

New Years Eve 2017 – Philippians 3:10-16, 4:8-9 (John 1:14-18)

So we come to the end of another year – I'm sure time speeds up as we get older! But it's a good chance isn't it, to reflect on the year just gone. How would you sum up your year? What's gone well? What's gone not so well? What do you hope for in 2018?

These are good questions, aren't they? And it's good to get into the habit of asking them. Old Plato observed well over 2,000 years ago that 'the unreflected life is the unlived life'. And it's not just philosophy: deeply embedded in a *Christian* understanding of our lives is the idea of lifelong growth. However old we are, whatever challenges we face, we *can* keep growing in our relationship with God, whose eternal task is to prepare us for heaven. As we sing at Christmas every year: 'Fit us for heaven, to live with thee there.' (Away in a manger)

You could say that from the moment we become Christians, the moment we choose to follow Jesus, the whole purpose of our lives becomes to live out the words of 'Away in a manger' – not the bit about cattle lowing, but being fitted for heaven.

In that sense, *every year* offers us the opportunity to continue in that purpose. Our bodies might not work quite as well as they once did, but our souls and spirits can still grow. Indeed, God expects that of us. Which gives us permission to expect it for ourselves. So as this year ends, if you haven't yet thought about those questions, can I encourage you to do so this week? And in the next 10-15 minutes, I want to help us make a start on that, both individually and as a church...

To do that, St Paul gives us some helpful tips, helping us to keep a good perspective both on looking back and on looking forward. So firstly:

Looking back

As some wag once said, 'Nostalgia isn't what it used to be.' But there is a value in looking back, as long as we know *how* to look back. Nostalgia can paralyse us or energise us, it all depends on our perspective. Are we simply trying to recreate the past, or learn from it? The truth is we cannot re-live the past, but our past *can* inspire our present and our future. How?

Well, firstly, Paul says: **Choose to let go of the bad stuff** (READ v13) – and Paul should know, he went around murdering Christians before he became one. Knowing what he used to be would have paralysed many people, so how did Paul push on beyond that? The truth is, it was always with him, but as he says here, it no longer defined him. When he says 'forget' he doesn't mean 'try not to think about', or 'pretend it never happened'; no, he means 'use the memory to inspire me to a new reality.'

The wonderful news of the gospel is that every sin, every mistake, every failure can be redeemed. As Paul says elsewhere: 'Godly sorrow leads to repentance, which leaves no regret.' In other words, *if* we learn from it, *if* we change our lives for the better, even our sins and misdemeanours can be used for good – so much so that we can even look back down the line saying 'it leaves no regret'.

What bad stuff do you need to let go of? What needs to be left at the foot of the cross for good, once and for all, to inspire us towards a better future, a changed life? For some of us, may the New Year mark a new season when we let go of the past which binds us.

Secondly, **choose to focus on the good stuff** (READ 4:8). 'You are what you eat.' Some of you may remember the C4 dieting programme from 10 years ago, perhaps some of you are putting into practise the last point and trying to forget it! But it's not just true with food is it? What feeds our minds, our souls? Paul is very keen to emphasise the value of a good spiritual diet to the young church in Philippi. There's so much spiritual junk food out there, isn't there?

Take a look back at your last year and ask yourself – what has really fed me or inspired me? Or maybe what has really inspired another Christian I admire? What's going to fuel your 2018?

It's really good to make a positive spiritual resolution isn't it? You know at this time of year, there'll be all the usual resolutions clamouring for our attention. New job, new diet, new hobby, nice holiday – and there's nothing wrong with any of those. But can I encourage you to make a spiritual resolution, based on this verse. How can you feed yourself well this year? What's going to fuel and inspire you?

It's not rocket science thus far is it – simple principles which enable us to keep growing – let go of the bad stuff which binds you, focus on the good stuff which feeds you.

And thirdly, **don't slip back** (READ v16). Life is always 3 steps forward, 2 steps back. Every mountain climb has periods when we have to descend a bit or walk along the side before we can start going up. Maybe last year was a year of growth for you, or maybe it was a year of stagnation; maybe it was uneventful, or maybe it was extremely eventful. Maybe you have a whole host of resolutions, maybe you're not sure of even one yet. Here's some good advice for wherever you find yourself: 'Live up to...' Don't slip back – if there's been a rot, stop the rot; if it's been a good year, try and keep it going.

John Robertson (Director of MP, occasional visitor) says churches are like bikes, you need to keep moving forward or you fall off. Same for us too – if we don't keep an attitude of trying to move forward, our default position is to fall off. So wherever you find yourself, whatever 2017 has been for you, can we resolve today that wherever we find ourselves in our walk with Jesus at the end of *next* year, we'll at least be where we are now, and hopefully beyond it.

