The shepherds were fearful early this morning when angels appeared to them, isolated on the hillside in the dark, as we’ve just heard. Don’t be afraid, the angels reassured them. Mary, too, was afraid when an angel had visited her nine months previously with the news of her pregnancy while a virgin. St Luke again tells us that she was encouraged not to be afraid.

The wise men, St Matthew records, were uncertain about the exact birthplace of the child born to be king as they followed the star. When they reached King Herod’s palace in Jerusalem they not unreasonably enquired there in their uncertainty about the location. Mary, too, we are told, was perplexed by the angel’s words to her – and how wouldn’t have been uncertain at such an extraordinary proposition.

And what frustration there must have been for the thousands, including Mary and Joseph, required for the census to travel to their home towns. How frustrating, indeed worrying for the heavily pregnant Mary to be forced into a hazardous journey and then to find no rooms available in Bethlehem. Surely it was frustrating also for the innkeeper to have the embarrassing reputation of hosting a baby born in the stable. What frustration as well for that new family to have to spend their child’s early months without the support and love of family and friends as refugees in another country.

This Christmas celebration provides no escape from the anxieties of 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic. Then there was fear, uncertainty and frustration. We are given today not escape but hope.

In the Bible’s accounts of Jesus’ coming and birth we find fear, with which so many people have lived and live still this year. We see uncertainties in the account of the incarnation, like the perplexity and uncertainty which have become a routine of life as we have lurched from shock and strident warnings to optimistic musings about normality in weeks or by Christmas. We find here in the Gospels the frustrations of living with what is required of us, alongside necessary restrictions and limitations on us which are distressing, and for some harmful to health and well-being.

Fear, uncertainty and frustration are the stuff of our lives as they were for Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men. But those three realities are not what draws us here – on screen at home or in person here in church. We have come to worship and to celebrate love and hope, made all the more precious because this year we hear the massage yet again but from a situation where we can appreciate so much better its power. Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine…Love for plea, and gift and sign.

Sally and I, like most of you, will be keeping Christmas this year not as we had envisaged. None of us find ourselves doing what we would most wish for, particularly where like us you cannot be with children and families – and cannot be here in person. I especially honour today very many in our communities who have served so generously and unstintingly, both professionally and personally, this year. Many are working today and so miss today’s opportunity to be with others. The commitment of so many is clear; from NHS staff to parcel van drivers, from shopworkers to teachers, from ferry and port staff to those administering vaccines and tests, and churchwardens, clergy and others making worship possible and available online, by phone, through the letterbox as well as in church. Those of us most comfortable and least threatened by fear, uncertainty and anxiety owe so much to them. They have brought support, kindness, commitment and love.

Jesus’ birth, more than the birth of any child, brings promise and hope. This is not wishful thinking hope, nor warm words to console or to cajole us into believing something better is soon to occur. Christmas is a real story where things happen less than perfectly and do not quickly resolve well. The holy family receives in a cattle shed the visits of people as diverse as itinerant untrusted shepherds and rich foreign potentates but then must flee as other young children are innocently slaughtered. Here is not a shallow hope of release from restrictions and tiers but a deep and lasting hope grounded in the reality we all face of fear, uncertainty and frustration.

Love came down at Christmas, as Christina Rossetti reminds us so beautifully, Love for plea, gift and sign. Hope is seen in this love, through the simplicity of a frail and vulnerable hours-old child; in the poverty of an animal’s feeding trough as a cradle; in the gentle bonding touch of a mother, in the humble worship of rough shepherds and rich grandees.

Whatever your fears today, whatever the uncertainties you face, whatever the frustrations you have but try to disguise, Christmas offers you a deep and lasting hope because this Love coming down does not minimise or deny challenges. This love does not avoid them or escape them. This love is the sign of God’s solidarity. It says I am with you, alongside you, for you, in solidarity for you. This is love which beings hope.