our only refuge and strength, we glorify you for you are a just and righteous God. We confess before you that we often covet worldly models of leadership. Help us to seek our Lord Jesus Christ not in the palaces of the powerful but in the humble manger and to emulate him in his meekness. Encourage us to empty ourselves as we serve each other in obedience to you.

We pray in the name of Christ who with you and with the Holy Spirit reigns forever in glory. Amen.

DAY 3

“When king Herod heard this he was disturbed,
and all Jerusalem with him” (Mt 2:3)

The presence of Christ, turning the world upside down

Readings

Neh 4:18-21	So we laboured ... from break of dawn until the stars came out
Ps 2:1-10	Why do the nations conspire...?
2 Thess 2:13-3; 5	But the Lord is faithful, he will strengthen you
Mt 2:1-5	He was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him

Reflection

The Lord has come amongst us. Christ's coming disturbs the ways of the world. In contrast to so many national leaders, the Lord comes in humility denouncing the evil of injustice and oppression that accompanies the ambition for power and status. The coming of Jesus calls for a change of heart and a transformation of life, so that people will be liberated from all that dehumanizes them and causes them suffering. Jesus shows us that God is with those who suffer because each person has a dignity as God's beloved child. Thus, Jesus' presence creates disturbance precisely because He rocks the boat of the rich and the powerful who work only for their own interests and

neglect the common good. But, for those who work for peace and unity, Christ's coming brings the light of hope.

Today, we are invited to commit ourselves to the constructive action of making justice a reality in our world. This implies the need to reflect and acknowledge the instances when our ways are not God's ways of justice and peace. When Christians work together for justice and peace our efforts are more powerful. And when Christians work together in this way, the answer to our prayer for Christian unity is made visible such that others recognise in us Christ's presence in the world today. Through our words and actions, we can bring the light of hope to so many who are still living in the darkness of political unrest, social poverty, and structural discrimination. The Good News is that God is faithful, and He is always the one strengthening us and protecting us from harm, and inspiring us to work for the good of others, especially those living in the darkness of suffering, hatred, violence and pain.

Prayer

O Lord, you have guided us out of darkness to Jesus. You have illumined the star of hope in our lives. Help us to be united in our commitment to bring about your Reign of love, justice and peace and so to be the light of hope to all those living in the darkness of despair and disillusionment. Take our hand, Lord, so we can see you in our daily lives. As we follow you, remove our fear and anxiety. Shine your light upon us and set our hearts on fire so that your love surrounds us with warmth. Lift us up to you, you who have emptied yourself for our sake, so that our lives may glorify you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

DAY 4

“And you, Bethlehem... are by no means least” (Mt 2:6)

Though small and suffering, we lack nothing

Readings

Mic 5:2-5a, 7-8	From you shall come forth ... one who is to rule in Israel
Ps 23	The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want
1 Pet 2: 21-25	Now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls
Lk 12:32-40	Do not be afraid, little flock

Reflection

From the small and lowly city of Bethlehem, the Lord, the Son of God, made his entrance into the world. From the womb of a humble village girl, he took human flesh, and chose to live his humanity in obscurity and simplicity. He became a grain in

the field, yeast in the dough, and a small ray of light to our eyes, and that light has filled the earth. Out of the obscurity of Ephrata has come a ruler, the shepherd and guardian of our souls. And though he is our shepherd, he became the Lamb who carried the sins of the world that we might be healed.

Though of little significance among the great clans of Judah, Bethlehem was made great because of the birth of the Shepherd of all shepherds, the King of all kings. Bethlehem, a name that means the “house of bread”, can be a metaphor for the Church that brings to the world the bread of life. The Church, the Bethlehem of today, continues to be the place where the weak, the powerless and the small are welcome because in her each has a place. The gathering of these grains becomes the harvest. The united yeast becomes a powerful force. The concentrated rays become a guiding light.

In the midst of political turmoil, a growing culture of greed, and the abuse of power in this world, Christians, like others in the Middle East, suffer persecution and experience a sense of marginalisation, living in fear of violence and injustice. Yet, they are not afraid because the Shepherd walks with them, gathering them into one fold and making them a sign of his loving presence. United, they are the yeast that leavens the batch. In Christ they find a model of humility, and from him they hear a call to overcome divisions and to be united in one flock. Though they are few, in their suffering they follow in the steps of the Lamb who suffered for the world’s salvation. Though few they are sure in hope, lacking nothing.

