

The power of the written word

Heather Cooke *reflects on* Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 and Luke 4:14-21

Until today our Old Testament readings this Epiphany have been from Isaiah. And in today's Gospel Jesus uses Isaiah to explain who he is: the anointed one, sent to bring good news. But today's reading bucks the trend. Why Nehemiah?

While we're thinking about ways in which God is made known, which is theme of Epiphany, Nehemiah reminds us how God speaks through scripture. Those who gather to hear Ezra reading from scripture are returning exiles, back from the rivers of Babylon, home at last in their beloved Jerusalem, but having to rebuild their city and their lives. Nehemiah tells us the book of the Law wasn't just quoted, but "read... with interpretation", giving "the sense", so the people understood it. Ezra uses it to remind them of their history and their calling as God's chosen people.

No wonder they weep – for shame, because of their doubts and wrongdoing, then for joy, at this reminder of God's loving purpose for them.

Turning to our Gospel reading, the Isaiah passage that Jesus reads is not his whole story, but a summary of God's plan; of a mission to destroy injustice and ignorance, poverty and pain, sin and death. The people of Nazareth need help to understand how that prophecy, and so many others, can possibly apply to an apparently ordinary human being.

We need help, too, to understand. So why not try some Bible study? 🍷

Teaching God, you sent your Son to be the Word made flesh. Help us seek him in the printed word, and in the world he came to save. May your Spirit interpret your law for us in our hearts and hands. Amen.

New year, new you

New for old

by William Hepper

The sage and sobering words of the teacher from Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun", may not seem the most appropriate saying with which to start a new year. But if we are honest it chimes with most of our experience. Resolutions are broken before you can say "Hogmanay", and New Year quickly turns to Old Year that feels much like Last Year.

Staging posts such as the New Year are important, but they rarely mean that everything changes for the better. Perhaps the problem is

that we want our circumstances or the people around us to change, but are not very serious about changing ourselves. Yet in Ephesians (4:24) we are called to clothe ourselves "with the new self, created according to the likeness of God". That kind of renewal is never going to happen overnight, it is the process of a lifetime. Nor will it be the result of a lightly willed resolution. It requires continuing devotion to God and seeking the renewing power of the Spirit.

There is indeed nothing new under the sun, but in God's strength the old can be made new. 🍷

Epiphany around the world Part IV – linking the seasons

by Frank Garcia

At one time all the events that proclaimed God's incarnation seem to have been commemorated more or less jointly. So the nativity, the visit of the magi, the baptism of Christ and even the wedding at Cana were one celebration, marking God's bodily arrival among us. This sense of the continuity of the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany is preserved by churches to this day.

Some keep Epiphany not just as a single day, but as a season, linking Christmas to Lent. This

is appropriate to the length and variety of God's Epiphany: a guiding star of wonder, and light in darkness; the living water of baptism; a miracle of transformation, from plain water to the wine of heightened experience.

A very old Latin hymn, sung to Gregorian chant, celebrates the feast of Epiphany in all its varied fullness. Perhaps we can echo its closing exclamation – "We keep this day holy, beautified by three miracles: today a star led the Magi to the manger; today water became wine at the wedding; today, Christ consented to be baptised by John in the Jordan, to save us. Alleluia!" 🍷

“Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth.”

Psalm 48:10