SERMON, ST LEONARDS
4th JANUARY, 2026
Epiphany Sunday

Is. 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7; 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Mt.2: 1-12

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer…

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries – that arbiter of the vocabulary and correct usage of our terribly complicated language – designated that its word of the year was "post truth". While, and to be pedantic, that is not one word but two, it does convey an image of false and falsified information being presented as news coverage. The concept has accelerated a growing mistrust in our media, particularly our public media. It has highlighted the growing tendency for public knowledge to become subject to private opinion. A case in point would be the growing dispute about the value of childhood vaccinations. On the one side, there is an old public consensus that grew from the experience of such childhood diseases as polio and scarlet fever. In the lifetime of many people who are still among us, these diseases went from being endemic to being occasional because of vaccination. This needs to be set against a growing public scepticism which gained traction during the COVID 19 pandemic and asserted that vaccination was a process manufactured by large drug companies to make money and was in general of little medical value and probably actually harmful. There is no actual evidence to support this proposition, but there doesn't have to be. It is enough that many people believe it and their opinions have weight.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany. And the thing about Epiphany is that it is all about encountering the undeniable. The word "epiphany" is one of those words that we commonly use without troubling too much about what it actually means If we use the word these days, we tend to mean that we have come to a sudden and unexpected realisation. To "have an epiphany" is to have what is called, in other contexts, a "lightbulb moment" when something, hitherto puzzling, now makes sense. In origin, it is a Greek word which was often used in the political vocabulary of Jesus' time, meaning "made manifest". Put more simply, it signifies that something is capable of being directly experienced. In Jesus' time, it was a political slogan used by Greek kings to advertise their close relationship to the gods. Probably the best known example is Antiochus IV,

the villain of the Maccabean books, whose full name and title was Antiochus Theos Epiphanes: "Antiochus the God made manifest". And is Kings, or rather, wise men, who become our own markers for Epiphany. Journeying from the distant east, and following a sign they have discerned in the heavens, they encounter the infant Christ child and the Holy Family, and recognise the baby as the promised Messiah through the presentation of the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

We find this story in the Gospel of Matthew, and he tells it in a particular way. The first thing that Matthew does is that he gives us a date and a place. The text of Matthew makes this much clearer than the translation read to us this morning. It is better translated: "Now Jesus, having been born in Bethlehem in Judaea in the time of king Herod…". This is not the world of Greek myth with its tales of divine conceptions, such as Heracles and Dionysus; or even Hebrew myth with its divinely ordered conceptions, like those of Isaac and Samuel. This is our world: the world in which we live and experience all of the reality of our daily lives. Here is a tangible time frame to which to cling; and a place on a map to which to pin it. That is the first point that Matthew wants to make in this particular narrative. This was a real baby in a real place at a real time with a real mother. We are used to such factual language, but in antiquity, religious narratives were cast differently. They looked and read more like fantasy novels than the newspaper.

The next thing that we find in this text is the story that has become the centre of the Epiphany narrative: "wise men" or "magi". We kind of assume that there were three because they brought three gifts, but there might have been two or four or many. But we'll stick with three because that's what we are comfortable with. Matthew tells us that they were from "the east". The term "magus" quite specifically refers to a caste of Iranian priests, who are generally thought to have come from Babylon. The caste of Magi are most generally associated with the ancient Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, and were probably skilled astronomers or astrologers – hence the reference to the star. It does not matter that they were not kings, nor that we do not know the actual number that came to do honour to the infant Jesus. What is of importance is that they were gentiles. If the local shepherds that we read about in Luke were the first to recognise the Christ-child, the "wise men" of the gentiles were not far behind. Matthew here is making the point that, from the very beginning, the gospel was for Jew and Gentile alike.

But that is not the most important point that Matthew seeks to make here. These scholars had seen something that led them to believe that big things were going to happen. And so they uprooted themselves and undertook a long journey. It's over a thousand kilometres from Babylon to Bethlehem, and even travelling on horse or

camelback, and allowing for reasonable rest days, it's still a month's journey. And it is a journey in faith. In his great poem, "The Journey of the Magi", T.S. Eliot puts it this way:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Eliot here captures the nature of their journey: an adventure prompted by a profound belief: one that is long, arduous and never easy. To put it in mythic terms, it is a quest. And it is a quest undertaken in the firm belief that the end is there to be encountered and honoured. The wise men carry with them the emblems of their quest: the gold, the frankincense, the myrrh.

But this is not just any kind of myth. This is what C.S. Lewis would have called "true myth". For what they encounter at the end, their very objective, is a baby – a very real baby who cried for his milk and needed his nappy changed and every so often had to be burped. And this is where we circle back around to those words of Matthew's that fix this event in human history: "Now Jesus, having been born in Bethlehem in Judaea in the time of king Herod…". What Matthew emphasises here is the reality of the experience, and of the gospel itself. In these moments, in this event, the presence of God among us, God with us, is made startlingly real. At Bethlehem, the Magi experience the truth of the

divine presence in our world. Their journey culminates in the direct and unmediated encounter with Incarnation: the Emanuel “God with us”.

Like the magi, we are gentiles on a journey, but our world is one of images and memes, in which the stark wonder of the Incarnation is obscured by folklore, custom and commerce. It is difficult for any of us at this time to discern what it is really all about, especially when the very concept of truth itself is under such sustained assault. There is a great temptation for the broader community to be satisfied with the wrapping and mistrust the gift, to worship the swathing bands and not the Christ-child. It is our task, as the people of God, to make Epiphany happen in our world by being the Christ to others, by meeting them in their places of need, by opening our hearts to the lonely, the alienated, the marginalised, the chronically ill, the homeless, indeed all those whose hearts yearn for the reality of the grace of God. We are the body of Christ. We say so often enough, and we read it in the scriptures often enough. Reading it and saying it are easy. It is being it that is our challenge: to make the gospel real by living it out to ourselves and to others, but when we can do that – and it is an eternal struggle – then God can break through again and again, and every day can be Epiphany.

The Lord be with you…