A Sermon for Sunday 4th January 2026
Epiphany Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

Lord, may I speak the words you want me to speak, may we hear the words that you want us to hear. ***Amen***

Who has made New Year's resolutions?

Who has kept them so far?

One of my guilty pleasures is an American writer called Gretchen Rubin. What I like about her is that she encourages people to deliberately take small-steps to make for themselves the life they want, rather than allowing life to happen to them by accident (while they weren't looking.)

One of her practices is to choose a word or short phrase that serves as a theme or guiding principle for each year. It's a concept that may help you guide decisions and notice opportunities. Because, as Christians, we want to live a life that is pleasing to God, which uses the skills and talents that he has given us for a good purpose. But I don't know about you, but I sometimes become paralysed by indecision, unable to choose between two good things, each of which has potential, looking for the only "right" answer. A theme word may help me with that by breaking the deadlock.

A theme is better than a resolution because you can't fail to achieve it. It just helps to make course corrections through the year to live a life a little more like the one you had in mind. By the end of the year, there are bound to be incidents that represent your theme.

Looking at today's gospel, I've picked out three words you might use as a theme for 2026, and suggested what, as a Christian, you might do with them alongside some other, more fanciful suggestions about how you might add to your life this year.

Star

The first word I thought of from the gospel is "Star". The star in Matthew was a source of light, and gave a sense of direction, and as a Christian, I wondered if a year linked to the theme word star might lead me to ask:

- What gives me light? What gives you light? Where do we get our direction from, and how do we make sure we are still following it?
- How can we be a light for others? What if love, compassion, justice, mercy, hope are the stars that light up each of our lives? What could we do to make that so?

Then you could have fun by adding in some other star related activities

- Some star gazing – after all the NY Moors are famous for it!
- Choosing to watch or rewatch all the films of a favourite film star
- Awarding gold stars to yourself for a new habit you'd like to take up
- Completing some star themed craft.

Do you get the idea? The word is like a nudge to live a better life and a fuller one– a life like the one Jesus showed how to live, and also a nudge to have some fun on the way.

Worship

Another fruitful word threaded through the Gospel is "worship". To worship is to notice and acknowledge the value of whatever or whoever we are worshipping. Christians might begin by

- Paying attention to their regular public Christian worship, the frequency of it, the extent to which we allow our worship of God to occupy the whole of our minds and bodies so that we too may be overcome by joy as the Magi were.
- Or we might resolve to make more space and time for private prayer and worship.
- We might want to reflect on our own worth to God, and what it means for us. Truly, a person could spend a lifetime on this and never reach the end.
- But a Christian might also think about balancing the attention –what we give worth to – between all the different elements of our lives. We might think about the worth we attach to our reputation,

our appearance, our hobbies or our homes. We might identify idols that we wish to give less worth to and spend less time on. (Facebook anyone?)

- Or we might want to practice treating other people according to the worth they have to God, recognising the God spark in them. What would it look like if we treated a stranger at the bus stop, the teenager on a park bench, the harassed mother in the CoOp just as God treats us? What is their worth? Can we acknowledge it and respond to it?

But we could also use the idea of worth to provoke some more practical steps:

- perhaps it is time to clear out the attic of things that are worthless,
- to think about our charitable giving to the church and to other causes,
- or to take other steps to put our possessions and finances in good order.

Way

The last word that leapt out at me from the readings is "way" – right at the end of the reading, the Magi go back by another way.

The word way has several overlapping meanings: there is the idea of a journey, road or a route, but also the idea of a method or approach.

Of course, we are all familiar with the idea of life as a journey. There are journey stories like: Homer's Odyssey, the Hobbit or The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry. And there are journey and road trip films like Rain man or Thelma and Louise. They all use a journey as the plot, and they all include some common elements.

- There is a beginning and a desired ending, even if the travellers are not quite sure what it will be. The Magi followed a star, which they thought would lead to a King.
  Where do we get our sense of direction? Are we still travelling in the direction we want to be travelling in? All good Sunday School students know that the answer to any question is either "Jesus" or "pray about it". Are these answers enough to give us direction in 2026?
- Journey stories all feature overcoming difficulties: getting lost, adversity and discouragement, maps, plans and guidebooks and fellow travellers who help or hinder (Herod was certainly in the latter category).
  You might like to think about the wise women and men whose advice and counsel you seek and trust when you are lost or discouraged. Or notice and thank the people that orient or guide your life.
- Travellers in journey stories usually accumulate memories of interesting sights and adventures along the way. And they are all changed by the adventure: surely the Magi went home wondering about the significance of what they had seen. How will God be changing you in 2026? How do you need to change?

Early Christians were often described as followers of "the Way", reflecting the distinctive way of life they adopted, and echoing Jesus statement that he was "the way, the truth and the life". Might 2026 be the year you choose to concentrate on following Jesus in his way? On working out what it means to have a distinctive, Jesus-inspired way of life?

A year with way as a theme would give us a chance to reflect on all these elements, to focus anew on following Jesus, to make course adjustments, and take time to notice some new and special aspect of the scenery that is passing by.

But it would also have the potential for some real journeys to new places – or to try out new ways to do old things in whatever way makes sense for you. Surely you could have fun in this "way".

Conclusion

This morning I've offered you the idea of picking a one word them to guide or nudge your life in 2026. But you might choose a different word, or you might think that the whole idea of a theme for a year is ridiculous.

But whatever you plan for 2026, even if it is to have no plan, my prayer is that:

- The light of God will shine in you and in your life.
- That you know your own worth in God's eyes.
- That you will join me in travelling the way of Jesus, enjoying both the journey and the destination.

Happy New Year