Prayer

Good Shepherd, the fragmentation of the little flock grieves your Holy Spirit. Forgive our weak efforts and slowness in the pursuit of your will. Give us wise shepherds after your own heart who recognise the sin of division, and who will lead the churches with righteousness and holiness, to unity in you. We ask you, Lord, to hear our prayer. Amen.

DAY 5

“Ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising” (Mt 2:9)

Guided by the one Lord

Readings

Ex 13:17-14:4	The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud
Ps 121	I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?
Rev 22:5-9	For the Lord God will be their light
Mt 2:7-10	Ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising

Reflection

Again and again the scriptures tell us how the Lord God walks with his people, protects them, and watches over them day and night. The path may not always be straight: sometimes we are led to retrace our steps, and at other times to return by a different route. But in all our journeying through life, we can be confident that God, who neither “sleeps nor slumbers”, protects us lest our feet slip and we fall.

Even in the greatest darkness, God’s light is with us. His light shines out through the prophets sent to guide God’s people on the way set before them and to remind them of the covenant. Most perfectly, in the fullness of time, God sends His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. He is the guiding light for all nations, the glory of God in the world, the source of divine life, sealing a new covenant in his blood.

The way ahead into unity with one another, and so into closer union with Christ, is not always clear. In our earnest attempts to build unity ourselves it is all too easy to lose sight of this fundamental message of the scriptures: that God does not abandon his people even in their failures and divisiveness. Not only is this a message of hope for Christians, but for the whole world. As the story of the Magi reminds us, God guides people of all kinds, with the light of the star, to where Christ, the light of the world, is to be found.

God sends the Holy Spirit whose light enables us to see with the eyes of faith the truth of the divine Child, and the call to unity and the reconciliation of all things in Him. It is this Spirit that leads us from darkness and tragedy into Christ’s light and life.

Prayer

O Lord God our Father, you sent the star to lead the Magi to your only begotten Son. Increase our hope in you and let us know at all times that you are walking with us, watching over your people. Teach us to follow the guidance of your Holy Spirit, however strange the path may seem, so that we may be led to our unity in Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Open our eyes to your Spirit, and encourage us in our faith, so that we may confess that Jesus is Lord, and worship and rejoice in him as the Magi did in Bethlehem.

We ask you these blessings in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

DAY 6

“They saw the child with Mary his mother,
and they knelt down and paid him homage” (Mt 2:11)

Gathered in worship around the One Lord

Readings

Ex 3:1-6	Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God
Ps 84	How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
Rev 4:8-11	Worship the one who lives forever and ever
Mt 28:16-20	When they saw him, they worshipped him

Reflection

When the Magi from their far-away countries arrived at Bethlehem and saw the child with his mother, they worshipped him. In the presence of this revelation of God among us, eyes are cast down and knees are bent. Similarly at the sight of the burning bush, Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God. When the disciples saw the risen Christ on the mountain in Galilee, they were amazed and troubled. Yet they worshipped him. In the heavenly liturgy, the twenty-four elders fall before Him who sits on the throne. Encountering God's presence, we respond thus: gazing, followed by amazement, leading to worship.

Do we see? Are we amazed? Are we truly worshipping? How many times do we see without perceiving, our eyes remaining blind to God's presence? How can we worship in truth if we do not see first? In our narrow vision, too often we see only our tangled disagreements, forgetting that the one Lord has given his saving grace to us all, and that we share in the one Spirit who draws us into unity. Often in our pride we follow our own laws and human traditions, whilst often disregarding the love we are called to share as one people justified by Christ's blood, with a common faith in Jesus as our Saviour.

As communities enlivened by the Holy Spirit, our churches call us to walk together towards the Christ-Child to offer him homage as one people. The Spirit of compassion guides us to each other, and together guides us all to our one Lord. Only by following this guide will we be able to “worship in spirit and truth”. Our future in God is a future of unity and love; our way to this destination must reflect that same truth of one-ness in Christ.

