**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Many many years ago – more than I care to remember – in November - I bore my first son. We were in hospital for nearly a fortnight because he was early and rather jaundiced, but in due course we came home, and my mother came to stay and help out for a week or two. Eventually she went home.

My husband, being a teacher, and this being a very long time ago, had no time off for being a new father, so we got to Monday morning; he went off to school at eight, and would be gone until at least five. And I remember with great clarity standing in the middle of our sitting room with the baby in my arms and thinking: What now? The future seemed to stretch in front of me/us with no appreciable shape or form. I simply had no idea what my days would look like from henceforth. Hold that thought for now.

If I haven’t already wished you Happy New Year, then: Happy New Year. 😊 While 2020 is actually the end of the old decade, it feels like it ought to be a particular new beginning. What does that look like for you? Going to the gym more often/ walking upstairs instead of taking the lift/ eating less junk or chocolate/ and certainly trying to live greener I hope. We make all sorts of resolutions at this time of year that are ultimately meaningless – either because they last five minutes and we give up, or because we don’t need a deadline anyway; we can change what we do and how we do it any time we choose.

Nonetheless, it is not a bad thing to take stock at the beginning of a year – and I said as much in my magazine letter this month. If you don’t already subscribe, why not think about it? The fact that 1st January is a week after Christmas Day – and there is a zero at the end of the year number - simply provides a bit of added significance to the whole thing.

Today marks the end of the Christmas season in its strictest sense. But at the same time, it doesn’t. Christmas season becomes Epiphany season (tomorrow actually, but we have transferred it because most of you wouldn’t be here tomorrow) – but in church terms, the two are tied together with a big Christmas bow, so it is still Christmastide all the way to Candlemas on February 2nd. We can legitimately keep trees and decorations up until the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple – though most of us won’t.

So what are we celebrating in Epiphany then? Well, as we heard in the gospel reading, the arrival of the Wise Men, the Magi, the three Kings. I won’t labour the point that at no stage are we told how many there are; only what three of the gifts they brought to Jesus were.

And they didn’t get there in twelve days from Christmas – they had long difficult and dangerous journeys. All we can really be sure of is that something drew them there. The star. The light that shone in the darkness.

And they were committed enough to believe that it was that important, and to follow it as far as it took them. They didn’t ask at the outset where they were going. Nor how long it would take. They didn’t ask what would happen when they got there. And they didn’t ask who else was going – or who was going to be there. They only knew WHY. And the ‘why’ was: because whatever it was that was happening was so significant that they HAD to.

And it is there at the stable with these gentile visitors – Gentiles, note, not Jews like the shepherds – that we leave the story. We really don’t get any more of Jesus’ childhood than that. The Bible picks the story up again when Jesus is about twelve years old. And that’s it again until he reaches adulthood and begins his ministry.

And so it is that we ask: What now? We have sung the carols, we have worshipped in the stable; been there, done that, got the t-shirt. But now what? Now all the visitors have gone home, and you are left standing in the sitting room holding the baby: now what?

Because all of this is pointless unless it makes a difference to how we live our lives. Why did the baby come at all? Why did Mary and Joseph risk life and reputation? Why did the shepherds abandon their sheep? Why did the Magi travel so far if it didn’t make a difference?

I want to finish, if I may, with a short poem from the African-American theologian Howard Thurman. It is entitled The Work of Christmas:

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 flocks,

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 the people,

to make music in the heart.

What now? That.

**Amen**