

Matthew 2:13-end Sermon for 9.15am – New Year's Day 2017

Happy New Year!

Sometimes it is good to have a point in time where we can take some space to take stock of how things are going and to think about where we go from here. And as arbitrary as it sounds, New Year is often a good time to do this. We feel like each new year is a new slate with new opportunities, new priorities, new resolutions (even if only for a few days until we break them) and a chance to leave the past behind to an extent.

It may be for some of us, we breathe a sigh of relief at the end of 2016 and look forward to a year which we hope will be less difficult. For others, maybe 2016 was fantastic and we hope this continues into 2017. For some, perhaps 2016 was painful and we mourn losses and grieve for what we had at the beginning of 2016 which we no longer have as the year ticks over. In any case, we all probably have reflections on how we'd like 2017 to look.

Our reading from Matthew this morning is a perfect fit for a New Year reflection, and we are going to situate ourselves at the paragraph break between v18 and v19. At this point we find Joseph and the Holy family looking back and looking forward at this key point in the ongoing story of Jesus' younger years. I think this backwards and forwards looking gives us a chance to do our own reflecting on the year gone by and the year to come. For me, there are three key things in this passage: Looking back in verses 13-18, God in the present in verse 19, and looking forward in verses 19-23.

So firstly, looking back, in verses 13-18. For Joseph, my guess is that his reflection when looking back is not a simple one, just as ours may be a complex mixture of highs and lows. Joseph, Mary and Jesus are in Egypt having escaped infanticide by the skin of their teeth. They find themselves in a foreign country as refugees having fled in the night with only what they could carry. There would certainly be relief – they had survived, they hadn't had to watch as their baby was ripped from them and killed along with all the other babies. I don't want to dwell on it, but the scene would have been horrific. And they had escaped. Every little squawk and cry from the baby Jesus would have seemed a gift to them. But there may have been survivor guilt as well. For Joseph, he had returned to his home town, Bethlehem, for the census. How many other people had been caught up in the massacre? How many of his own relatives, also called back, may have lost their children because of his? So, emotions must have been complex. Cries of joy mixing with cries of anguish and regret.

For the Holy family, to reflect back was to reflect on a train crash. They fled from the massacre, leaving chaos and destruction in their wake. They rejoice at the gift of a son, while mourning their personal losses of home, and feeling guilt, despair, confusion...

I wonder if that rings true when we reflect back on 2016? Probably we haven't fled a massacre, but probably for all of us, our reflection is messy. None of us are refugees, but some of us may have lost our homes or freedom as we have become more dependent on others. None of us celebrate the birth and survival of the Son of God, our own baby; but many of us will celebrate births, gifts, new beginnings, and perhaps some of these new beginnings may be tinged with guilt or sadness as we haven't got the friends around us to celebrate with, or the beginning is complicated by other things.

As Joseph reflected back, amidst all his emotions, perhaps he reflected upon verse 13. Through this whole episode, God's hand was firmly upon him and his family and amidst all the terror, relief, loss, gain, joy and sadness, God was clearly within his retrospection. God's fingerprints were all over the story. I hope that as we reflect back upon our 2016s, we can also see God's hand at work. When you take some time to reflect, I urge you to pray that God would show you his hands and his safe-keeping, and that we all take time to thank him for this.

But secondly, Joseph didn't just look back, but experienced God in the present. In verse 19, an angel of God appeared to him in Egypt. In a foreign country, so far away from the Temple in Jerusalem, from the religious leaders, from the normal religious practices of his life, God still came to find Joseph. Joseph and the Holy family were living outside the boundaries of God's chosen people, and yet, God shows he is bigger than man-made boundaries. There was nowhere that Joseph could go that was outside of God's influence.

And for us, we might feel like at the turn of the year, we are in a place, perhaps not physically, but mentally, emotionally or spiritually, where God cannot reach us. Perhaps we have lost hope. Perhaps we feel like God is distant because we feel guilty about something we've done, about something we've thought, about something we're maybe still doing but can't or won't stop. Perhaps we stare down a black hole of bad health, depression, broken relationships or friendships, recurring family problems, and we feel like God couldn't intervene even if he wanted to, and perhaps what right do I have to ask him for help when I've made such a mess of things.

