



Seasons of Grace

Praying with Mary MacKillop

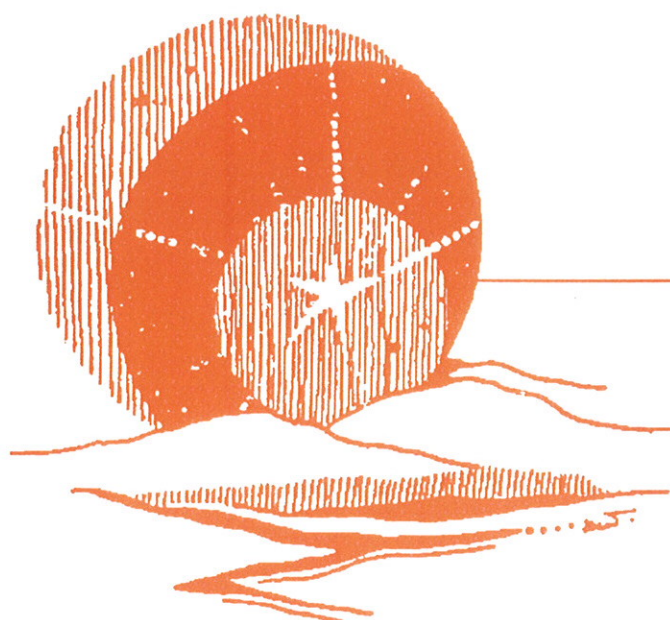
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Epiphany

A Season of Revelation

As Epiphany draws near, we dust off the three statues of the Magi and place them in the Crib in positions before the infant Jesus. On this great feast we celebrate that God is revealed to the nations. In fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "a light shines on a people living in darkness." God came as a homeless infant, dwelling in a lowly stable, a feeding trough for his crib.

Like Jesus' birth place, God's coming into our lives is never tailored to our expectations. Those who were most attentive to this revelation of God were not the religious people of the day but humble shepherds and three outsiders. The outsiders were wise men who came from the east to pay homage. They were guided to the birth place by a star, the sight of which filled them with delight.

MARY'S TIME OF EPIPHANY

Many people speak of a moment or an experience when they seemed to have an unusual sense of God's presence. This awareness may come unexpectedly and often leaves them with the sure knowledge that they have received some revelation of God's mystery in their personal life. Such revelations can cause life to take on a new perspective, indifference might vanish. Such revelations form the basis of a personal relationship with God.

Mary MacKillop gives us beautiful testimony of these awakenings in her life:

I must go back a little. I must tell you that from early childhood, as far back as I can remember, He gave me such a sense of His watchful presence that I would feel myself reproved for my smallest faults.

In a prayer she once wrote to Our Lady, Mary refers to this sense of God's purpose and call:

My Mother, you know what you told me when I first knelt to ask you to offer me to your Son; but I did not know it was your voice that whispered.....Since my childhood, I had been receiving those lights, but I did not know what they were.

Some occasions looked disastrous but instead brought her to a sense of God-with-her. In fact, she perceived the disastrous element as a blessing instead of curse.

In some of the most trying matters of business, where I had to meet or provide against heavy expense which had come upon me, where I had no earthly resource, I went to Him in Holy Communion, and from there to the angry persons with whom I had to deal, and found them gentle, considerate and kind.

These experiences of the creative touch of God in Mary's life were woven into the texture of her lived experience. She wrote of them occurring very early in life and also as her life unfolded over 67 years. In her prayer she held and cherished the memory of these revelations.

She discovered that her desire for union with God was awakened or intensified in these moments. She expressed a sense of being graced cherished by God, a feeling of wholeness and strength. These experiences became the 'touchstone' of her life and she discovered that the desire which was awakened in this moment of God's revelation led her more strongly in the direction of fulfilling the purpose of her life.

OUR TIME OF EPIPHANY



For Mary MacKillop and for each one of us there are Epiphany seasons in our lives. These are the times when we experience God-with-us in a new and wondrous way. We have an awakening and we enjoy a sense of God's presence in the ordinary human reality of our lives. In these moments we realise that we are called to live our lives in a normal way and yet to seek ideals which soar above the powers of our mind and sweep even beyond our dreams.

These are times when life's journey is full of purpose and we go beyond familiar territory in our search for God. Our lives are enlarged, our horizons shift. New demands are made of us but new resources may also become unexpectedly available to us.

This is the season when we need to be aware of our dreams. Strangers or new friends may come into our lives bearing treasures and gifts. They might come in surprising ways. They can introduce us to new insights and sensitivities to others. We must pay attention to signals and encounters which break down barriers. Such openness enlarges hospitality and hope.

The scriptures recount many revelation experiences. Moses' season of revelation was dramatic, it involved a burning bush. For St. Paul it involved a violent crash to the ground. However, the God-moment for us is likely to occur in our everyday events. God might cut into our lives anywhere, on a bus, at a business meeting or when gazing at a sunset.

It can be useful to recall any experience we have had in which God reached into the depths of our minds and hearts. Sometimes we call this a revelation or an illumination, sometimes it is better described as a conversion.

