

## EPIPHANY HOMILY 2019 ESSENDON

### A MESSAGE OF WELCOME TO ALL PEOPLES OF ALL NATIONS

*Mt 2.1-12 Is 60.1-22 Eph 3.2-6 (Rhyme Bible “The Wise Men” also)*

Welcome to 2020, somewhat ominously sounding to me, but still we look forward! Remember the pop song one hit wonder *“In the Year 2525”*, number one for 6 weeks from July 1969, the month of the Apollo XI moon landing.

At Christmas I looked back on what I saw as a somewhat dark year, with human selfishness and narcissism and inward-looking nationalism predominant in the headlines. Where is there hope, in this message of peace and good will for us and for all? It can be difficult to be positive, until we stop and consider the bigger picture.

Right now, we see the almost apocalyptic sights, as in the frightening scenes from the beach at Mallacoota, of the out of control bushfires not just here in Victoria, but in NSW, SA and Tasmania. The tragedy of loss of life, of homes and of livelihoods is devastating and will have long term traumatic effects on those affected, and on those firefighters, professional and voluntary, who are doing their level best in countering potential disaster and risking their own lives in the process. *‘Black Saturday’* of 2009, was a shocking tragedy, but never (*in my lifetime of 67 years*), have I ever seen anything like this ongoing catastrophe. The least we can do is to make a donation to support the cause. (*So we’ll have a leaving collection as you leave the church after Mass today, whilst there is a website for direct contributions to St Vincent de Paul Society’s official bushfire appeal on <https://donate.vinnies.org.au/appeals-vic/vinnies-nsw-bushfire-appeal-vic>*).

Yet, these terrible and tragic events can also bring out the best in people. Simple examples are where one small town café owner, in the midst of it all, offered free refreshments to anyone involved in the firefighting, and in another town the Sikh community have come together to provide sustenance for those adversely affected by dislocation and loss. A generosity of spirit is revealed, in the good will and selflessness of those coming forward to help and also of those contributing materially and financially to those whose lives are devastated.

Yet, on the brighter side, amid all the sad and bad news, I read an optimistic article this week by Nicholas Kristof, headlined: *“In the long arc of human history, 2019 has been the best year ever”*, and I thought at first, what planet is he living on or coming from? Then again, on considering his analysis, I could see his point, reminding us that not all is lost! *“The bad things you (we) fret about are true. But it’s also true that since modern humans emerged about 200,000 years ago, 2019 was probably the year in which children were least likely to die, adults were least likely to be illiterate and people were least likely to suffer excruciating and disfiguring diseases. Every single day in recent years, another 325,000 people got their first access to electricity. Each day, more than 200,000 people got piped water for the first time. And some 650,000 went online for the first time, every single day... One of the trends in the last 50 years has been a huge reduction in global poverty. As recently as 1981, 42% of the planet’s population endured ‘extreme poverty’, defined by the UN as living on less than \$2 a*

day. *That portion has plunged to less than 10% of the world's population now.*” And so there is hope for a better world, with good will and peace to the fore.

At the same time, climate change is a huge threat (*just look locally at the extreme bushfires, an ongoing extreme danger and the gradual melting of the polar ice caps*), unless more is done on local and global levels to address it, and compassion fatigue in our wealthier nations, perhaps particularly here in Australia, is also a serious hazard in itself, not to forget self-interested, inward-looking and narcissistic leadership in our global village, our precious **‘Blue Planet’** (*on screen from Apollo VIII Christmas 1968*).

And here we gather in faith for Epiphany, our ongoing celebration of the Nativity of Jesus as the one who comes among us in love, simplicity, poverty, good will and peace, a message for all of humanity, whoever and wherever they are. **The Magi** or **Wise Men** or **3 Kings** from the East symbolize the universality of his presence and message in our troubled and complicated, yet wonderful world.

Leunig, as usual, has an interesting take on this, importing a few **‘Wise Women’** as well. (He notes in another cartoon that **‘Wise Men only exist in history books’**, implying that’s why they write them. (*As Winston Churchill once said: “History will be kind to me, as I am going to write it!” And he subsequently did get the Nobel Prize for Literature.*))

*“Once upon a time there were 3 wise men... and 3 wise women. They met under a mysterious bright star. They talked, they laughed, they shared food, they enjoyed each other’s company. They appreciated each other. They inspired and humbled each other. They became friends for life. They found peace together. It was a miracle!”* Lovely positive thoughts, if a bit tangential! (*Then there is a more recent Leunig with the wise men lost and thinking about getting an Uber, and another cartoon with the third gift being Bitcoin – forget the myrrh!!*)

There is a historical context here, with the contrast, where we see the dark character of Herod, a vassal king subservient to the Roman emperor Caesar, a strong personality in himself, ruling from 37 to 4BC (*so we could rearrange our years from 2020 to at least 2024 to get the history right, but we don’t want to confuse the computers and IT industry, do we??*). As opposed to the darkness, we have the light brought in the person of Jesus, whom Matthew portrays as the epitome of goodness and love, foreseeing the spirit of the Beatitudes, reflecting the contrasting kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, the antithesis of worldly power and wealth. Despite the threats and dark shadows, the good news will win out in the end.

It’s not about astrology (*Who has already looked up their horoscope for 2020?*), implying astral determinism, as if we might as well be fatalistic and feel helpless to change anything for the better about ourselves or our world, and yet we know we have the potential to make a difference, by being ourselves and using our time here in the material world to make it a better place by our presence in it. Surely that’s at the heart of Jesus’ message.

The images and the gifts of the Magi reflect the significance of this child Jesus, born among and for us: gold for leadership (*kingship here, but not about wealth in itself*), frankincense for

divinity or the sacred nature of this child, and myrrh for redemptive suffering or self-sacrifice, which is not a masochistic thing about suffering being good in itself, because it's not, but it is a reality for all of us at various times in our lives. (*We don't have to look for it, do we!*)

Over the centuries, interpretations have varied and evolved, but with the message that these wise men reflect diversity of race, culture and geography, from the known world of that time. Suggestions arose that they represent non-Jewish peoples in Persia (*where the Zoroastrians were and still are, in modern Iran*), Syria (*still sadly suffering displacement, exodus, hostility, war and poverty*) and Arabia (*hardly a happy place to be today, especially Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where war continues*).

Then evolved their names, Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior (*with crowns put on the crowns of their heads*), Caspar becoming the darkest (*but remembering all were of Middle-Eastern appearance back then, including Jesus!!*).

There's nothing clearer to me than that this is a call to inclusion and rejoicing in diversity, receiving the stranger and responding to need, on living this Gospel, and bringing Good News, not bad, into a challenging and changing world, for each of us to make a better place.

The Magi are not astrological deterministic men of magic, but rather remind us of the universality of our Christian and catholic message for all!

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*john hannon*

*5<sup>th</sup> January 2020*

***UPDATE: Thanks to the generosity of St Therese's parishioners here, \$3600 was donated after weekend Masses this weekend!***

### **The Bottom Line by Howard Thurman**

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart.

**The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents.**