

## Looking back and looking forward

### Sermon given by Rev Christopher Harrison at All Saints' church, Nottingham

31<sup>st</sup> December 2017

Today is the last day of 2017; tomorrow a new year begins. It is, therefore, a moment for looking back over the year that has passed, and a time for looking ahead to the year to come. What took place for us in 2017 which was particularly significant or important? Where was God in this? And where will God be in whatever lies in store for us in 2018?

As we look back over things which have taken place in our lives, we can see how they fall into various categories. There are firstly the things we did because we had to do them out of necessity. Perhaps we had to care for someone in particular need or difficulty, such as a family member who was sick, a friend who was in distress of some kind; or maybe there was a journey we had to take. Then there are the things we chose to do because we wanted to do them: a holiday that we decided to take, or a new activity which we decided to take up. Thirdly, there are those things which happened to us, which took place and affected us in some way. Maybe a special anniversary occurred; perhaps something took place, beyond our control, which affected our finances for better or for worse; maybe we met someone who was to prove special to us; or, by contrast, perhaps we lost someone who was especially close to us. And then fourthly, there are those things we did in response to the call or the invitation of God: such as making an active decision to seek God's will and purpose for us, or doing more to help and support those around us, or deciding to play a bigger part in standing up for those issues and causes which might help to create a better world, a world which is more in keeping with God's kingdom.

After the birth of Jesus, and following the visit of the shepherds to Mary and Joseph, Mary is said to have 'treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart'. Now of course we have no way of telling whether this happened to coincide with the ending of one year and the beginning of the next. But we can see that the things which took place in Mary's life over the year or so which had just passed can be described in terms of the various categories I have just mentioned. It all began with the visit by the angel Gabriel to Mary, telling her that she would bear God's Son, and inviting her to submit obediently to the will

of God as she took up this supreme responsibility. Mary had then chosen to go and visit her cousin Elizabeth, to tell her that she was pregnant and to share in the joy of Elizabeth's own pregnancy. Then there was the journey of some eighty miles that Mary and Joseph had to make out of necessity to Bethlehem, in accordance with the legal obligation to return to one's place of origin for the purpose of being registered. Finally, of course, the birth of Jesus took place, and various events happened around Mary which reflected the magnitude of this event, announced by the angels and celebrated by the shepherds.

We wonder, perhaps, therefore, just how Mary pondered on all these things. Maybe she was beginning to put together the pieces of this divinely ordained pattern; maybe she could increasingly see how the hand of God was at work in the things which she had had to do, the things she had chosen to do, those things which had happened to her, and the way in which her obedient response to God's call was gradually being revealed to be part of a much bigger plan that God had for humanity than she could initially see.

As we then look at the events which started to unfold in the life of the Holy Family following the birth of Jesus, we continue to see how they fall into the various categories which I have outlined. Mary and Joseph had to have the baby Jesus circumcised, in accordance with the requirements of the Jewish law; they then also had to dedicate him to God, as their first born son, accompanied by a sacrifice of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. Certain events then took place which were to shape their lives significantly: the visit by the wise men with their symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; followed by the massacre of the innocents as Herod sought to eliminate what he perceived as a threat to his rule, and the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus to Egypt. Eventually, as this threat receded, Mary and Joseph followed the call of God to return to Nazareth, where the remaining years of Jesus' childhood ensued.

As we look ahead to the year to come, we can perhaps foresee events and activities in our own lives which will take the various forms I have been describing. Things we know we will have to do; demands which will be placed upon us; obligations we will have to do our best to fulfil. There will also no doubt be things which will happen to us, which we have no way of predicting. Some of these may be pleasant; others may be less pleasant, and indeed we

all have to allow for the possibility that something will happen which will cause considerable suffering or distress. But we must also not forget that, in whatever situation we find ourselves, we can make at least some choices, which may bring happiness and joy to ourselves or to those around us. Let us never feel overwhelmed by difficulties and pressures, but try to step back from them, reflect, ponder, and renew our determination to find a way through them. But it is also supremely important, as this New Year begins, for us all to seek out what God wants of us and wishes for us. What does obedience to God mean for each one of us, and for our Church? What are those areas of our lives in which we are being asked to put our own wishes or needs to one side and allow the will and purpose of God to take us in a different direction, just as God called Mary to follow a path which she could surely never have predicted?

People within and beyond the Church have, over the years, debated at length the relationship between our own ability to shape our lives and the extent to which everything is actually predetermined, pre-planned, mapped out in advance. The reality, I would venture, is that our lives reflect an elusive mix of these principles which it is impossible to pin down. If our faith in the loving purposes of God is to mean anything, however, it is always important for us to look for the hand of God in events which happen to us, in choices and decisions which we face, even in those things we have to do and to which there is no alternative.

As we seek, therefore, to discern God's will and purpose for us over the year to come, we must never forget to give thanks to God for blessings received, for guidance given, for the people who matter to us, and for the joys we will always cherish. Alongside this we must be unstinting in prayer, both as we actively seek to follow the ways of God, and as we express our care and concern for those around us both inwardly to God and in our outward actions of love. If we do these things, we will find that our lives are being lived more and more in the service of God, and that his purposes for us become increasingly clear.

May God bless and guide you all as we give thanks for the year that is passed and embark upon whatever path God has in store for us in 2018. Amen.