MARY LOOKS AT THE STARS



Like the strangers from the east Mary MacKillop had very few landmarks to guide her way. In her Epiphany times she had to lift her gaze beyond the confusion of this unknown territory and pray that she be guided by a star that was not on the astronomers' charts. As a pioneering Australian woman Mary was called to trudge through uncharted landscapes.

There were no blue-prints for her of the kind of religious life that would fit the needs of this wild, untamed Australia. Mary had to lift her eyes above the dust-storms and the whirl-winds that made her journey so uncomfortable to search for a deeper meaning to express her commitment to God.

In spite of all the chaos along the way she learned to look with the eyes of kindness, compassion and forgiveness. It is difficult to love those who have betrayed us yet Mary's willingness to forgive is a sure testimony that her life was focused on the revelation of God.

The tone of this note to her Sisters in 1890 could only be the result of such prayerfulness. Mary had been banished from the Adelaide Diocese by Archbishop Reynolds and treated harshly and unjustly:

I beg of you all to pray very earnestly for Dr. Reynolds who was once so kind a friend and who is now so seriously ill. Pray that it may please our good God to let us have a peaceful understanding; and that he may obtain all the strength and spiritual comfort he requires. It grieves me so much that he is suffering and that I cannot help him; I can only remember that he was once, and for many years, a kind friend and Father.⁸

WE LOOK AT THE STARS

Let us take our cue from Mary MacKillop and pray as she did:

Find a comfortable position where you can gaze up into the sky. Allow your spirit to lift up above the bogs and ditches of your daily wanderings. Look for a focus there in the sky, it may be a shimmering star which reminds you of the constancy and brilliance of God's presence in your life.

Your eyes might linger on the moon, or a cloud tinged with the radiance of the sun, or swirling fog might reflect the energy and verve of God's activity, cloud might remind you of God's love. Let the sky-scape speak to you of God's watchfulness over you.

I lift up my eyes to you who are enthroned in heaven.

Ps 123

Allow the image of God which is reflected by the sky-focus to draw you into prayerful dialogue. Be present to the God who leads us beyond our own concerns and ask to see the broader, wider dimensions of life.

Yahweh is your guardian, your shade Yahweh, at your right hand. By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night.

Ps 121

Recall the events of your life that have hurt and damaged you. Pray that resentment and hostility will not diminish your spirit. Ask God to heal such scars.

I will say, 'Let the darkness cover me, and the night wrap itself around me,' even darkness to you is not dark, and night is as clear as the day.

Ps 139

What is darkness for us is not darkness for God. Our darkest secrets do not drive away the God of light. Bring your darkness into the light of God's tender compassion and let it be illuminated and transformed.

Rest peacefully and restfully with the One who is God of heaven and earth, who will not allow you to stumble and fall.

MARY PRAYS HER DREAM

When she was at Penola Mary told her sisters, Annie and Lexie, of a dream which she had during a meditation time. Annie joked about it when she wrote to Fr. Woods but with hind-sight we can regard it as a premonition of what was to happen in Adelaide in a few short years time. Annie's account of this prayer-dream is as follows:

I am not sure whether I can describe properly what she saw but the Bishop seemed to be before her and she was a sheep. The Bishop went to pull her up by his crook or staff, whatever it is called, and then he altered his mind, and the crook looked like one of those things they use to dip sheep with when they are washing them, and Mary was a sheep getting dipped in the same way.⁹

Mary had this dream whilst praying, not sleeping. We all have images and intuitions which will enlighten us if we work with them. We have no proof that she worked with it but its prayer-context suggests that she probably reflected on it and allowed it to be the source of a grace. The very fact that she shared it with her young sisters tells us that she recognised its significance.



WE PRAY OUR DREAM

The Epiphany seasons of our lives are intimately connected with the way God communicates to us in our dreams. We are told in Scripture that St. Joseph had many dreams. He trusted deeply such inspirations as discloses God's message. The Magi were also warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. They took the dream seriously and returned to their country by a different way. These were messages from God that they could not afford to ignore.

Morton Kelsey in the book 'Dreams - A Way to Listen to God', suggests that we are gifted with a dreamer within, who is none other than the Holy Spirit. This inner guide directs our consciousness to reveal what we need to understand about ourselves and uncovers that which is hidden and repressed. The dream gives us a safe way to confront aspects of our inner life that we need to explore in order to grow. It has been said that our dreams are always friendly, offering to communicate messages of healing, inviting us to deeper self-understanding and awakening us to new insights.

Invite the Holy Spirit, the Dreamer-Within, to re-visit the dream with you. Begin by writing down a dream, recalling as much as possible of the imagery, the action and the characters who played a part.

Notice how you were feeling as the dream unfolded. Try to give the dream a title, then begin to 'unpack' its meaning by spraying around all the feelings and associated ideas, memories, insights that it suggests.

It is important that you recognise the characters and symbols for what they symbolise for you. Only the person who is gifted with the dream can say what the dream means.

