

A Word for the New Year
31 December 2017
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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13
Revelation 21:1-6
Luke 2:15-21



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

I've been spending the last few days since Christmas with my family in Nelson, and enjoyed being part of the hurly burly of a full house, with more people staying than there were beds, with too much food, and definitely too much chocolate, but also loads of berries and cherries so some healthy stuff too. A lot of time spent at the sink doing dishes, but also plenty of time with our feet up reading as well.

Well, that was when I wasn't busy playing with Duplo, or blowing bubbles and water play in the back yard, or filling up a miniscule watering can for my 20 month old great-niece, who's at that stage where she's very busy and very much on the move so there was plenty of 'trailing' round the house and garden. There was the delight too of hearing her discovering language and trying out words. Two of her favourite words at the moment are **Look**, usually wanting me to come and look at something with her, and **Watch**, which usually meant watch me - watch me jump, watch me run etc.

I think **Look** and **Watch** are two good words for us at this time of year.

I always love these days between Christmas and New Year when you're not quite sure what day it is, and when hopefully after the busy-ness of all the December and Christmas events and activities, there is some time just to **look and watch**, to reflect on it all, to take a proper look at Christmas cards and letters and presents.

It's a time to think about all the people who've been part of our year, to look back, to give thanks, to appreciate those who've supported us through the year. It's also a time perhaps to look back from the perspective of year's end at some of the harder parts of this year, to say sorry, to grieve, to leave behind, to let go, to place in God's hands what is unfinished or the might have beens, 'what has been done, has been done; what has not been done, has not been done; let it be'. I wonder if there was some time for the Holy Family in Bethlehem to just *look and watch*, once all the anxiety and panic of Jesus' birth was over – Luke's gospel suggests there was, but not to start with. Our Gospel passage takes us back to the night of Jesus' birth, and to the shepherds' hasty trip to Bethlehem, rushing off to see what had been revealed to them in what had been at first a terrifying and then an exhilarating, angelic visitation.

Let's recall the angel's words: "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12).

Saviour – the long awaited one who will save God's people from oppression by their foreign overlords.

The **Messiah** – the long awaited and promised King in the line of King David, anointed by God for a sacred calling. And this child is born 'in the city of David' (Luke 2:4, 11), in Bethlehem. The name in Hebrew is Messiah; in Greek, the Christ. He is **the Lord** – a coded message if ever there was one. Here we have the Hebrew *Adonai*, in Greek *Kyrios*, both words used to convey to the Jewish people the ineffable name of God, the Hebrew name "Yahweh" revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), the God whose name is "I am who I am, I will be who I will be". That is a great name to hold before us as we face into a new year. This is the God who holds together past, present and future, and who holds the future of this world and our lives in trustworthy hands.

Saviour, Messiah, Lord, exalted titles – but found in a tiny child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger? Yes, this is what they found – no wonder that when they blurted out all these names proclaimed to them by the angel, 'all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them' (Lk 2:18). And the shepherds go home, glorifying and praising God.

But Mary... 'but Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart' (Lk 2:19). Now comes the time for Mary to look and watch, to ponder and reflect. Mary is already on a journey with God. She has already heard the words the angel Gabriel spoke to her alone: "You will bear a son and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the *Son of the Most High*, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of *his ancestor David*. ³³He will *reign* over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his *kingdom* there will be no end... the child to be born will be *holy*; he will be called *Son of God*" (Lk 1:31-35). Wondrous and overwhelming words, but then comes confirmation from the shepherds, perhaps bringing the angel's words back to her heart and mind.

Mary ponders and wonders – there will be so much more to her journey yet, still to come will be the cryptic words of Simeon, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Luke 2:34-35)

But not yet – now still the wonder of a new-born baby to name.

Both Mary at the annunciation (Lk 1:31), and Joseph in his 'annunciation' through the angelic visitation in a dream, are instructed to name the child *Jesus*

– the Greek version of the Hebrew *Joshua*, meaning, as Joseph is told, ‘for he will save his people from their sins’ (Mt 1:21).

Over Christmas, we heard that the infant was called Emmanuel – God with us (Mt 1:23). Today we hear he is named Jesus, the Saviour (Mt 1:21, Lk 2:21).

There is so much here for Mary and Joseph to take in, to absorb and come to terms with, to treasure and to ponder in their hearts. That word ‘ponder’ derives from words to do with weight and worth, so Mary estimates the worth of all these wordy titles attributed to her son, their heaviness, their weight, their impress on her and his life and future.

So it can be for us at this time of year, we look forward, we pause on the threshold before we step ‘through January’s open door’ as Shirley Murray’s hymn puts it. Yet unlike the northern hemisphere, many of us here in the south have a January which is in itself a liminal time, a threshold time before the year really gets underway in earnest. I associate January with walks on the beach, or, as I will do this week, a road trip up the new east coast road.

I will be **looking and watching** as I do that, and they may be themes you would like to take through this month as we step back from the year’s routines and have some time to look at the bigger picture of our lives and world. As we seek to discern the signs of the times, **to look and to watch**, very soon we may feel called **to watch and to pray**, as the Taizé chant (Stay with me) puts it.

Watch and pray for our world, for the Church, for our St Luke’s community, for those especially on our hearts.

Next Sunday we will move into the season of Epiphany, we will **look and watch** like the magi for a star, for a sign of the God we seek to accompany us into 2018. Today I want to offer you a star word, a word written on a star shape that you might like to take away with you. It might be a word to look for in your life in 2018, and to watch to see where God is at work in and through you. There’s nothing magic about it, they are all words of things which could be helpful or important to us on our journey. Sometimes when we allow a word to choose us, rather than the other way round, new avenues of our journey with God may open up. So do feel free as you leave today to pick up a ‘star word’ and then look and watch to see what God will do with it and you in 2018.

I want to conclude with some words from T S Eliot’s *Little Gidding*:

“For last year’s words belong to last year’s language
And next year’s words await another voice.” [II]

“What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from...

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time.” [V]