

## A New Year Message 2022

Psalm 146: 4. Blessed is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help : and whose hope is in the Lord his God;  
5. Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that therein is : who keepeth his promise for ever;

One cannot help but feel that one ought to deliver a new year message for 2022. We've been through such a lot in the last couple of years and predictions with regard to our future are, to say the least, mixed. What is God saying to us in these difficult times? I derive a lot of strength from the couplet, *We know not what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future...* *Blessed is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help : and whose hope is in the Lord his God; Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that therein is : who keepeth his promise for ever.* That comes from Psalm 146, one of the psalms set for the last day of the month and therefore also for the last day of the year.

But what does the Gospel say specifically about 1<sup>st</sup> January? Nothing actually. Where does New Year's Day feature in the Church's Calendar? Nowhere actually. It's just an arbitrary date, a number, a convention. New Year's Day has no deeper meaning than that. In the Middle Ages, the New Year was considered to begin on 25<sup>th</sup> March. The tax year starts on 6<sup>th</sup> April. The academic year begins in September or October. The Jewish New Year will begin this year on 25<sup>th</sup> September and the Chinese New Year on 1<sup>st</sup> February. So why invest so much in one arbitrary date in the calendar? And yet very many people do.

New beginnings are important. The Bible has a lot to say about God making all things new. The Gospel is an invitation to make a fresh start: to be born again; to die to sin and crucify the lusts of the flesh, that, buried with Christ in Baptism, we might rise to eternal life, filled with the Holy Spirit, Who is the source of all life in this world and the next. Put off the old and put on the new. Leave the past behind, with its failures and disappointments, and reach out towards a bright new future. There is much in the past to be thankful for, to build on. Isaiah 51<sup>1</sup>: *Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.* But we can't live in the past. There is much in the past to regret and to be sorry for, but there is always the possibility of repentance leading to forgiveness and a new beginning, a new creation, *forgetting*, as S Paul says, *those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before* (Philippians 3<sup>13</sup>).

But what do people look for on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day? There is hope for the future, that things will change, that things will get better. For many people, New Year's Eve is a communal event, a convivial celebration – something which has been spoilt again this year by COVID – or a precious time with close family, and, I must admit, for some people like me, not a particularly special time for the sort of reasons I have already mentioned. For some people, of course, like Christmas, it can be a very bitter time if they are lonely, resentful or remorseful or if they feel that all the best days of their life are behind them. Never feel like that. I Corinthians 2<sup>8</sup>: *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.*

So what does the Church have to say about New Year's Day? January 1<sup>st</sup> is a Christian feast. It is the eighth day of Christmas and, therefore, it marks the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus. I've not got time or space to go into the significance of all that today. Maybe I will when Christmas Day falls on a Sunday. *At the Name of Jesus, every knee shall bow.*

Actually, the Christian New Year's Day was five weeks ago – Advent Sunday. You want grounds for hope that the future will be bright? Advent lays a far firmer foundation than Big Ben striking 12.00 on New Year's Eve. Advent looks forward to the coming of Christ. It looks forward to Christmas, His first coming, which we are celebrating now. What firmer ground could there be for hope than that the *Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, that God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.* Think about that for a moment. What could be a stronger guarantee that things will work out than that the Almighty Creator of the universe should become one of us and share our life, that He should die for us in order that we might live in Him. Advent also looks forward, perhaps more so, to Christ's Second Coming, when Heaven and earth will pass away, the judgment will be set and the books opened and one like the Son of Man (Jesus) will come with the clouds of heaven, and the saints of the most High (everyone who believes in God in Jesus Christ) shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever (Daniel 7). This is

a great mystery, but we do know that through faith in Christ, *now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is* (I John 3<sup>2</sup>). You really can't ask for more than that. God is with us here and now, looking after us in our every day lives and His Son, Jesus Christ, has gone to prepare a place for us in His Father's house, where there are many mansions, that where He is, we may be also – in all eternity! (John 14<sup>1-3</sup>).

Hope – sure and certain hope – in the new beginning that we have in Christ. He was born into our world 2,000 years ago. He will come again at the end of time to judge both the quick and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end. If you haven't done so already, welcome Him into your heart. You only have to believe, to repent of your sins and to be baptised in His Name. *O Holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin, and enter in: Be born in us today.*

New Year for the world is about hope, though nothing can really satisfy our deepest and truest needs except the knowledge of God. New Year is also often about resolutions. We're going to be better people in the new calendar year. New Year's resolutions have a notoriously high failure rate. How many people keep their New Year's resolutions even until the end of January? So far as I can make out, many people's New Year's resolutions seem to be about things like alcohol, diet and physical fitness. Maybe they're the ones most talked about in the media and people make other resolutions too - like working harder, learning more and being nicer to other people. They're all good resolutions, though S Paul does point out that *bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come* (I Timothy 4<sup>8</sup>). We have to ask ourselves what really matters in life, what we're investing our time and energy in and for what? Fit for what? is a good question to ask any fitness fanatic.

Christians examine themselves every day, ask forgiveness for their sins and seek God's grace to become better people. Lent, rather than New Year, is the time when we especially concentrate on this self-examination. What really matters is our relationship with God. What spoils that relationship is sin. Sin is a deficiency of love. We are sinners because we don't love God with all our hearts or one another as Christ loves us. The remedy for sin is faith in Christ and repentance. If we turn to Christ, we receive His Holy Spirit and through prayer, through participating in Christian worship, through the Scriptures and the Sacraments and by whatever means of grace God chooses to employ, we do become better people. We can't lift ourselves up by our own shoelaces, by making extravagant resolutions which we then lack the means to keep, but we can grow in grace if only we remain open to the love of our heavenly Father in our day to day lives.

And finally, I came across a striking book review this last week. The book is by John Symons *After Life – Afterlife?* The reviewer (Jared Hay) says, *This is not an academic book on \*eschatology, but at its heart is a desire that the Church would believe more fully, and speak more openly about, the Christian belief in life after death. It begins in the opening days of the pandemic and Symons' sense that among leading figures within the Church (of England) there was a failure to articulate a message of hope for life beyond the grave when so many people were dying. Death was all around, and we were not coping well with it.* I think Symons has a point. We are not always as confident as we ought to be in *be[ing] ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:* (I Peter 3<sup>15</sup>). We do have the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life. We don't have to be doubtful about it or to apologise for it and we certainly shouldn't be reticent in sharing the Good News with which Jesus has entrusted us for the salvation of the cosmos. In Revelation chapter 3, Jesus rebukes the Church at Laodicea for being lukewarm, something for which the Church of England has been accused far too often and often with far too much reason. We don't have to be like that. *We have Christ's own promise, and that cannot fail.* Revelation 3 finishes with these words – thought provoking at the commencement of a new year. <sup>20</sup> *Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.* <sup>21</sup> *To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.* <sup>22</sup> *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*

\*Eschatology is about what happens at the end of all things finally and to what purpose.