

All Age Talk for New Year's Day: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt." Matthew 2.13

I wonder how many of you were able to stay up until midnight last night to see in the new year?

If you did stay up until midnight you might have sung the song 'Auld Lang Syne'. It's a song that recalls what has happened in the past. 'Auld Lang Syne' means literally 'Old long since', like 'Times gone by'. It's a chance to remember what has happened in the past and to look ahead with friends with hope to the future.

You may not be so familiar with some of the other new year traditions from around the world. I've brought some of these along in this suitcase to show you this morning. This suitcase itself is one of the traditions. In some countries like Colombia, people will carry around an empty suitcase on New Year's Day as a hope that they will have adventures and travel during the coming year.

Here's another of the traditions: Do you know what this is? This is a piece of coal (now a rather treasured gift to give someone!). In Scotland there's a tradition called 'first footing', where the first person to cross the threshold after midnight brings the hope of good luck for the new year. Usually they would hope for a dark haired person to enter first, often accompanying the coal with a bottle to offer a drink. Originally this was water, symbolising the water of life, but for some strange reason this was changed to whisky.

Other countries look forward in hope to the future year in different ways.

Here is an object that's not quite right, but the closest I could find in our own home. It's an old and well-used football, in memory of the great Pele who died recently. A more accurate photo is on your service sheets. People travel from all over the world to Singapore, so they can write their hopes for the new year on these huge spheres. These are then taken out and floated on the Singapore River in their thousands.

And finally, here is another tradition. In Buenos Aires in Argentina they take some of their old documents and shred them and throw them from their windows in a shower of confetti, to symbolise that saying 'Out with the old, in with the new.' A hope that the new year brings a fresh and new start. I can happily shred these old work documents in that hope as well!

It's something we can all relate to, this need to begin the new year with fresh hope.

However, hope often can seem elusive and so difficult to find. The problems of our world do not go away magically overnight on new year's eve and we wake up finding that our world is in need of hope more than ever.

Our gospel reading today reminds us that the nativity story isn't just about Christmas fun and new year resolutions. It's also grounded in the pain and dirt of ordinary life.

In the passage it says: 'An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And so this new family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus begin their new life together as refugees, fleeing their home from the insane and cruel violence Herod is about to unleash on other families.

On your service sheet you'll see a photo of one of the windows beautifully decorated by Sue and Chris Jupp in nearby Talfourd Avenue. Here we have set side by side the two worlds of Mary and Joseph fleeing into Egypt and the life of modern day refugees. We live in a world where millions live the daily reality of being displaced from their homes and fleeing for their lives. The International Rescue Committee states that we have now exceeded a terrible watermark, that over 100 million people have now been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of ongoing conflicts and crises in countries like Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Yemen. People continue to flee in hundreds of thousands each year from tyrants like Herod. In our local churches we've been blessed by welcoming refugees from some of these countries.

Today's story reminds us that Herod is real, not only in Jesus' time but in ours as well. The world of Herod is the world in which Jesus puts our lives back together. The world of Herod is the world in which Jesus reveals God is with us and for us.

There is great darkness in our world and for many of us, in our own lives as well.

But we have a hope that is greater than this darkness. Herod's darkness is not the final reality. Darkness will not prevail.

One of our congregation, Stephen Dilley, shared the poem by Malcolm Guite on your sheets, called Refugee. It's a lovely poem of light overcoming darkness. But there is hope for the immediate future in 2023 as well. Whatever we face this year, we face with a God who knows the pain and horror of being left homeless. And through Christ we have a hope that can overcome the evil that surrounds us.

Whatever 2023 holds for us, we can face it together in the light of Christ's love and guidance. And together we can hold onto the words of the prayer written by Desmond Tutu: Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death. Victory is ours through Him who loves us. Amen.

A very happy and peaceful New Year of hope and love to you and all your family.

Hamish Bruce

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