

Resolutions

©Margaret Joachim

Advent Sunday, 30/11/14

Hallo, everyone at the back. It's good to see you this morning. Not that you haven't been there before. I've just got a new pair of glasses. I'm reminded of a verse from Isaiah (always a good prophet to read in Advent): Peace to you that are far off and to you that are near. Now I can see those of you who are far off! But this is a useful thought in a much wider sense. Almost every year someone gets up into this pulpit and says that Advent Sunday is the start of the new church year. Fair enough. It means we start again on the familiar cycle of worship and festivals. It means (for those of you paying attention) that we begin on the next cycle of Sunday readings (this one is gloriously entitled 'Year B'). It means that it is now less than a month to Christmas. And it means that the flower team gets four Sundays off, and that we won't sing the Gloria or Alleluias again until December 25th.

But what does this 'new year' really mean? What will we learn, or do differently, just because today is the start of the new church year? There is a salutary story of a new young headmaster who is having introductory discussions with each member of staff in turn, and he eventually gets to the longest-serving teacher. He tells him that he will be introducing a lot of changes, and that the teacher will have to adopt new methods and teach different classes. This is met with much harrumphing, and the old teacher splutters: 'How dare you tell me I should do anything differently. I've got thirty years' experience in this school!' 'No,' says the new head, 'You've got one year's experience repeated thirty times.' Many of us have years of experience in this church, and even more years as Christians, but have some of them been the same year repeated lots of times? It takes courage and maturity to branch out from the familiar, develop and extend our worship, our personal prayer life and our spirituality. Have we, as a Christian community, been able to extend our connections and influence across our parish? Have we taken our Christian understanding and approach into the places where we live, work and take our leisure – and has anyone else noticed?

We have, as a community, just taken a big step. Last Thursday we hosted the Night Shelter in the church, and we're doing it again for the next three Thursdays. It's the first time, at least in the seventeen years I've been here, that we've done anything similar. At St. Peter's we pride ourselves on our hospitality, and this is a tremendous way to develop it. We welcomed ten homeless men into the church, gave them dinner, chatted to them, listened to some of their stories, watched over them all night, listened to one of them snoring, gave them breakfast and cleaned up after them. Over a dozen of us worked on this, in three shifts. For once we were able to give a little peace and comfort to people who have been far off, and we shall learn and grow by bringing them nearer. If you'd like to hear more about the experience, talk to anyone who took part. If you'd like to support it but can't volunteer for one of the shifts, talk to Father David or to me. And please pray for the Shelter, the guests, and for all the church people in Ealing who are involved.

A new year means New Year resolutions. Everyone makes theirs in January (and has mostly broken them a few weeks later). We can get a head start on the making (not on the breaking, of course) because our new year starts now. How about a commitment to peace? We certainly need it, not least because there will be a General Election next year. But peace has a much wider scope. True peace is not simply the absence of dispute or war. Peace goes inextricably with love. Somewhere in this there is a resolution for each of us: peace in the family, in the community, across nations. Peace to those who are far off, and to those who are near. And because, as today's gospel reading told us, we do not know when the opportunity will arise, we must always be ready for the moment when our personal commitment to love and peace can make a difference. Keep awake. Be alert. And maybe, because a fresh perspective is always helpful, get a new pair of glasses.