May these words be pleasing. Amen.

On Thursday, at school, I wished a colleague a Happy New Year. He replied, and a Happy New *Tier* to you. We continue to face difficult times. The job of the preacher, however, is to find hope and share it (wish me luck). I wonder you find that sometimes, in a sermon, the mind can wander? Most of you will remember Bishop James of Knaresborough. I made the mistake of letting *my* mind wander in one of his sermons – I was down there at the end of a long week and I was absorbed by the light shining through the windows. Bishop James posed us a question and he wanted a response, so he looked directly at me and said ‘Scott, where would you use’. I’d no idea what he’d been talking about so I simply guessed. ‘The Bible’. ‘Excellent answer’ said James, ‘Anyone else’? and he continued to take answers from around the church. To this day I’ve no idea what he had been talking about.

Well last week something Martin said got me thinking about *this* week’s readings and I would admit that my mind wandered off to think about *the wise men*, then *wisdom*, then the need for *wise leaders* and then I thought of our queen just, rather nicely, as I tuned back to Martin who used these words ‘I’m sure you’ll agree with me that our head of state Queen Elizabeth in the way that she speaks and acts is a humble servant of the Lord.’ Many could equally argue that she has reigned *wisely*.

The wise men represent wisdom, which is an important, and perhaps the most ancient, voice within our bible. ‘Lady wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ The people of God had lived in Egypt and Assyria and Babylon. When not in slavery and captivity they lived on ancient trade routes between much bigger nations. Like magpies those in charge of Israel borrowed and adapted very ancient sayings to describe both God and how to live as people under God. And so amongst the very oldest books in our bible are Proverbs, Job, the Psalms and Ecclesiastes. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil”. “With the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding.” “He that is void of wisdom despises his neighbour: but a man of understanding holds his peace.”“How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding rather than fine silver!”

There are other pearls tucked in the proverbs (increasingly out of sight). ‘A nagging wife is like a dripping tap’. And from Proverbs 13, in big letters across the library wall in my teacher training college: ‘Spare the rod, spoil the child’. We may offer own wise words based on experience: From Christmas Day in the Lunn household: Don’t leave the turkey crown near the edge of the work-surface for if you do Benji the dog will get it. He was more than reluctant to let it go for it was more valuable than gold, yea much fine gold.

Those who collected wisdom were the small band of those who could read and write and rule. The kings who followed Lady Wisdom would be blessed and the nation would prosper. Those who were greedy in wealth and sex, those who did not uphold the rights of the poor and needy, their choice destruction for themselves and the nation they were called to govern. As then as now there is freedom of choice but not freedom of consequence.

So to our Magi, the wise men from the East. I don’t think they were like this (picture on screen). They were Magi as in ‘magicians’ but not illusionists or tricksters. They were a type of prophet or ‘sentinel’. At least one of them had the unusual spiritual gift of recognising signs sent from God. Theirs’s is a lonely gift, a burden but a joy. The Sentinel learns to expect signs from God, to recognise them, to follow them, to point them out to others, and attempt to interpret what each sign means, whether a symbol of change, or something that brings joy, or pain. It will always be something significant. By way of the star, a conjunction of two planets, the Magi find the Christ-child, a sign of change bringing joy and pain.

All of us can look back hoping to gain wisdom. We will describe it as a strange and difficult year. A friend described it as a year when things were turned on their heads: Older folk sneaking out of the house only to be yelled at by the youngsters telling them to stay at home. And who’d imagined walking into a bank with a mask on asking for money? Looking ahead to the next few weeks, months?, it looks tricky. What wisdom can we share in this New Year, where are the signs of hope?

We like things that come in threes. God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three gifts of the Magi: Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. How about three Advents? We have finished our Advent season in church through December, purple on the altar, our four candles lit in turn in preparation for the lighting of the fifth white candle of Christmas. There is a second, longer, Advent season in which in which we remain. The virus continues to dominate our world: Schools, businesses, hospitals, church, home. How long O Lord, how long? Through new treatments and, of course, the vaccines there are signs of hope, signs that this year will be better than last year. Good news. What faces us now is very difficult, but the best is yet to come. What of that time when the virus is beaten, we regain freedom, children properly back in schools, the economy given the chance to recover, hospitals allowed to breath, and we are free to worship here without fear all the days of our lives? We pray for this time but even then we will shall still be in a third and even longer season of Advent, of waiting. The ancient Kings of the bible who followed lady wisdom discovered that, though they seemed to have everything, it was not enough.

Imagine kneeling with the Magi as they present their gifts to the baby. Here is joy, here is hope. If we then shared with the wise men and with Mary what we know of the pain that this child must suffer they would ask, ‘how can it be’? Imagine holding the tiny hand of the baby. Here is joy, here is hope. These hands will become the wounded hands to reach out and to hold us. These are the hands of God inviting us to follow, to be healed, and to be complete. At the end of these days when during which we are called to serve, at the end of the longest of Advent seasons, we will be made complete. The best is yet to come.

We pray that through the church God’s wisdom will be made known, that we will arise and shine, shine even in the difficult days and weeks ahead, shine throughout this year, shine throughout this life, to follow the sign, the sign of the Christ child, the sign that the best is yet to come.

81 years ago, in 1939, King George VI shared a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins. Here is a part of it

"And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand in the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.' So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East."