

Views from the Pews:

Second Sunday of the Epiphany: The languages of God

During this season of Epiphany, we continue to think about the story of the visit of a group of Eastern astrologers and mystics who did not speak Hebrew, so were not steeped in First Testament expectations.

Nevertheless, they understood a message they read in their own prophetic literature predicting that a very significant child was about to be born to the west of their country, and they travelled a long way to see him. Later they got another message direct from God, delivered in a dream, warning them not to tell Herod how to find Jesus.

God speaks to us in many languages – not only the different human tongues, but also the language of beauty – in art and in nature - and the language of mathematics. Now we can also read another of God's languages, that of the genes, and understand the instructions for many different species of animals. Genes are just simple 3-letter words in code, and these words contribute to the instructions that direct an egg to grow into a particular kind of adult.

A given word in the genetic code has the same meaning in any living thing, because the genetic code developed only once and is inherited by all forms of life. As in an ordinary book, the words comprise letters arranged in a specific order. When the letters and words are assembled in different combinations, they together make up a different story in, say a cat compared with in a dog, or in a bird compared with in a mouse.

Human languages are also made up of combinations of letters and words which, spoken, written, or dreamed, are understood throughout a given culture. Likewise, the language of the genes is there in the innermost parts of every one of us as individuals. So, despite the legend of Babel, there really is a deep relationship between all creatures and all human cultures.

We are all creatures of words – and this image is even more telling for Christians, because we all belong to the most precious word of all, Christ the Word of God. Some may question whether the Magi were real or legendary, but the point of their story stands in either case. The Magi and the gifts they brought symbolise not just the coming of the expected Messiah of the Jews, but the first stage of God's rescue plan for all humanity.