An epiphany is a moment of revelation or insight—a sudden, intuitive perception into the reality or essential meaning of something. An epiphany can take place in the most ordinary of circumstances. And yet in that moment there is a new way of seeing which brings change and transformation. Of course the Bible is filled with such moments of epiphany. Moments when the mystery of God breaks into seemingly ordinary lives and changes everything. Like Moses seeing the burning bush. Or of course the wise men from the East who follow a star to Bethlehem. This epiphany is not just a moment of revelation it is the beginning of a new journey. I love the way the poet RS Thomas describes that moment of discovery in his poem the Bright Field:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

It would have been easy for those wise men from the east not to embark upon the journey of their lives. They could have, just like everybody else, looked up at the sky and either failed to notice the star that appeared or simply ignored it—thought let’s just stay here for its meaning was far from clear. Why make that journey to Jerusalem and beyond? It’s not their religion, their nation, their people. Why should they care about a child born to an alien people in a foreign land? There must have been many moments on that journey to Bethlehem when they must have wondered why they set out. Was it for a birth or a death?

I wonder about the epiphanies of your own life. Have you had moments when you saw something that was worth everything you had, worth giving your life away for? The pearl of great price, the glimpse of hope and purpose that flooded your imagination and dared you to set out in search of that promise? Sounds dramatic. Perhaps that treasure is or was a person, an experience of relationship, tenderness, intimacy or love that you wanted to last forever. Perhaps it was an experience of forgiveness or healing. Perhaps like the Christmas nativity that epiphany was a new born child held in your hands—a miracle of life that you knew you would give your life for. A daughter, a son, a lover, a friend... a relationship that unbound you and filled you with humanity. Perhaps it was an experience of beauty in creation—a sunrise, a mountain top, a river, a huge sea, a bird in flight, an incredible piece of music, an act of unexpected generosity, the kindness of a stranger, a painting, a foreign city, a discovery, a joy, a longing, an illness overcome, the lost found.
Perhaps your epiphany was a glimpse of the God with us. Here in the midst of our lives. God in ordinary. It was just my imagination you think. I haven’t got time, I need to come down to earth. It’s just a dream, fantasy. It would never work anyway. I am afraid. Get away from me I am a sinful man! There’s no such thing as God anyway. I need to get on with my life.

But what if this is your life? What if we do turn aside? What if we say yes? Will we regret that yes-although the yes promises to enlarge our hearts? TS Elliot describes that journey:

**The Journey of the Magi**

\[\text{A cold coming we had of it,}\
\text{Just the worst time of the year}\
\text{For a journey, and such a long journey:}\
\text{The ways deep and the weather sharp,}\
\text{The very dead of winter.}\
\text{And the camels galled, sore footed, refractory,}\
\text{Lying down in the melting snow.}\
\text{There were times we regretted}\
\text{The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,}\
\text{And the silken girls bringing sherbet.}\
\text{Then the camel men cursing and grumbling}\
\text{and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,}\
\text{And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,}\
\text{And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly}\
\text{And the villages dirty and charging high prices:}\
\text{A hard time we had of it.}\
\text{At the end we preferred to travel all night,}\
\text{Sleeping in snatches,}\
\text{With the voices singing in our ears, saying}\
\text{That this was all folly.}\
\text{Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,}\
\text{Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;}\
\text{With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,}\
\text{And three trees on the low sky,}\
\text{And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.}\
\text{Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,}\
\text{Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,}\
\text{And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.}\
\text{But there was no information, and so we continued}\
\text{And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon}\
\text{Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.}\

\text{All this was a long time ago, I remember,}\
\text{And I would do it again, but set down}\
\text{This set down}\
\text{This: were we led all that way for}\
\text{Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly}\
\text{We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,}\
\text{But had thought they were different; this Birth was}\
\text{Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.}\
\text{We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,}\
\text{But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,}\
\text{With an alien people clutching their gods.}
I should be glad of another death.

I would do it again. You see once we have been enlarged by the journey it’s difficult to get back into the box again. Once we have glimpsed God and the possibilities and beauty of God’s life in us and in others it’s difficult not to thirst for God. All of us have come to this church today on New Year because somehow, somewhere, something has been awakened in us - somehow this Christ child has captivated us, just like he did those wise men from the east. It is a mystery we can’t let go of. The beginning of a journey of realisation that something better is possible - that compassion is sweeter than prejudice, and forgiveness is more liberating than recrimination and that generosity and free gift is so much more deeply satisfying than greed and possessiveness. And perhaps deep down - at the very well spring of our lives the acknowledgement that we can’t do this journey alone, but that we need a love from beyond us. Yes God’s love, unconditional, unquantifiable, eternal love. And the realisation that loving our neighbour as we love ourselves is not just a commandment we find hard to keep but the very thing our life depends on, in fact our world depends on, not a threat but an abundant gift.

New Year is of course the time when we are reminded of the life journeys we are all making. Many of us make plans and resolutions at New Year but of course we all know that even our best made plans and hopes are never certain and we walk forward through the gate of the new year in faith and trust. ‘The Gate of the Year’ is a line from the poem by Minnie Louise Haskins who taught at the London School of Economics before the Second World War. The poem became well known when the then Princess Elizabeth handed a copy to her father King George VI which he then quoted in his 1939 famous Christmas broadcast to the British Empire. The words of this poem were said to have been a comfort to the Queen and the whole nation during the horror of the war when no one knew whether they would survive. These are the words of Haskin’s poem:

“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 into 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!

Do we not also need that hand of God as we step forward? 2016 has not been an easy year in terms of peace or hope for the future. None of us can or should be able to forget the terrifying images of Aleppo where a nation divides against its own people and oppression and brutality escalate as others are drawn into the spiral of killing while other nations abandon all responsibility. None of us can forget the images of families, fathers, mothers, children on the road or risking death in the Mediterranean in search safety and a home. None of us can forget that fear and prejudice can divide our nation too, divide Europe, divide America - and that we have a very long road to travel if we are going to answer the Christian call to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. All of us will be judged by the way our nation treats its most vulnerable be they Jew or Gentile or Refugee or child or elderly person or prisoner, or sexual minority or homeless person or those with mental health needs - and that if we have not learnt to the lessons of the past that led to brutal discrimination, and even war and genocide - then the same evils still threaten us. Nor can we ignore that creation is in our hands, wondrous and miraculous and beautiful and free - but also wounded by human greed and carelessness. We have realised too more than ever in the last year the way even truth telling itself can become the victim of politics and propaganda. And none of us can forget the fear of terrorism or grief for those so senselessly murdered be it Nice, Paris, Brussels, Ankara, Mosul, Juba, Sanaa, Berlin, or Istanbul.

Many of us may indeed feel justifiably overwhelmed. But Christmas and Epiphany is the time for us once more to set out on a journey with the one who is as vulnerable as a naked child born in a borrowed stable. A child who also faced persecution. A God who depends on us just as we depend on him. For have we not too seen his star and come to worship him? Have we not too been in some way transformed by our encounter with him and begun like those wise men the journey of bearing his good news to the world? I would like to end by reading you part of a poem by Alfred Lord
Tennyson’s which is from In Memoriam, a poem he wrote after the tragic death of his beloved friend Hallam. Though written more than 125 years ago it is indeed a poem that could have been written for our times:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
   The flying cloud, the frosty light:
   The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
   Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
   The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind
   For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
   And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
   The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
   The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
   Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
   The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.