

Tomorrow's world?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 1 January 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Christmas 1 A

Contemporary Reading: 'Epiphany' by Duncan Andrews; Matthew 2: 1-12

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

How do you, how do we, approach new things? On this New Year's Day, how are we feeling about what is happening and may happen? My sense is that some of us are hopeful and excited, but others less sure and anxious. Some of us see fresh possibilities, and others renewed burdens. What does tomorrow's world look like, and feel like, to you?

Growing up in England, one of the TV shows I remember was entitled 'Tomorrow's World'. It began when I was a little child and ran for 38 years, sharing new developments in science and technology. In its early days it was filmed live. When one of its demonstrations went wrong, it then offered extra unintentional entertainment. On one notable occasion, for example, a new kind of car jack was shown, allegedly requiring much less effort to operate. Unfortunately for the presenter, but great fun for the viewers, the car jack spectacularly disintegrated. However, even when things went smoothly, Tomorrow's World was always fascinating, sharing cutting edge creations, some of which have become staple fixtures of our lives.

Typically, Tomorrow's World viewers would experience a mixture of thoughts and emotions, partly due to personality, partly to our context. If you talk with my wife Penny for example, you would find she absolutely loved Tomorrow's World, much more than me. For her, the technological promise of the future was, and still is, largely untrammelled. In my case, I tended, and still tend, to receive the heralding of some new ideas and technologies with a mixture of feelings.

Neither of us is instinctively conservative but we also understand why some people can react quite negatively to the new. For conservative reactions do not, after all, simply come from those, with power and privilege. If you have been having a hard time simply surviving, or you will not be a leading beneficiary, you will also be less impressed by the possibilities of change. Actually, if we are honest, there are few if any people who are simply conservatives or reactionaries, progressives or radicals. Much depends on what changes we are talking about. For the line between greeting or resisting the new runs within us all, in different ways and times.

So how do we greet tomorrow's world of faith and spirituality? Are we able to say 'yes' to the new in our invitation from God? Again, I suspect it depends upon who we are at any moment, and what aspect of new life we are being offered. For we can all be quite progressive in some things, as individuals and as a community, but at other times we may find ourselves being quite resistant. Being true 'pilgrims on the Way (of Jesus)' is a continuing process. Tomorrow's World is not as obvious as we might like it to be, certainly in faith terms. There is no simplistic route. Like the magi, whose story of visiting Jesus we hear today, we may be called to travel on 'by another road.'

Duncan Andrews reflects on diverse experiences of changing times, in his poem Epiphanyⁱ, which we also heard read this morning. For some, he observes, this New Year brings nothing worthwhile: *'every season winter'* for those who see no hope or reason, and for the *'boy huddled in a ditch'* - perhaps from war, abuse or persecution, *'not a trace of sun,/not grey but thickest pitch'*. For others, *'for now'* as the poet puts it, *'not needing a thing'*, new year may feel like Spring. Each of us experience tomorrow's world in our own different ways, including those who are currently *'lawn-mowers', 'sports-cheerers', or 'jittery-flyers heading home'*, those counting their/our net worth, and those shedding tears in seeing and feeling *'a groaning earth'*. On this New Year's Day, let us name those experiences in our hearts and prayers, as we meet and travel on.

Duncan Andrews says something more however. For he speaks of the light of Epiphany, the core of this season of faith. This is vital when we come to reflect upon tomorrow's world. For we cannot anticipate what we will face, and we cannot control what we will experience. Yet, as for the magi, it still matters by what road we seek to travel. Which way will we personally seek to travel this year?

Epiphany offers us an Invitation not just to do things differently, still less to acquire more things or experiences for their own sake. Rather, Epiphany offers us an invitation to be in a different way. After all, even the best New Year resolutions so easily fall over when we try to do things without new being, and when they do not rest on letting go into greater light. This is really the gift we need to receive at this time. Perhaps the gifts of the magi – the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh – may even get in our way if we feel we must offer our own gifts to God and others. Instead, as for the magi, whatever gifts we can offer are nothing compared to the gift we are offered: the gift of divine light and grace. As the poet puts it:

For and on all souls and things,
every power and place,
every trace, every hour,
what moves, loves, smiles, sings—
A light! A burning brightness,

If we need to do something at New Year, and in the Epiphany season, it is surely, like the magi, to see that light and then travel forward in it. This does not require great resolutions, or efforts of will, but deeper and more humble recognition, and reception. For we are called into new being more than new doing.

Seeing and sharing the light. This applies to us as a faith community, as we reflect together on the way ahead, and by what road we will travel on together. Indeed, in the coming weeks we will reflect upon our 'mission', as we have been asked to do by the wider Church, as part of fulfilling our calling to share in tomorrow's world.

