

Readings for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

18th January 2026

First Reading: Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' But I said, 'I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.'

And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honoured in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength. The Lord says, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, 'Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

From Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel: St John 1:29-42

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look,

here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).

A Reflection for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

from Rev’d David Higgon

Do you remember as a child when someone in the playground started playing with something that no one else had? Like a yoyo or a hula hoop; you could guarantee that within a week everybody would be playing with that toy, that had been obtained by hook or by crook from older siblings or bought with your pocket money. It is the same today with electronic devices and games.

There is a theory to explain this, it is called mimetic theory. Mimetic simply means to imitate or copy, and the theory was developed by a French philosopher named René Girard. Girard has influenced politicians like J D Vance the Vice President of America and people like Peter Thiel, the man behind PayPal and the first major financial backer of Facebook. Thiel says the French thinker opened his eyes to the primal force that moves people: comparison and rivalry. This crucial insight helped Thiel understand the potency of Facebook, the great comparison machine. Without Girard, Facebook might never have taken off. Girard argues that people are deeply mimetic – that is, they always imitate or copy someone. That is how we learn and grow, we literally do not know what to desire and therefore, to find out, we look at the people we admire: we imitate their desires. Girard contends that no one simply desires an object spontaneously but first learns that desire from another. We each desire what other people desire. A little child learns how and what to desire from miming the desires of others. Our desire for a new car, a better job, is mimetic and is fed by the people we admire.

You may be wondering why am I talking about René Girard? Well, what he theorises about is evident in today’s Gospel reading. John the Baptist recognises Jesus and points him out to two of his disciples as the Messiah, the son of God. They in turn mimic John in now following Jesus. John is their role model and if John recognises Jesus as the lamb of God, they too will desire to know Jesus.

What Girard argues is that our tendency to copy others can very quickly become rivalry as we feed on each other’s desires. He said that “These rivalries, unlike animal rivalries, can become so intense and contagious that they spread, mimetically, to entire communities.” The fact that violence results from this led Girard to a second discovery: when mimetic rivalry in a group increases, it will end in violence unless the growing pressure finds a release valve. Violence is most easily prevented by blaming someone else – an outsider or a stranger. This clears the air and brings peace. Girard calls it the mechanism of the scapegoat, after the practice described in Leviticus 16:10.

There is rivalry everywhere, but if we can blame someone else, it dissolves. The best way to unite people is a common enemy. Anger is a very contagious passion it is easily copied. If people are angry with me, it is very easy to transfer

that anger on to an innocent target, a member of the family for example, or the cat -hence the expression to kick the cat. Anger is a powerful passion that gives one a feeling of power and self-righteousness. Having an enemy unites us, whether we label that enemy fascist or communist, or the label illegal immigrants. Girard found, the closer we get to each other – in language, education, income, or gender equality – the more we compare ourselves. The more equal we become, the more we become rivals. This applies not just to individuals, but to nations as well.

It's not just money, status, or power we're competing for these days. There is a new source of rivalry – the struggle over who is the most wronged. Everyone wants to be seen as the victim.

As a theologian, Girard found this mimetic or copying tendency to be present in Jewish and Christian texts. At first, they seem very similar to other ancient myths and religions. But he discovered one crucial difference, the Hebrew Bible and the Christian gospels are different in that they are written not from the perspective of the victors but from that of the victims. This is evident throughout the Bible, from Joseph, Jeremiah, and Job to Jesus, the Lamb of God sacrificed by the angry mob. Just as in the myths, the victim dies for the people – yet this time not because he is guilty but because he is innocent. Girard writes, "The Bible is a radical break with mythology: it undermines the supremacy of the crowd, which goes back to the roots of humanity."

Girard's research into scapegoat theory led him to convert to Christianity. According to him, the gospel is a revelation, the unveiling of an ancient lie. But it is a very dangerous revelation, he says, because it threatens to explode the order humanity has devised to contain violence. How can we place evil outside the community if we can no longer blame others for it? How can we reject anyone if Jesus came for all humankind?

In mythology violence is considered to come from the Gods but we know that it does not come from the gods but comes from within us. This terrible insight had always been disguised, says Girard, and that is why our rivalry had an outlet. Christianity robbed us of all sacred pretext.

It can be said that since the Middle Ages, our historical world has been moving in the direction of less and less violence. Our world saves more victims than any previous world. But our world also kills more victims than any previous world. The twentieth century had a history of death camps, genocides, and nuclear weapons."

As Girard always reminds us, we can't combat scapegoating with scapegoating, intolerance with intolerance. Our scapegoating always looks to us like justice. And that is the importance of dialogue: we can't discern our own scapegoating. We need the other for that. If we only stay inside our own ideological bubble, and only blame the others, then we will never learn something about our own blind spots. This was one of the themes that Alastair MacIntosh took up at his talk at the MacPhail Theatre in December, about the need to have compassion for the cat as well as compassion for the mouse. As a society we need to listen to the people we condemn if we are to tackle intolerance and hatred of others in our society. It is of course difficult to initiate a dialogue when both sides are so concerned with being right that we refuse to tolerate the views of those we oppose; but that is what Christ asks of those who would be his followers, as in the case of Andrew and his brother Peter in our Gospel reading.

How can I make peace while I still can? Girard would say: the only way to peace is to stop imitating each other. Refuse to follow the group. Give your rival space. We are imitating creatures, we cannot do otherwise. So, imitate Christ instead, because he imitates no one except his Father, whom we can't picture. What does that mean, in practice?

Sharing your food, caring for the poor.... This, according to Girard, is the only safe way out of the mimetic tangle. He truly believed that violence will not go back in the box unless we humbly renounce rivalry in imitation of Christ.