Looking forward

Which is really the very simple advice Paul gives us when he looks forward. He knows he's not the finished article, but his aim is simply this: READ v12.

Why was Paul so greatly used by God? It could have been his great mind, his formative life experiences, his capacity to absorb suffering. But I think one thing stands out above everything: **Paul relentlessly presses on**. Whatever the setbacks, whatever the ups and downs, he has the same attitude, he presses on. He wants to live out those lines from Away in a manger, to be fitted for heaven – or as he says READ v14. He is never defeated by life, but always hopeful that God can

use his circumstances to bring good. He writes this in prison, as he does many of his letters. He *knows* what is like to look back on a difficult year – but he keeps on doing the simple stuff well. He lets go of the bad stuff, focuses on the good stuff, and presses on.

I wish I was a bit more like Paul, don't you? And we can be, that's the truth. Because it's not just about us: it's God who calls us heavenward. So we keep asking for his strength and this kind of attitude can be ours. Life only defeats us as much as we let it. God keeps calling us heavenwards, and the One who promised is faithful, and He *will* do it.

So what will it mean for you this year? How will you press on? What can you choose to let go of? What will inspire you?

I hope and pray that this year 'Away in a manger' is more true than ever, that you will look back in a year's time rejoicing that God is continuing to fit you for heaven, and thankful for all that He has done in you and through you along the way.

But as I close, I want to spend just a few minutes thinking about **what it might mean for us as a church – where are we now? Where do we want to go in 2018?**

You may remember that our text for this year was 'Build Up the Walls', by which we meant, become more visible in the community. And by God's grace we've done that: we've made great connections with Walton Community Council, we hosted the Mayor's Civic Service, our coffee morning has never been so popular and we now have the community nurses looking at a possible baby weigh-in clinic as part of it. We've prayer walked every month, run 2 quiz nights for 60 people each, and developed better links with local schools than ever. We've bought 2 new banners, put in a new sound system half financed by local grants and tidied up the front face of our churchyard. We have openings to talk with Wavendon Parish Council about how to use the old school buildings when St Mary's School moves, and the Diocese has now formally agreed to give us a new Pioneer Minister to work in the new housing estate and, God willing, plant a new church in the new church school which opens in September 2019.

That's a lot of progress in a year! (Take a moment.) And we give thanks to God for all of it. It's God who calls us heavenwards, and he has honoured the word he gave us.

But what will guide us in 2018? I want to suggest that this year is a **Season of Sowing**. The inspiration for this is from Psalm 126 and I believe this is our text for 2018 (turn to p624). You can read the whole thing at your leisure, but first we want to use v3 to give thanks for 2017 (READ). Then our text for this year is v4-5

*'Restore our fortunes O Lord, like streams in the desert/Negev.
Those who sows in tears will reap with songs of joy'*

This is a psalm all about God doing a new thing after a difficult season – and we've had that. As a church, we've had to face some hard times over the last 10-15 years. As we've reflected together recently, the church has faced declining attendance, financial struggles, and just in the last 15

months we've said goodbye to 5 of our saints: we give thanks for the faithful life and witness of Dorothy, Eric, John, Ann and June.

But I believe we've turned a corner. As I shared with the church council in December, despite these sad farewells, our average number of adults attending in 2017 was the same as in 2016. We've welcomed new people, and we have all these opportunities to look forward to.

It is a new season, a season of sowing. A chance to make good on the opportunities which now face us. But the verses remind us of some key things we must hold onto as we commit I hope to an exciting year to come:

- It's God who restores our fortunes – this psalm is a prayer and not just a song
- There is a cost – some of our sowing may yield tears
- But in order to reap we have to sow.

This is our season of sowing. And as I close I have a one word summary for you, one we can all remember: **TRY**

I don't mean Try Harder – what I mean is that we have a 'have a go' culture. We're not afraid to try new things and see how they go. In fact we've got 2 starting in January:

New regular quiz night – Colin kindly leading this for us – first one 23rd January. Not a fundraiser, simply a chance to open ourselves more to the community and build more social life.

New approach to all age – (not working) 14th January at 9.30am we'll have breakfast together and then have a shorter act of worship starting about 10am – this will have core elements of worship and prayer but the teaching element will be built around discussions. Also allows BCP and 9.30 congress to eat together (start 9.20ish).

I don't know if either of these will fly – they might go great, they might not. But that's not the point – we're going to TRY. We're going to celebrate successes *and* we're going to celebrate failures. We're going to be accountable to each other too, so that what we do, we do together and we support each other in it.

2018 is a season of sowing. It's a season to TRY new things. If you want to try something come and talk to me. And may we all 'press on towards the goal for which God has called us heavenwards in Christ Jesus.' Amen.