Now I really think we need to find another name for 'mission'. Even if that word were not so tired and besmirched with other connotations, surely the colonial history of this country would encourage us to find another. Certainly, if we are genuine about walking together with First Nations people, then 'mission' is surely not the right word. Rather than developing a 'Mission Plan', perhaps we would do better with something like a Pathway of Invitation? For it is the invitation to share God's own light and joy which is at the heart of our Gospel reading this morning.

It is God's own light and joy that brought the magi to Jesus; and it was the experience of God's light, and joy, and grace that re-directed them and gave them courage for their steps forward into their own uncertain world of tomorrow. The magi were offered a pathway of invitation: to see and share God's light - and walk on in that grace and joy. In taking that pathway of invitation, they model the journey into tomorrow's world.

Like New Year resolutions, mission plans so easily become hard work and fall over when they are not truly centred on God's light, and joy, and grace. They so easily become things which drive us and we become driven people. Indeed, I have to wonder, as a church historian, how much of the very modern fashion for mission plans is driven by other concerns than the invitation to share light and grace: self-interested church concerns such as numbers, money, keeping buildings going, and other institutional anxieties, as well as a lingering sense that God will judge us if we are not 'successful' in traditional terms

Instead, our Gospel today encourages us to share, to let go of such compulsions and receive more fully the love of God, found in life-giving simplicity, and in a poverty of spirit which can be filled with new light and divine grace. For at the heart of the magi's story is a sense of being drawn by God's light rather than driven.

Today's story is a great gift, and I use that word advisedly, especially for those who are driven. I say that as someone who is too often a driven person, in this faith community which is also too often a driven congregation, in a wider Church (the Uniting Church) which is quite a driven Church, in a society and world which is also very driven. What drives us today may be different in name from Jesus' day, but it has similar features, including the insistent demands of today's Herods to fit in, to respond, to perform. In contrast, the story of the magi encourages us to be drawn to the God of grace, rather than by other gods: call those gods success, capitalism, progress, achievement, lifestyle, gross domestic product, control, religion, mission plans, or whatever you will.

Being people with drive can be a very good thing. After all, if the magi had no drive they would never have made their arduous journey to Bethlehem nor evaded Herod and brought new light to others. Yet being driven is a very different thing. It is death-bearing. On this New Year's Day, as we move further into tomorrow's world, we therefore do well to be drawn, as the magi were, and not driven. For though a little bit of drive did help them on the way, what kept the magi going was what drew them, and then led them further on: the light, and joy, and grace, of God.

Duncan Andrews puts it this way in his poem Epiphany:

A light. Beauty, warmth, love,
a story so fierce and tender
the splendour of your glory,
Father, Son, descending dove.

What is it that draws you, that draws us? This, and not what drives us, is what we can put our faith in. This is what can sustain us, through every season, shift and twist of our lives. This is what can give us ultimate purpose and meaning, even when purpose and meaning seem hard to find. For God's love is not a demand but a gift. The Way of Jesus is not so much a mission as an invitation: an invitation to see and share light, even in darkness. We are invited to share our gifts, like the magi, not so much out of our own efforts, but from our gratefulness: in thanksgiving for the gifts we have seen already and in which we can continue to trust.

One of the wonderful Orthodox Christian traditions at Epiphany is that of the Blessing of the Waters. Here in Sydney, as in other parts of the world, Orthodox Christians will again this year plunge a cross into water – here in the harbour, but elsewhere in seas, lakes and rivers. It recalls the baptism of Jesus, and the sanctification of all creation.

Many Orthodox Christians will also plunge themselves into the same waters, often extremely icy in parts of the world. For this too is a way of sharing in the light which shines in Epiphany: inviting us, like the magi, into seeing and sharing that life and grace in our own lives and in creation as a whole.

We may not all feel inclined to jump into the harbour, or even into a swimming pool. Yet I invite us all to reflect upon how we might, ourselves, receive the gift of Epiphany light. Maybe we might splash a little extra water, or perfume, on ourselves in the name of Christ.

Maybe we might say a little prayer of thanksgiving as we wash ourselves or drink a glass of water.

Maybe we might light a candle, or prayerfully watch a sunrise or sunset, or something quite different again.

We might certainly think of what gift we might like to offer, and to whom, in thanksgiving for the light, the love and grace of God, among us.

Whatever we do, and whatever season of life we may find ourselves in on this New Year's Day, may we know that love and grace in our hearts and lives.

May we be drawn to that light, and not driven.

And may we travel that other road which leads to life.

In the name of the Christ born among us, inviting us to deeper love and joy.

Amen.

ⁱ 1 <https://the12daysofchristmas.wordpress.com/resources/new-poetry/duncan-andrews-epiphany/>