Happy New Year, my friends...No matter how you approach this strange line in the sand we’ve created for ourselves, it’s always an "interesting" moment in life, I find.

Last night there will have been a bit of stock-taking for many, wound-licking for some, a recognition of blessings to be counted and challenges to engage with, be they large or small...And today, however we spent the evening, we wake to that lovely sense of a clean slate – a whole gift of time to live through, a succession of new moments that will none of them be exactly the same as their predecessors.

There might be resolutions, - or maybe not.

Excitement or apprehension.

We never DO know what’s coming – and that’s probably all for the best.

This year, though, I’m particularly excited, as our middle child and his wife are, please God, expecting a baby in February.

They were with us for Christmas, and we’ve spent quite a bit of time considering not only names for their daughter but also what names she might call her grandparents. I have a bit of a problem here, as the only Grandmother I knew was well into her 80s when I arrived, a very difficult lady whom I found it hard to love. As a result both “Grandma” and “Granny” feel like names I can’t own – and somehow “Nanny” isn’t quite right either. In the end we’ve decided to see what the wee one herself comes up with when she’s old enough to say anything. My own approximation to “Kathryn” as a toddler was “Catkin” - so who knows, the wheel may yet go full circle. I was surprised, though, at how much it seemed to matter. There was something about being given the same name as a lady who made my mother cry that was HUGELY uncomfortable.

As if her name somehow carried her essence, -an idea with deep and ancient roots.

Again and again in Scripture names are a significant gift...marking a new identity for Abram/Abraham, Simon/Peter, Saul/Paul...or offering an insight into true calling. Mary and Joseph avoided all the discussions about whether or not their first-born should be given a family name...because he was named even before conception, when the angel visited Mary.

“you shall name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins”.

It wasn’t a unique name – Jesus, Jeshua, Joshua are all common variants of a name that means “Jehovah brings salvation” - but it was uniquely true for the son of Mary....his destiny bound up in his name....a glimpse, from the very beginning, of who this child IS. It’s an immensely audacious name to give to a baby – and as she held her tiny son while he received circumcision, a sign of his people’s covenant with God, I wonder if Mary’s pondering included “How on EARTH can this little one truly be or become all that is promised”.

So much suggested by a name. Of course, we who know the rest of the story may be less surprised, less unsettled – but we mustn’t overlook what an extraordinary thing this naming is. Before his teaching and preaching, before his healings and miracles, before his death and resurrection, Jesus is already identified by God as the one through whom He will save his people. An eight-day-old baby named Jesus. “He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High.” In the naming of a tiny child, we already catch a glimpse God’s gloriously mad plan to save the world through the gift of a vulnerable human being.

And there are many other names that help us to understand more of that same child’s nature....names that we draw from the Old Testament ,- “Wonderful counsellor, Prince of Peace, Messiah” and from the New , - “Lamb of God, Light of the World”....and my favourite of all, found first in Isaiah 7 and then reiterated in Matthew’s Gospel, “Emmanuel. God with us”.

That’s the name I shall cling to as I go into the year ahead.

Emmanuel.
No matter what happens – both good and bad – I won’t experience it alone, and nor will you.

That most wonderful name means that whenever we are most afraid – or most joyful – the one who knows all the secrets of our hearts is there beside us. Emmanuel. God with us.

Of course, our own names too will have their individual significance, be they the names chosen for us with love and with care by our parents, or that collective name that many of us here today share – the name of Christian. A Christian, after all, is a little Christ...or, according to some, more accurately a slave of Christ, one living in total obedience to his call on their life. I wish I found that a more comfortable reflection, but I have to ask - If the names of Jesus offer an insight into his nature – is the same true for you or me?

To be a “true Christian” has very little to do with where or how we worship, far more about where we place our loyalty, our confidence and trust. If we are Little Christs then each one of us should be visibly living in obedience to the law of vulnerable Love that Jesus proclaimed at every moment of his life and ministry...living lives of visible difference.

Circumcision reminded the Jews of God’s external covenant with them and reminds us of the new covenant in Jesus bought with his blood. This cut on an eight day old Jesus points to those wounds inflicted on the cross for our salvation. When we became Christians at our baptisms, we too received a sign of the new covenant – the cross traced on our foreheads as indelible reminder of the self-sacrificial shape of the life to which we should conform.

In the old Catechism, after the famous question

“What is your name? N or M

The next question was “Who gave you this Name? And its answer “My Godfathers and Godmothers in my Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

That is to say, each one of us is part of God’s salvation story...members of Christ, beloved children, inheritors of the kingdom.

It’s fair to say that names really can tell us a lot about people’s characters and the roles they play in a story (think Gradgrind or Malfoy)...They can also tell us about their aspirations....and if we aspire to be Christians, that will surely set our agenda for the year ahead and for all our years to come.

In his Holy Name, let us claim and live our true identities as children of God and heirs of the kingdom...and when we fail, let us call out to Emmanuel, God with us, who will never leave or forsake us...whose very name reminds us of his ultimate purpose, to save his people from their selves and from their sins.