

The Epiphanic Imaginings of the Church.

Epiphany is the season when we rejoice in the revelation of God's glory to all people. It is marked by the celebration of good news and new life realised through the Word becoming Flesh in Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God facilitating the birthing of a new world. We joyfully anticipate to the time when God dwells among God's people, which will enable everyone to experience the freedom, joy and love that define God's very being. It is important for us not to assume that this is different from God's original work of creation. Rather it is God's ongoing work of redemption, weaving together of a beautiful tapestry. Beginning with Creation, through all the mighty works of redemption, and continuing to the present day, God has been in the process of generating a wonderful world. The beauty all around us serves as perceptible reminders that God's work is beautiful beyond our limited imagining. Even as we observed the week of prayer for Christian unity, Epiphany is a reminder that through all the ebb and flow of history, schisms, divisions and reformations...the church has been and will continue to be emerging as part of God's renewal of the creation until God's glory fills the whole earth.

Now I may have painted a very serene and peaceful picture.

Sadly, many feel that neither the world nor the church feels like God is at work or even remotely present in the unfolding reality all around us.

Fires, floods and famines dominates our headlines, capturing the unravelling of catastrophic environmental crisis and the gathering pace of climate change.

Geo-Political conflicts driven by nationalist ideologies destroying homelands and innocent lives, driving people to become refugees and migrants

Many of our nations are gradually shifting towards populist politics exploited by self-serving authoritarian leaders propped up by oligarchs.

There is discontent fermenting on the back of growing gulf between the rich and the poor.

Closer to home the established church is coming to terms with its own fragility and failures to be a safe and inclusive space in a largely post-Christian society, in the process risking credibility.

Across the pond in the last few days, we witnessed the spiteful reaction to a bishop pleading for mercy from a pulpit!

Now, can we for a moment place ourselves into Jesus' imagination and read the scripture with him?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...

To proclaim good news to the poor

To lift up the ones who have been pushed down

To mend the broken hearts

To set free the prisoners

To make the blind see again

To proclaim the year of God's favour, jubilee

Jesus steps into the scripture to remind his audience, the ongoing redemptive work of God. Jesus was very much aware of the location from where he is re-reading the scripture. He presents the salvation in earthly terms not in an otherworldly interpretation. The good news is about freedom, healing, liberty, and comfort. God's liberation that is tangible, real, corporeal and immanent. Jesus reads from Isaiah who was speaking to a context of a fragmented nation, where justice and equity were for sale, discrimination institutionalised, the privileged had their way, while the religious quarrelled acrimoniously among themselves resulting in sectarianism, forgetting the expansive mercy of God they had received, and failing to extend it to the stranger and excluded. Sounds familiar isn't it! So, who are the recipients of the good news: the oppressed and broken hearted, the captives and prisoners, the pushed aside and trampled upon, those who mourn and the faint hearted.

God's mission is to restore them. God has a preferential care for them.

Consequently, the identity of God's people is defined by their participation in the liberative and restorative mission of God. Isaiah frames the good news of God's expansive mercy and salvation imagined as a restored place of well-being and abundance for life. Jesus leans into Isaiah's world and holds it as a mirror to his own community. Jesus draws our attention to the wideness of God's mercy, reiterating that living as a community of Jubilee is the sacramental and missional identity of God's people.

Maybe we have to pause and search our own hearts and ask the question who are the imprisoned, the captive, the oppressed and broken-hearted, not only by the world but by the narrow vision of the church, here among us?

I hope I don't have to spell it out for you.

The invitation from Jesus is for us to usher in the eschatological vision into a reality. What it means is to challenge all forms of 'churchianity' as Bonhoeffer called it, which seeks self-preservation and considers the church as an end in itself rather than facilitating the reign of God. Just as Jesus did, we are invited to step into the imagination of God in this ever-unfolding story of redemption and restoration.

The power of imagination is that it has the capacity to bring into life a vision, the power to inhabit a world that is not yet realised, piece together an imagination grounded in hope. Imagination takes us beyond the immediacy and allows us to visualise an alternative. Let your imagination take flight with wings of hope.

Dear Friends, we are gathered today around the same scripture just as Jesus did two thousand years ago. How can we imagine a church that mends the broken, enlightens our blurred vision, lifts-up the ones who have been pushed down, practice freedom, and embody jubilee?

Let me submit three Epiphanic Imaginings of the church:

Firstly, Church as a relational community, gathered around the truth revealed in Jesus Christ.

A community that exhibits principled commitment to live the truth, and not as a captive of antiquated beliefs. Such a commitment is shaped by a relentless pursuit of truth in a fragmented and broken community. A continuous process of listening, talking, thinking and challenging oppressive and dehumanising norms. Jesus embodied this pursuit when he walked up to the front and opened the scripture along with those gathered in the synagogue. Jesus engaged with the gathered community to reflect around the issues that affected and divided them, there by gently equipping them to challenge the tyranny of orthodoxy. Fragmentation of our beings often happens under the weight of disembodied tradition and misguided orthodoxy.

