

Message for Epiphany – January 9, 2022

Matthew 2:1-12

A very interesting column was printed in the Toronto Star a couple of years ago. It was written by Dow Marmur who, prior to his retirement, was the lead rabbi at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto. In his column he wrote about the Holocaust and, quite rightly, pointed out that a rather surprising number of people insist that it never happened despite all of the evidence to the contrary. To deny the reality of the Holocaust is of course to deny history and the truth but, Marmur wondered, how or why could people think this way?

He pointed out that we now live in what is commonly called the Post-Modern Age. The Modern Age, which preceded it, began with the Enlightenment about three hundred years ago and its emphasis was on logical proof and rational thought. One of the great principles of the Modern Age was also the idea that the truth and even reality itself are objective and beyond a person's feelings and emotions. Indeed, I suspect that most of you reading this message grew up in the Modern Age and take these ideas for granted. In the 1960's though things began to change and we entered what is called the Post-Modern Age.

In this Post-Modern Age of ours, there is a deep distrust of institutions and tradition. In our Post-Modern Age facts aren't all that important either; rather what really matters is what we personally believe and feel. Truth and reality are no longer objective or out there beyond us, rather they are subjective and to be found within us. To put it simply, for many people today the truth and even reality itself are whatever we want them to be. If we believe that something is true then it is, and it doesn't matter what others think or what the 'facts' may be. We can use climate change for example.

The best scientists in the world today insist that global warming is both a reality and a threat and we can see this for ourselves; all we have to do is think about how much warmer our summers and winters are today than what they were just a few decades ago. And of course we can also think of the recent natural disasters in British Columbia and the United States. While such natural disasters have always happened, they are now happening on a scale and frequency never seen before. It seems obvious to any objective observer that

something is going on and yet it is estimated that up to a quarter of the population believes, despite all of the evidence to the contrary, that climate change is not for real. And as for the evidence put forth by the scientists? It is simply dismissed out of hand or ignored as it doesn't fit in with that person's vision of reality. We see much of the same thing when it comes to the current pandemic.

By any objective standard it is obvious that we are caught up in the midst of a crisis. Even so, there are those who deny the reality of what is happening saying that it is all a hoax. They insist that thousands of people have not become sick or died because of covid, and as for the images of crowded ICU's? It is all make believe or propaganda! The truth and evidence don't mean anything at all or, as an advisor to President Trump famously said when confronted by evidence against her claims, she had "alternate facts". That of course is logical nonsense simply because a fact is a fact; logically speaking there cannot be such a thing as alternate facts. This however is typical of how many people think today and such attitudes led Dow Marmur to conclude that we are not just living in the Post-Modern Age but that we are also living in what he calls "The Post Truth World". As typified most famously by the former American president's response to losing his re-election bid, truth and reality for many people today are whatever they want them to be. In fact I sometimes encounter this in my role as a minister.

Whenever I meet with a couple about their proposed wedding, I ask some basic questions pertaining to religion. Almost invariably they will earnestly assure me that they are Christians and that is why they want me to officiate at their wedding. Sometimes though I start to wonder about their claims. When I ask them for example if they have been baptized, are or have been associated with any church or community of faith, the answer is usually 'no'. Some gentle questioning also reveals that they have only the foggiest ideas about Jesus, the Bible and what Christians believe but even so, they assure me that they are Christians. In fact I am often left with the distinct impression that these people would be both hurt and very angry if I dared challenge their claim. This is the world that we live in today; one where anyone can be whatever they claim to be and expect to be treated as such. Such an attitude may seem so reasonable too, after all what does it matter if a person is baptized, is or ever has been associated with a community of faith? What does it matter if they know little if

anything about Jesus, the Bible, or Christianity's core beliefs? If they say that they are Christians, then they are. Suppose for a moment though that I claimed to be a member of "The Society for the Preservation of the Immortal Memory of Sir Isaac Brock", which by the way I just made up! What would you think if you asked me about when I had joined or took out my membership and I replied that I hadn't. Or suppose that I had never attended their meetings and couldn't tell you anything about Brock and his life? You would quite rightly doubt my membership. In fact my claim to belong to the society would all sound rather silly, and yet this is how many people today think. For so many people today truth and even reality itself are whatever they want them to be; truly it seems as if we are living in the post truth world, but then what are we to think of the event described in today's scripture passage?

The story of the wise men is now usually remembered at Christmas but the wise men's visit to see Jesus actually happened months or possibly even a year or more, after his birth. Also the 'wise' men as we usually call them, were actually magi or what we would call astrologers. They studied the night sky looking for signs and wonders because they, like most people back then, believed that the conjunction of the stars and planets at the time of a person's birth foretold that person's future. They also believed that what happened in the night sky above reflected what was happening down here on earth.

One night then while scanning the night sky, they saw a new phenomena. We don't know what it was, though there has been a lot of speculation that it may have been a super nova, a comet, or a conjunction of the planets. Whatever it was, it filled them with excitement and they were convinced that it signified the birth of someone very important. They decided to follow the mysterious star which led them to Bethlehem. There they worshiped the Christ and presented him with their wondrously expensive gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh.

As I have already said, these men were magi or what we would call astrologers. Most people today don't take astrology very seriously but what we have to realize is that the magi were the scientists of their day, and it was their pursuit of knowledge, truth, and reality itself that led them to Christ. They knew that truth and reality were not subjective and to be found within themselves. Instead, they knew that truth and reality were objective and to found beyond themselves. This in fact is the significance of the story of the wise men.

The wise men remind us that science and religion are not, as many people seem to think, mortal enemies. They remind us that knowledge is not to be feared because all knowledge ultimately comes from and leads us to God and Christ. Above all though, they remind us that while we may live in a post truth world, that is a world of illusion. Reality and the truth are not, as many people today like to think, whatever we want them to be. Truly reality and the truth aren't to be found within us but rather, beyond us. Indeed, the ultimate reality and truth are to be found in God and Christ. The way, the truth, and reality itself are not whatever we may want them to be. Instead, as Christ himself said, "I am the way, the truth and the life". That is the ultimate truth and reality, even in a post truth world.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer this winter morning.

We thank you for the wonder and beauty of this season with its wind, cold and such as the snow so dazzling white in the sunshine.

We thank you for all that we have that enables us to live in what is sometimes a harsh and forbidding climate. We thank you for the warmth of our homes and the clothes we wear. We thank you for the warmth that comes into our lives through our families and friends.

We pray this day for all whose lives are cold, whether it be physically, mentally, or spiritually. We pray for all who are homeless and lack enough food to eat. We pray for all who are lonely or estranged from family and friends.

We pray this day for the well-being and safety of everyone as the pandemic continues with its upsurge of cases. We pray for all who are ill. We pray for those who are struggling, those trying to cope with their children at home and the challenges of online learning. We pray for the children, living in a world where the pandemic with all of its restrictions is almost all that they have ever known. We pray as well for the businesses so dramatically affected by the latest closures, wondering if they can survive. We remember too this day all who live in fear, desperate to get their booster shots.

We give you thanks for the medical system we have, as we offer up our prayer for those who work in it, even as they grow weary and are in danger of burning out. We pray as well for those in positions of authority as they make difficult decisions that can and do have a huge impact on the lives of so many people.

In this difficult trying time, we give you thanks for the holy wonder that is you. You are God, so holy and different from us, and yet you love us and are always with us. For this we thank you, praying that secure in your loving presence, we may put all of our faith, hope, and trust in you. Grant not only us but all of your children everywhere the courage, strength, and peace that only you can give. We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen