

A New Year – Let's Face It!

Scripture: Luke 2: Selected Verses

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January 1, 2017

On the surface the title of today's reflection *A New Year – Let's Face It!* sounds a little harsh and, to use a colloquial expression, in your face. I can assure you before I begin that the intention isn't to suggest a casual approach to the New Year before us. Rather I believe that there is a reality that needs to be addressed as we move from the sometimes hectic experience of the Advent/Christmas season to anticipating another year. In summary we are in transition as we move from extraordinary time to the ordinary time that we will encounter as early as tomorrow if we have not already done so. I think it is fair to say that this transition can be difficult. We have experienced a month of expectation, of celebration, and the sharing of *good tidings*. We have illuminated our homes and our Christmas trees with a sea of lights that in a Christian context reminds us of the light that has come into our world and our lives. We have welcomed to our home our families and friends, or conversely have visited them, and our time has been consumed with a multitude of preparations . . . making sure that everything turns out as planned and hoped for. The difficulty lies in the fact that all of this has removed us from the ordinary day to day repetitive activities and demands of our lives.

It was the renowned biblical scholar and preacher William Willimon of Duke University who summed up this transition in describing it as *The Ordinary*

Resumption after the Grand Intrusion. Willimon is very realistic in his observations in saying that “The Christmas Eve service was, as usual, quite grand. There were candles, choirs, carols and crowds. But that was Christmas Eve, the time of great expectation, and this is the Sunday after Christmas, the time of great *dissipation*. Yes, we are still singing Christmas carols and the decorations are still beautiful, but nothing beats the expectancy, excitement, anticipation of before Christmas. Now is the season of crumpled wrapping paper, overstuffed trash cans, and line-ups at the return counters. Christmas when the child is born in Bethlehem, is the *grand intrusion* of God into our lives, *the great interruption* with angels rending the skies. But today, the Sunday after Christmas, we’re on the verge of the *great resumption*.”

Every seven years we as clergy are faced with a dilemma or perhaps more appropriately a challenge. Let me say more . . . I refer to the occasion when New Year’s Day falls on a Sunday, as is the case today. In turning to the Lectionary, the three year cycle of scripture for the seasons of the church year, we have three choices of readings from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke for this particular day. Do we go with Mary and Joseph as on the eighth day they take Jesus to the temple for the rite of circumcision? The passage which Rhiannon read to us earlier. There they experience the reactions of Simeon and Anna, both of whom had waited decades for evidence of salvation and who recognized the significance of the Christ child as their answer, expressing their feelings in eloquent terms. These recognitions are the very first epiphanies recorded in the gospels and serve as an introduction to the next season of the church year, Epiphany, that will commence this coming week; or do we take another track and enter the world of King Herod and experience the danger to Jesus. Herod sensing a threat to his

kingdom ordered all children under two to be killed and so Joseph and Mary escaped to Egypt to protect him; or lastly we have the less pleasant choice of that problematic passage which describes what is in store for the sheep and the goats. It is a passage heavy in judgement and which separates those who will enter God's presence and those who are cursed and relegated to the eternal fire. I recall within the evangelical setting of my early faith formation this was heavy stuff and as young people we were never quite sure to which group we belonged. The sometimes hand motions of the preacher to the left or right sides of the sanctuary didn't exactly provide any confidence! The ushers that morning were not helpful in suggesting which side of the sanctuary the sheep were occupying! Well for me, and I suspect for many of you, judgement described in this way doesn't belong in our respective theologies . . . and so this last choice is easily discounted.

The point I want to emphasize in referencing these other Christmas related readings is that we rarely get to address them. We never consider the complete picture. The reasons perhaps being due to time limitations of the Christmas season; the reluctance to intrude on such a glorious happening; or because everything has been invested in the main event, the birth of Jesus which after all is said and done, was an ordinary birth with a whole backdrop of the extraordinary special effects. The creative juices of gospel writers who added to the mix angelic visitations; a star that mysteriously leads shepherds to the Bethlehem manger; and yes, a virgin who conceived.

I recall the most helpful advice that I received in seminary was from our Catholic New Testament professor Father Gerald Caron. At the commencement of our

study of the Gospel according to John, Gerald said to us students: *Remember that gospel writers took ordinary events and made them extraordinary.* That has been helpful in the task of biblical interpretation. If I may say there are times when we can get caught up with the special effects and miss the point or the heart of the story. All the special effects in the birth story are simply to emphasize the significance of the child Jesus who gospel writers later made the Christ. The *Jesus of History* became the *Christ of Faith*. Having said this there is something very special about the biblical bells and whistles of Christmas. What would we do without all the carols whose narratives have their origin in gospel stories? Not to mention the libretto of Handel's oratorio Messiah. When we hear the term *the magic of Christmas* I think that this *magic* does embrace the extraordinary embellishments to the gospel stories. Regretfully much of the pure Christmas story has been subsumed into the secular world and its associated pressure to subscribe to its norms. Christmas and all its trappings has become a major industry.

