Writing in the Times newspaper back in 1894, one commentator estimated that in 50 years every street in London would be buried under nine feet of manure. The reason was that cities in the 19th century depended on thousands of horses in order to function with anything approaching efficiency. By the turn of the century, London had 11,000 horse-powered taxis. There were also several thousand buses, each of which required 12 horses per day, a total of more than 50,000. In addition, there were countless other horse-drawn vehicles, all working constantly to deliver the goods needed by the rapidly growing population of what was then the largest city in the world.

I was reminded of the often-unrecognised debt we owe to the internal combustion engine when reflecting on this morning’s first reading from Isaiah 60. In the light of urban life as experienced in the 19th century, the promise in verse 6 that ‘A multitude of camels shall cover you’ turns from being mildly perplexing to downright alarming...

But, of course, looked at in context, it’s clear that Isaiah is wanting to open the eyes of his people to something very different. These words are addressed to the city of Jerusalem – not so much the physical location in Israel/Palestine, but more the symbol of the people of God on earth. Often downtrodden, marginalised and ignored, this is a vision which looks forward to the day when the tables are turned.

In the powerful imagery of verses 1-3, Isaiah anticipates the dawning of the wonderful day when the song ‘Shine, Jesus, shine!’ will come into its own – the day when his people will arise and shine because ‘the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...’ What this means is spelt out in verse 19 at the end of the chapter, ‘The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory’.

With the result, verse 3, that ‘Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn’. And the point is that they won’t come empty-handed. Those of God’s people who have been scattered all over the world will be brought back home. And then, verse 5, ‘the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you’. Which is where the camels, the ancient equivalent of Eddie Stobart’s network of lorries, come in. Verse 6: ‘A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. [Not just any old camels, but the elite!] They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.’

Now this is all very well – but what does this beautiful but rather curious corner of Old Testament prophecy have to do with us? It’s stirring stuff – but where does it take us?

There’s a big clue in the reference to gold and frankincense in verse 6. Our thoughts would have been drawn to Matthew 2 even if it hasn’t been today’s Gospel reading! The echoes with the description of the gifts brought by the wise men to the manger throne of the infant Jesus are unmistakable. For the most significant layer of what Isaiah sees coming true, of what he sees being fulfilled, comes through the birth of Jesus.

It’s God’s costly commitment to us, revealed through the coming of his Son into the world, which brings light to those who are in darkness and hope to those who are in despair. One of the most famous verses in the Bible anchors it with exquisite clarity: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...’
This is what makes Christmas such a happy and joyful celebration. For this is what it underlines: the deep, unswerving, passionate love of God for us. This is the truth above all truths which lifts us up and helps us to ‘rise and shine’ and give God the glory. This is what gets us out of bed in the morning: the love of God revealed in the gift of himself in Jesus.

The account of the wise men coming to worship the child born to be king has something else for us as well. That’s the importance and significance of the foreigner. It’s a theme which we find again and again in the Bible. The fact that, back in Genesis, God chose to identify Abraham and his descendants as ‘the people of God’ doesn’t mean that he consigned everyone else to oblivion. Far from it! Right at the start, we find God telling Abraham, ‘...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Genesis 12.3). I have chosen you to be my people now so that everyone may become my people in the future.

It’s all too easy for us who identify ourselves as the spiritual descendants of Abraham, the people of God today, to downplay this. The temptation to try and shelter in safety from the mess of the world around us is enormously appealing. The pressure to settle for membership of the church as merely a sort of religious club for those who are ‘into that sort of thing’ is very strong.

But the wise men urge us not to do this. Their appearance in the Christmas story presses us into being outward-facing rather than inward-looking. To welcome the strangers who come among us. And actively to seek opportunities to reach out to those who are not yet included among the people of God so that they may become so. That’s why every church worthy of the name of Jesus has outreach, hospitality, mission, evangelism, at the core of what they are and do.

Which leads us onto something else. The wise men tell us that there is no part of our planet which we are to think of as a ‘no-go area’ for Christian Faith. This isn’t a popular line to go down and runs contrary to the desire of those who want to try and divide the world up between the different religions. But the wise men underline for us right from the start what Jesus himself declares right at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...’

This is why God arranged that foreigners would come and be part of the Christmas story. As Matthew tells us, ‘they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they [set the ball rolling for the whole of the human race as they] knelt down and paid him homage’. Our job is not only to follow their example as we worship Christ the new-born King – but to help everyone else to do so as well.

For Jesus Christ is not just a take-it-or-leave-it lifestyle option. If he were merely another religious teacher to add to the list, that would be fine. But he isn’t. He is ‘Christ the Lord, ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored’. Yes, it begs all sorts of questions for us to wrestle with – but the message of Epiphany is that the wonder of who Jesus is means that he belongs at the centre of the life of absolutely everyone. This is what we’re celebrating today. This is what leads us to arise and shine – ‘for our light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon us’. Amen.