Bethlehem is located amidst a little group of hills. But 3 miles away is a huge, strange flat topped mountain that looks very out of place in the Judean landscape. It is in fact a fake mountain. It is called Herodium and was one of the many fortresses that Herod the Great built during his reign. Herods building projects were as big as his ego, and when he was searching for a place to build his home there wasn’t a mountain big enough. So he built one, 2,500 ft high. It was a massive place with 40 acres of entertaining space, a pool, colonnades, mosaics, frescos, and his massive tomb, where eventually he would be buried. He may have been good at grand designs, but Herod was a thoroughly unpleasant person. It was once said that it was better to be Herods pig than to be his son. He had a number of sons killed, ordered many assassinations. Woe betide if you tried to challenge his claim to rule. You can just imagine the fury that would have been seething inside Herod as the wise men asked him ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’ Jesus did indeed have royal lineage in the line of King David. But the contrast could not be more different between Herod King of the Jews and Jesus, who had that title pinned above his head at the crucifixion. The wise men must have been surprised when they finally met the boy king. Not within in the royal walls of Herodium. But in an ordinary family, with more in common with people like the shepherds who still serve in those fields even today. Mary and Joseph, along with the people of Bethlehem were vulnerable, facing terror from the soldiers that would swoop down from Herodium and slaughter the innocents. King Herod killed the innocent; King Jesus was the innocent killed on the cross who liberated rather than enslaved. Herod lifted himself up in his huge towering fortress; Jesus was lifted up on a cross. Herod tried to kill the infant Jesus but failed due to the providence of God and the obedience of the wise men. Instead, Herod himself died, and was buried in the Herodium, overlooking the city where the true King of the Jews was born.
The grave was looted, the palace overrun and very little remains of the internal glories of the fake mountain. But the legacy of the little baby King of the Jews is the eternal Christ, risen, ascended, glorified, present in his church and the sacraments and in the hearts of his people.

As we celebrate this feast of Epiphany and the beginning of a new year, we bring our gifts of praise, talents, and love to our King. We know this King to be one prophesied by Isaiah, and the Psalmist; along with the magi we recognise him not amongst the big egos or the wealthy, but amongst simple small poor things. We have seen this week that power and influence is still used in diametrically opposed ways.

On one hand we see an international financier who used power and wealth to prey upon the innocent and manipulate his peers. The Herod format. And one the other? The Christlike format, seen in Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who died this week.

I read a fascinating piece about Tutu by Rowan Williams this week.

“There are two kinds of egotists in the world,” he wrote after meeting Tutu. “There are egoists who are so in love with themselves that they have no room for anyone else and there are those egoists that are so in love with themselves that they make it possible for everybody else to be in love with themselves. They are at home in their own skins. It doesn’t mean that they are arrogant or self obsessed or think they are faultless. They have learned to sense some of the joy that God takes in them. And in that sense Desmond Tutu manifestly loves being Desmond Tutu, there’s no doubt about that. But the effect of that is not to make me feel frozen or shrunk; it makes me feel that just possibly by Gods infinite grace I could one day love being Rowan Williams in the way that Desmond loves being Desmond Tutu. ”

As we begin a new year, may God grant us light, not darkness, hope not despair. May the leaders and the powerful of the world learn to walk the way of Christ and not Herod. And may we know ourselves loved by him, that others may know and feel that too.