Prayer

Compassionate God, you gave the blind the insight to recognise you as their Saviour, enable us to repent. In your mercy, remove the scales from our eyes and lead us to worship you as our God and Redeemer. In the midst of our sorrow and despite the depth of our sins, give us the capacity to love you with all our hearts. May we journey together guided by your light, with one heart and one mind, as were the very first disciples. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be upon us, so that together we glorify you in the Spirit's fellowship, and witness to all those around us. Amen.

DAY 7

“Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Mt 2:11)

The gifts of communion

Readings

Hos 6:1-6	For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice
Ps 100	Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise
Acts 3:1-10	I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you
Mt 6:19-21	For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also

Reflection

In our journey to Bethlehem, the city of bread, we contemplate the wise men who came to pay homage to the Christ-child. They opened their treasures, and offered the new-born king their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Our historical divisions, our wrong-headed fixation with rules and rituals, and our preoccupation with worldly matters, have broken us apart. So, what gifts have we prepared to offer to the king who comes to illuminate our lives and lead us to the grace of unity? We know that God does not want our riches or burnt offerings, but rather that his power works through our poverty: “I have no silver or gold”. The Lord desires our beating and loving hearts: hearts full of love for Him and for our brothers and sisters in Christ from whom we are separated; hearts flowing with acts of mercy; and hearts truly penitent and desiring change.

Let us then prepare for him the gift of a heart full of love. Kneeling in worship requires hearts that are contrite for the sin that divides us and obedient to the One we serve. This obedience revives, heals and reconciles everything that is broken or wounded in us, around us, and among us as Christians.

Christ has already given the gift of unity to his Church. We grow in communion as we share the graces our different traditions have received, acknowledging that the source of all our gifts is the Lord.

Prayer

All praise, glory and thanksgiving to you, O God. You have revealed yourself in the epiphany of your Son both to those who have long awaited your coming, and to those who were not expecting you. You know the suffering that surrounds us, the pain caused by our divisions. You see the world struggling and the deteriorating situation in the Middle East today – the place where you chose to be born, which was sanctified by your presence. We ask you to enable our hearts and our minds to know you. As we join the wise men coming from afar, we pray that you open our hearts to your love and to the love of our brothers and sisters around us. Give us the will and the means to work towards the transformation of this world and to offer each other gifts that may nurture our communion. Grant us your endless gifts and blessings. Receive our prayer in the name of your Son Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

DAY 8

“They left for their own country by another road” (Mt 2:12)

Beyond the familiar routes of separation to God's new paths

Readings

Jer 31:31-34	I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel
Psalms 16	You show me the path of life
Eph 4:20-23	To be renewed in the spirit of your minds
Mt 11:25-30	Because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent, and have revealed them to infants

Reflection

We do not know what the wise men thought - they who were experts in astronomy and navigation - when they were warned to return by another road. They may well have been very confused, but the same light that illumined their journey showed them that there was another road, another possibility. They were called to change direction.

We often find ourselves bound by our familiar ways of doing things and of seeing the world. When these ways or 'roads' are closed, we wonder how to proceed and continue the journey. God's divine providence is always there to show us that there is another way prepared for us. God is there to renew His covenant and lift us up from

the frustration we experience when we meet an obstacle. We only have to trust that the everlasting One who gave us the light, can always find a way forward when our ways and paths are blocked. A fresh start is always possible when we are willing and open to the work of the Spirit. As churches we look to the past and find illumination, and we look to the future in search of new ways so that we can continue to shine the light of the Gospel with renewed fervour and welcome each other as Christ welcomed us for the glory of God.

On the old familiar roads Christian communities have walked apart from one another. On the new roads to which God calls us, Christians walk together and become pilgrim companions. Finding these new roads demands discernment, humility and courage. Now is the time for conversion and reconciliation.

Prayer

Gracious God, when we only know one way and we think we must return to it, and when we think that all roads are blocked, and we fall into despair, we always find you there. You are the God of renewed promises. We find you creating a new path before us, one that we did not expect. We thank you because you exceed our expectations. We thank you for your wisdom that surpasses our understanding. We thank you because your creative paths open up unforeseen possibilities. If we search our maps and find no route, nonetheless we always find you, who lead us by a yet more excellent way. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, that you will always lead us back to you. Amen.