If this rings true at all with you, please know that God is never so distant that you are out of reach. He comes to find us no matter where we are. He waits for an invitation. If all this rings true with you, I pray that as you reflect on the New Year, you invite him to come and find you to guide you back to himself.

Thirdly and finally, we look forward to the new year. For Joseph and his family, verses 19 and 20 mark an important change. Herod, the ruler who ordered the infant massacre has died. The world has changed for Joseph, and the change signals the opportunity for a new start. An episode in the life of the Holy family is coming to a close and new opportunities present themselves. The opportunity is at once and the same time a return and a new life. It is the return to the Land of Israel; the country promised by God to his people, the country of the temple, the focal point of all life and religion. And yet, it isn't a return to life as it was before. It was a new life, in a different area. The new life still remained under the shadow of fear; there was no completely happy ending. The Holy family settled in a backwater to avoid the gaze of the authorities. So this new life wasn't a happily ever after, ignoring what had gone before, and with an entirely clear slate.

But really, who can have an entirely clean slate and a new start? How many of us have the luxury of starting a new story which isn't coloured by the one which has gone before? No-one has that privilege. We all start 2017 in the light of 2016. None of us can just turn a clock back and carry on as if nothing has happened. So it was with the Holy family. They moved to a backwater, they still lived in the shadow of the authorities, and they still lived haunted by the memories of what had happened that night in Bethlehem.

But at the same time, they did have a new start. The return to the promised land is a return to their own people. It was an opportunity to start new business, trade, family ties, friendships. It was a

chance to stop being fugitives and to put down roots again; to stop being destitute refugees and make a home once more. An opportunity to reconnect formally with the religious life of their people again.

So the new life prompted by God was not a clean slate, but a bright opportunity. It didn't deny or cheapen what had gone before, but it came rich with opportunities, physically, emotionally and spiritually. And we might like to reflect on 2017 in these same terms. 2016 cannot be cancelled or undone. The good and bad events cannot be just wiped away and it would be wrong to do so, just as it would be wrong to see Joseph's return to Israel as an oblation of the massacre at Bethlehem. But 2017 is also rich and new, not undoing our lives up to this point, but not re-living them endlessly either. Joseph didn't stay in Egypt, but he returned and started a new life in Israel.

And this is the key to looking forward to 2017 I think. Joseph listened to God and obeyed. He returned to Israel when bade to do so, and he settled where he was instructed. And just as we talked about seeing God's fingerprints in our reflections upon 2016, perhaps we need to reflect upon the future, praying that God will be in control of our destinies and that we would have the ears and eyes to see where he leads and the feet to follow him. God went ahead of the family, back to Israel, and God goes ahead of each one of us into 2017. Following God's lead won't remove the bad memories, negate the pain and the longing for what was good in the past, and won't remove any risk in the future. It won't return us to some sort of golden age when life was good in hindsight. But following God will put us in the place where we are right to be. It will enable new life to spring from old wounds, new opportunities from the new circumstances we find ourselves in.

So if we look forward to 2017 in fear, let us trust the Lord who cared for the Holy family. If we look forward in loneliness, let us trust God to return us to a place of opportunity where we can put down new roots. If we look forward in dread, seeing a rocky or dark road ahead this year, let us trust God to go before us and guide us through that valley, just as he did Joseph. If we look forward scarred by the wounds of the past, like Mary and Joseph were scarred by their flight from Herod, let us trust God to be with us in all that is past and to build on these ruins for all that is to come. If we feel like we are still running away, or stuck in a dark place, a long way from God, let us trust him to come to meet us where we are, and let us grasp his held-out hand to pull us back to himself. And finally, if we are in a joyous place, without a care in the world, revelling in the world God has put us in, let's keep our eyes very closely on God, in thanks and praise, but also following him so when a storm comes, we are not made dizzy and lost, but are led closely through it by our God.

Amen.