**SERMON FOR FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY | 03.01.2021**

**Isaiah 60: 1-6: Ephesians 3: 1-12; St Matthew 2- 1-12**

**One of my New Year resolutions – well a post-Christmas one really – has been to try and tackle things that I have putting off for ages. So at long last I got round to putting together a brief guide for the increasing number of people who visit the Church when it is open on weekdays. And that drew me to sort through some books on the history of the parish, and in particular two books by Harry Walters who lived in one of the old Cottages on Popham Road from the 1930s to their demolition in 1978.**

**There, in the middle of the stories of how that generation coped with squalid living conditions, little education and no money, was an insight into how St James’ was regarded by our nearest neighbours at the time. He wrote: *On Sundays the bells from our local church would peal out. The church, St James’, was very fine church inside, beautifully built like a miniature cathedral. Over the years the congregation became smaller and smaller, not only from the street* (his own Popham Street) *but from the rest of the parish. When I was young and used to attend myself, the congregation was quite large and an enthusiastic young priest kept congregations. Then an older and, so we thought, more pious priest came on the scene.***

***The Church had a club in Britannia Row and this was where quite a few of us youngsters went. The building was very old yet most of us would spend quite a few evenings a week there.***

***Some of the happiest times I have had in my life were with the crowd of fellows and girls who used to attend there. It was a place to look forward to. Subscription were small and facilities not so many but the crowd of members always seemed to get a lot of fun out of the place. The younger priest, as was his right, would do his utmost to get the youngsters to attend Church each Sunday and although he didn’t succeed, most would go at least once or twice a month. The new and older priest made it compulsory: ‘either you go each week or the club closes down’. Now everyone knows that compulsory church is not good for anyone least of all the church. That was the end of that little community of about a hundred or so teenagers. It all broke up and everyone went their separate ways…***

**As I read Harry Walters’ account I had a strong feeling that that is how many of us feel as 2020 finally passes into 2021. We might not have had that much but what-ever it was has been taken away.**

**So at first I warmed to the tweet of Miranda Threlfall-Holmes, whose day job is Team Rector of St Luke’s in Liverpool: *Someone asked me what my word for 2021 was, and the one that came to mind was perseverance. I’m not planning flashy new stuff for 2021, or making amazing resolutions – just to keep on keeping on, focusing not on the journey but on the next step.***

**And that took me to the image of the Three Wise Men! Those of you who were able to be present at the wonderful carol service Epiphoni sang for us before Christmas, or who have watched it on line as well over 100 people have done – may remember Alison Rice reading the story of Baboushka, the Russian tale of the old woman visited by the kings as they go in search for the Christ child. You may remember that after she has fed them, they offer to take her with them on their journey.**

**But at that moment she is not ready for the big quest, the search for the big thing in her life: just then she doesn’t feel able to do more than take one step at a time, working out how to get the next meal on the table. In the hard conditions of life, just doing the basics, persevering, may not be very glamorous. But it is sometimes essential: we may not have much but we will not be beaten.**

**The response of so many during this pandemic has been redolent of that extraordinary stoicism: ambulances queuing round the block because wards are just too full to admit new patients, with crews still caring for their patients; so many making decisions not to hold weddings, not to travel at Christmas and the New Year, not to put other people’ lives at risk in 1001 different ways; the dogged work of Food Bank volunteers and neighbours to the isolated and lonely.**

**Yet Baboushka begins to realise that just doing the necessary, attending to the basics, is, ultimately, not enough for human flourishing. In this hugely unpredictable world, there has to be something more. So although she never catches up with the kings, it doesn’t stop her showering gifts on all the children that she meets along the way.**

**What the Three Kings, carved on the outside of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona or in that great Rubens picture in King’s College Chapel Cambridge are reminding us is that the greatest driving force is not actually coping with ‘need’ but an optimistic vision of the future: it is optimism that is the spur for inspiration and growth.**

**Time and time again we discover that it is often in times of crisis that the greatest and most positive achievements occur. The author Matt Haigh reminds us that *just as volcanic ash turns into the most fertile of soils, so the most intense times often lead to the most exciting growth.***

**Mary Portasthe economist, reflecting on Covid, sees today the emergence of a much kinder society, suggesting that – with the help of David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg - people are now realising that we simply can’t go on consuming in the same way as before.**

**Allison Pearson writes in her column that as a result of this pandemic *we have developed a renewed appreciation for all those little things we took for granted – having a cup of tea with a friend* she says, *will seem more exotic than a trip to New York, a hug better than any gift. And when it finally comes, the reopening of theatres and concert venues will restore to us our soul food of which we have all been so starved. And the intense human desire for simple, live, companionship will stop us from settling for the pandemic shaped normal. We will all feel the need for something so much better, greater, bigger.***

**And Archbishop Justin Welby points us to a new report coming out in February about the Church in the Community. And he asks us, as we come out of lockdown, to see in what ways Christians can develop their churches as ‘centres of creative support’, places that reflect the kinds of expansive creativity that God seeks for his people.**

**I am afraid that wasn’t the message that came out of Harry Walters’ account of the Britannia Row Centre 60 years ago. For whatever reason the priest of the day closed activities down because the local young people wouldn’t come to his services. Is that love-in-action? Does that speak of the generosity and life-giving activity of God that led the Wise Men to trust that something much greater was ready to be discovered?**

**On Wednesday we are expecting to be called to a zoom meeting with the new Diocesan Chancellor to discuss the Organ Project Consistory Court. And you know how we have persevered with this, taking on every delay, every piece of maladministration, every objection. But it has not deflected us. We will not settle for that as normal. We will go on retaining our inner optimism that if we rise above the ordinary, if we follow the star like those Magi, we will find what we need to make St James’ ‘a centre of creative support’ for all. That, surely is the message of this Epiphany.**