Today we find ourselves in a sort of hiatus between what we may consider two very different celebrations . . . the birth of Jesus and the welcoming of a new year. However I suggest to you that there are in fact several reasons to recognize them as connected and what we are experiencing at this time. Let me endeavour to explain.

When Joseph and Mary took the boy Jesus to the temple they were following the tradition of doing what is expected of every Jewish family. Circumcision was performed on a Jewish boy on the eighth day of his life. They were getting on with their lives and their parental responsibilities. There is a sense in which they were

not in transition from the extraordinary life experiences to the ordinary because everything about the Bethlehem birth was for them ordinary. This was a humble birth in the extreme. Jesus came into a cruel and oppressive world and returned to those same circumstances. As I mentioned earlier everything that was extraordinary about this birth was later projected on to the family by gospel writers. Storytelling at its best that raised the significance of the *person* Jesus from the very time of his birth. Such significance may take time for us to fully engage, but through incremental teaching, enlightenment, and personal discernment that has informed our faith journey, we place our hope in those immortal words from the Gospel of John “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” These words represent what might be considered the core reality, the very nucleus of a growing faith. Jesus came to be with us . . . the intrusion was of a permanent nature. We cannot pack away this event with the lights and decorations until the next time. At his birth we beheld his glory but in the ordinary times of our lives he remains a companion on the road of life. The historical Jesus never claimed or expected any adulation and accolades attributed to him in the gospel writer’s construction of the Christ of faith. But one thing remains sure and unchangeable, that is Jesus taught us how to live and how to live abundantly . . . not in material well-being but in the fullness of life. The wholeness of life which brings in and of itself a calmness, a serenity, and an overwhelming gratitude for each day of life to reach out and love our neighbour.

Today as we have gathered together we bring a whole range of feelings that can overwhelm us as we commence a new year as individuals and as a community of

faith. 2017 is now with us as just a few hours ago the glistening ball dropped in Times Square and the crowd shouted down the last few seconds to midnight. Since then we have offered and received the greeting phrase “Happy New Year.” That is the normal seasonal expected exchange. But underneath those wishes is the realization that the future is unknown and this year may well bring us joys as well as sorrows, not unlike the year ended; achievements as well as disappointments; challenging times; and complete surprises both pleasant and difficult. This will be the same for those we love and indeed our world. We wonder just what the year will bring. As well as the name of a Syrian city, Aleppo has become a term to describe the extreme war and acts of cruelty exercised against innocent citizens and that tragedy has not ended; refugees will continue to seek shelter and a new beginning, some by taking to unsafe boats to cross the seas, many will lose their lives and increase the number of casualties from the already 5000; the direction that a new US government will take has given rise to anxiety throughout the world; and within our own faith family here at LPCC we reflect on the joys and sorrows of 2016 and wonder what circumstances we will face together in this new year.

There is no particular liturgy, or theological pronouncements, or trumpet fanfares that can be used to launch this New Year. Such introductions are unnecessary and out of touch with the context of a world in need. I am sure that, as I have, you have considered this day a new beginning, not necessarily with resolutions that tend to soon lose their glow, flicker and die. Rather I believe that in our troubled world our focus moves away from self to the incredible needs of our brothers and

sisters, our neighbours around the broken world caught up in inconceivable atrocities and tragedies of an horrific scale.

We may hold our hands up in frustration and exclaim what can we do? Where do we look for hope? Where will peace come from? Where can we find inspiration to move forward in this New Year?

The One whom we have welcomed into our world grew and thirty years later commenced a ministry defined by authentic living. His code of ethics, his unconditional love for all people devoid of the sheep and goats theology and judgement, his example of acceptance, forgiveness, and justice have inspired millions to follow his way. You and I are in that company. It is in this Christmas season that we take the opportunity to renew that relationship which goes beyond a seasonal acquaintance to a lifetime covenant. It is that covenant which calls us, that impels us to reach out to our world. Let us take heart from the assurance in John's gospel that "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1: 5 – NRSV)

Yes, there are many times when we feel that our infinitesimal contribution will not make a difference. If you tuned into the Queen's annual Christmas message you would have heard her words of encouragement and inspiration and I quote: "Sometimes I think that the world's problem are so big that we can do little to help. On our own we cannot end wars or wipe out injustice, but the cumulative impact of thousands of acts of kindness can be bigger than we imagine." A New year . . . Let's face it! with renewed faith and love for one another. AMEN.

