

I heard someone say yesterday, *How quickly time flies!* Three days into the new year, and we are already blaming time for flying faster than we can use it!

Something tells me, 2016 will not be an ordinary year. Globally, there are some important elections which could change the way nations relate to each other. Here at home, we have several political currents which might decide who we will be as a people, what our nation will stand for, and how we relate with our neighbours, both near and far.

While we may agree or disagree about the role of the Church in politics, and the responsibility of Christians to participate the political process, there are changes taking place which affect us: how we worship, how we express our faith, how we reach out and care for the needy and the vulnerable in society, are changing.

We used to think of ourselves as a “Christian nation”, and some are aggressive about retaining this title and all that it implies. For example, we used to consider ourselves keepers of the Word of God, describing the King James Bible as the “Authorised Version”.

When Wycliff Bible translators and the United Bible Societies declare, of 6,918 languages in the world, 513 have complete Bibles, and 2,304 languages have either the New Testament or a portion of the Bible, all translated from original sources including those which have emerged in the 100 years or so, sources like the Dead Sea Scrolls, we are no longer keepers of the “Authorised Version”!

Besides, King James I, is remembered for having **authorised** the translation of the Bible, which when it was completed, was **“appointed to read in all churches”**.

One of the lessons I have learned in the past 40 years, of managing the process of change, is that when change takes place which is not under our control, it is best to retreat to a position where we affirm our basic values: who are we?, what do we believe in?, what do we stand for?, what are our values?, do we have principles which are non-negotiable?

A recent example comes from Volkswagen. When the company found, the fallout from the emissions scandal was getting beyond its control, statements from the boardroom and in the press referred to the company "being responsible and acting responsibly". Unable to control change taking place in its world, the company retreated to speaking about its basic values which underpin the company, and start re-building from there.

The rate of change today, is faster than it has even been. The start of the industrial revolution in the mid-to-late 1700s, paved the way for the social revolution which was the Victorian way of life. After the second world war, change gained a faster pace. A growing middle class, easier access to credit and the desire to live a better life, fuelled innovation and technology, which changed the way we lived our lives.

The church in our community, across our nations, and all over the world, the Church is changing and in the midst of a crisis. A generation is growing up who do not know, nor understand the very basics of the Christian faith; there are people in positions of power, taking decisions how Christians should live their lives, who have no idea of the basics of the Christian faith.

There are plenty of real-life anecdotes, like the one about a man in Oxford who visited a church building on a Sunday to collect something for his partner who works during the week in a creative-arts project run by the church. He arrives as the morning congregation is leaving, recognises the

minister, whom he knows. Surprised, he asks: 'What are all these people doing here? I didn't know churches were open on Sundays!'

Then, there is a generation of Sunday school children, who think baby Jesus was conceived on the first Sunday in Advent; Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem arriving there on the 24th evening, knocking on all possible doors to obtain a room for the night, finally a kindly innkeeper ushered them into a cattle shed where Joseph, a carpenter, fashioned a cradle out of wood lying around, while Mary quietly gave birth to Jesus. After He was born, a group of shepherds arrived, followed by three kings from the east, who left gifts and returned to their homes. The next day, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt as nasty Herod wanted to kill all newborn baby boys.

Nothing could be further from the truth!

It is not news that the church is struggling to forge a new identity, find new idioms and expressions, to learn new vocabulary and speak a new language which is relevant to the people of our times. During such times of change, which seems to be out of our control, we need to go back to the basics of our Christian faith, re-acquaint ourselves with Truth, and rebuild from there.

Jesus was constantly questioned and harassed by the educated elite. Matthew tells us of an incident where one group asked him a convoluted question about the relationship between husband and wife, where according to local custom, upon the death of her husband, the woman married her husband's brother, down the chain of brothers, seven times, therefore in the final analysis, whose wife is she!<sup>1</sup> Jesus makes the point, *You are wrong because you do not know, neither the Scriptures, nor the power of God.*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:23-33

Another group of educated elite standing nearby, who had a legal bent of mind, witnessed the way Jesus demolished the argument of their opponents. So they decided to ask a question they thought would make them shine. *Teacher!* they said. *Of all the commandments in the law (the entire older testament), which is the greatest?*

The question summarised the debate these legal-eagles were engaged in for centuries, about which laws were “light” and which were “weighty”, like the past debate in some churches about “white” lies and “black” lies; a “white” lie may be necessary to save your life, but never indulge in a “black” lie!

Jesus’ response takes them back to basics, to the time they were being formed as a nation after being freed from slavery in Egypt and were taught by Moses<sup>2</sup>,

*These are the commands, decrees, and regulations that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you. You must obey them when you live in the land you are about to enter and occupy, and you and your children and grandchildren must stand in awe of the Lord your God as long as you live. If you obey all his decrees and commands, you will enjoy a long life. Listen closely, Israel, and be careful to obey. Then all will go well with you, and you will have many children in the land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.*

*Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. **And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all you mind.*** Love God with your entire being!

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:1-

Before they could respond, Jesus added, *This is the first and most important commandment; there is another commandment just as important and as significant, which is, **love your neighbour as yourself!***<sup>3</sup>

The **basics of the Christian faith** is a relationship with god, to love Him with all your heart, soul, strength and mind; the **basics of a God-centred way of life** is, love your neighbour as yourself.

If you don't know **how** to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, but desire to do so, ask Him and will teach you. So to about loving your neighbour as yourself; God says, come to me in worship and I will show you how to love to your neighbour, as yourself.

As we embark on the journey of 2016, we don't know what is in store for any of us; but this we know, we can have a relationship with the Living God and His Son the Christ, and through this relationship, the power of the Holy Spirit is set free to work in and through us.

There is a new year's resolution to be made, which can be kept because the One before whom you make the resolution, is faithful and committed to your success.

- make a resolution, a **commitment** to love your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and God is faithful to help you live up to this commitment.
- then, make a resolution, make a **commitment** to love your neighbour, **as yourself**. Let nobody tell you **how**, but ask God and He is faithful to show you how to live this commitment, honouring Him at all times.

**AMEN**

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:39