If we carefully consider the biblical notion of human identity, the dignity of all beings is fundamentally shaped by the shared nature of our created-ness with the creator, this shared nature is essentially an embodied one. We cannot conceive this shared worth and value in a vacuum but only in the recognition of the divine in others. We need to desire and delight in the innate value of every living being. So fundamental is the *imago dei* as an element of creation that it ought to be the supreme value that shapes our identity and therefore our belonging to one another, because we all share in that ineffable love as the source of our being.

Jesus' spirituality was animated by relationality. Our lives are intertwined, bound to one another, what affects others affects us. Solidarity is resisting any force that destroys the God intended interdependence and balance. If we undermine the intertwined and interdependent nature of our being, we become less than human, less than God intended. Jesus opened-up a relational approach in a fractious and fragmented society. A relational spirituality provides space for solidarity, which is life affirming and underpinned by the interdependence of all creation as God intended.

Secondly, Church is a subversive community.

Jesus was proclaiming the good news in the shadow of Roman imperialism. The Roman empire was built on systemic centralisation of power, underpinned by socio-economic and military power, legitimised by religious myths. The Roman empire's worldview was shaped by the dominant imperial culture. Peace was achieved through enforced violence. In such a context, the subversive imagination Jesus offers is to strip away oneself of the marks of empire (i.e, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abuse and lies) and clothe oneself in God's values, with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Contrary to colonial powers, Jesus' pathway to peace was through love and justice.

The alternative relational ethic is at the heart of Jesus' radicality. It refuses to bow before the idols of empire. It resists the principles of enforced normalcy. By stepping into the prophetic imagination of Isaiah Jesus critiqued the Roman imperial politics. In opposition to repressive colonial hierarchy and exclusion, Jesus practiced a redemptive unconditional inclusion. In *Born*

from Lament, Emmanuel Katongole comments, “The church’s unique calling and mission at the intersection of social brokenness is to be a sacrament of God’s ongoing work of social repair”.

The violent empires may have faded but their legacies linger on in new forms. The church ought to heed the call to be the alternative community rooted in Jesus, carrying on God’s work of social repair in our world today.

Thirdly, Church as a restorative pilgrimage.

Liberation in the context of Jubilee means more than just freedom, it is a complete overhaul and reversal of a lop-sided socio-economic relations that perpetuates slavery and despair. The comfort proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah was not just wiping the tears, but a restoration and reconstitution of the social order rooted in God’s righteousness. Jesus positions himself as the one who is proclaiming and bringing God’s transformation to fruition. Proclaiming of liberation involves, denouncing, resisting, opposing, crucially organising, prophesying, and reimagining. Jesus imagined a community that sets free everyone. A season of jubilee, a time to repent, reset and revive.

Jesus’ political engagement was marked by the fruits of the Spirit. Freedom that stems from that engagement embodies an alternative to the present brokenness. In the context of fragmentation and division, the prophetic love imagined by Jesus actively sought to reconcile and heal, not through fudging relationships but through the pursuit of justice. The world we inherited doesn’t have to be accepted as it is. If it needs to be changed so be it. We don’t have to embrace repressive tolerance that undermines fundamental freedoms. For Jesus love is the substance of justice. It always challenges consensus and thwarts any efforts towards absolutizing. In the *Afternoon of Christianity*, Tomas Halik says “If the church is to be the church and not become a self-contained sect, it must undertake a radical shift in its self-conception, in its understanding of its service to God and to people in this world...if the church wants to go beyond its boundaries and serve all, then this ministry must be linked to respect for the otherness and freedom of those it addresses. It must be free from the intention to squeeze everyone into its ranks and gain control over them, to ‘colonize them’”.

Dear Friends, in this age of sound bites that fuel hatred and outrage, an epiphanic imagining of the church invites us to proclaim God's freedom, dignity and worth. With the world edging towards unpredictable political future, the good news urges us to gather and knit together a community that has been disembodied, dismembered and scattered by the machinery of social media. As an alternative to the empire, the body of Christ, ought to step into God's imagination. The role of the church is to out-imagine the conventional frameworks within which people imagine the world and its possibilities.

We are not just a small band of desperate believers, but a living breathing body of Christ, called to live in the light of God's emerging future, God's Now and Not Yet. We have to fan the fickle flame of hope so that it might animate our faithful living rooted in justice, mercy and compassion. We are called to proclaim and embody the scandalous and subversive kingdom of God, by out-imagining evil, to change our attitude to life, holding before people an impossible possibility, thereby bringing hope and peace to the broken world. Here in lies the Epiphanic invitation to us, the church, which is a 'work in progress', not perfect, continuously emerging, to imagine with God, the ever unfolding of creation, a world redeemed and restored. Amen.

The Cambridge University Sermon, The Great St Mary's.

26th of January 2025, The Third Sunday of Epiphany

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