We would need to ask Mary what she associated with 'Bishop', 'staff', 'sheep-dip' etc and about the emotional tone of her dream. For example, the Bishop may represent 'authority' or 'church' or 'status' or 'fear', the crozier might represent a shepherd's crook or a weapon. But only Mary could tell us what they symbolised for her.

Try to identify with the various characters in your dream as if they represent part of your own inner life, for example, a loved one may represent that part of yourself which you cherish, a thief may indicate that you are doing violence to some aspect of your life, a playful kitten might invite you to re-connect with the whimsical, lighter side of your nature.

Fully identify with the people and action of your dream, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you to understand its meaning.

Working with a dream in this way or talking it over with another person enables you to be drawn into a graced encounter with the Spirit whose only wish is to lead you to a greater awareness of God.

MARY'S MEDITATION

Meditation is a form of reflection used by many people the world over. We know that Mary MacKillop was a devoted user of this form of reflection as prayer. She left us with a collection of her own meditations.

The following is an example of how she directed her Sisters to enter into a meditation:

Let us imagine we see a supper room at the furnished table of which we behold our dear Lord seated amongst His Apostles with tender love and compassion beaming from His adorable features. Let us note well the separate attitudes of two amongst that number of privileged children of our Divine Lord, namely, John the beloved disciple of His Heart and Judas, who was about to betray Him.

Meditation never dates. It is a valuable way to pray in any era and in every season of the spirit, for it can immerse us in the Gospel mystery and enable us to enter more fully into the presence of God.

OUR MEDITATION

To enter into a meditation, read a passage of Scripture, for example, The Visit of the Magi (Mt 2). Then take a position in the story. You might identify with an on-looker and describe the story from the on-looker's point of view.

Do this as if the action is unfolding right now in front of your eyes. Give your imagination and senses the opportunity to bring this scriptural mystery to life in your presence. Now identify with one of the key figures in the story perhaps one of those Magi who had come from afar, trekking into foreign territory, crossing boundaries.

As you experience what it must have been like for this person, be aware of your own feelings, thoughts and hesitations. Now shift out of this role-playing and imagine that you are face to face with Jesus.

Bring the reality of your life into the presence of Jesus. Perhaps you are feeling alienated or negotiating unfamiliar events in your life. Allow yourself to feel safe in Jesus' presence.

Jesus can heal and transform us in our uncertainty or fear. We can ask for what we want and enjoy this moment of dialogue and revelation.

MARY'S EXPERIENCE OF THE MAGI



It is a warm experience of life to realise that we have been gifted by someone who seems to appear from nowhere. The presence of these people can become a deep source of friendship for us.

Mary MacKillop enjoyed this experience in a remarkable way. In those days when sectarianism, religious prejudice and anti-semitism were strong, her great friends and allies were non-Catholics. One of these was Dr. Benson who provided valuable service and kindness to the Sisters at Kensington.

Robert and Joanna Barr gave Mary the astronomical sum of 2,000 pounds for the building of Kensington. Joanna became a very special friend of Mary's. The Baker family, wealthy and prominent in the political scene of the colony, were also very supportive.

Emanuel Solomon, a local Jewish merchant and Member of Parliament gave Mary and her Sisters a row of cottages rent-free for as long as they needed them. This was a great gift at a time when Mary had offered the Franklin St. convent to the newly-arrived Dominicans and subsequently found only inadequate accommodation for her own Sisters. They were living in crowded, uncomfortable quarters until Emanuel's generosity came to their rescue.

Later when Mary was excommunicated and the whole group was homeless, Emanuel Solomon heard of their plight and again offered them a rent-free house in Flinders St. Mary made no secret of her love for these people and her appreciation of them appears in her writings:

A house in Rosetta Terrace was kindly lent for the purpose by the Hon. E. Solomon. The kindness shown by the Jewish community has been remarkable, but then St. Joseph was a Jew.¹⁰

Mary may not have even heard of the word ecumenism. She knew its spirit well and recognised the treasures that come into our lives through openness and receptivity. No doubt the affection and kindness was two-way. Most certainly she would have prayed in gratitude and asked God's blessing on them.

OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE MAGI

Let us use Mary's example to reflect on what we have received through those who appeared in our lives as strangers, aliens, culturally different or marginalised.

Name the people who have been 'strangers bearing gifts' for you. Pray for those who have given you gifts of 'gold' and have enriched you by sharing their resources.

Give thanks for those 'myrrh-givers' who have brought healing, renewal and strength into your life.

Celebrate your encounter with those 'frankincense-bearers' who enhanced your life with excitement, fragrance, hospitality and communion.

Resolve to offer your own gifts and qualities to others, even to those who would not expect anything from you. Practice the art of gifting in unexpected ways.



EPIPHANIES ARE TIMELESS

The older we get the more we realise the recurring nature of these Epiphany experiences. Let us savour the adventure that comes into our lives at such times. We can enjoy God's presence in these seasons of our spirit.

As we follow the life of Mary MacKillop as she lived out her Epiphany seasons we notice that it involves listening to our dreams and remaining optimistically open to all possibilities.