

Hope for Another Year

On 7th December, I was listening to Women's Hour on Radio 4. When you are in a car driving at 10 am, listening to Radio 4, this is the broadcast!

On this day, Jane Garvey and her guests reflected on the challenges they faced as young girls during Christmas. Samira Ahmed (BBC) was cast as Mary in a school play. When she realised it was a "silent" part, she wanted to be Angel Gabriel who had something to say!

Someone wrote to the programme, *I was a narrator - only pretty girls got to be Mary and the Angel Gabriel.*

Another mentioned, *We were Jewish and you could not be Mary if you were Jewish, **and** you had to be blond !*

Other experiences sent in:

- Worst thing to be is, "the sheep"! They are smelly
- Now, I don't know how this got into the Christmas story, but someone wrote in saying, *My daughter played Mary and slapped Joseph when he tried to kiss her!*
- A feminist fashionista noted, *Mary was the first woman to have a signature colour - BLUE !*

Jane Garvey closed this section with the comment, *It seems our adult role is determined by the first acting role we had in the school nativity play.*

Christmas is a challenging time, not only for young girls, but for anyone planning to tell the story everybody knows, and wants to hear again, but in a fresh, engaging manner!

Through Advent 2016, we examined the lives of refugees today, against which we sought to better understand, the story of Christmas.

Jesus' birth made refugees of his parents, Joseph and Mary. They were compelled to journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to satisfy the official

census, and sometime after Jesus' birth, they fled as refugees, to Egypt to avoid mad Herod's infanticide.

Today, we look at the final narrative which connects Jesus' birth with his upbringing, leading to adulthood.

Matthew tells us, ... *read Matthew 2:19-23*

Returning home can be a traumatic experience. Old enemies might still be lurking, nursing their grievance, waiting for an opportunity to get even. Changes may have taken place, some for the better, others for worse. Not only physical changes, but changes in the hearts, and attitudes of people we knew. The longer time since we last saw them, greater the change!

Omar, from West Africa experienced this his return. During the 12 months he was away, tribal infighting increased and engulfed the capital city. Although he had not seen his wife and two sons for one year, but spoke with them weekly, he later admitted, during the flight home, the thought crossed his mind whether time and distance had changed his relationship with his wife and children, and theirs with him.

Nathan had a different experience. Whilst he could not return home, "home" followed him and haunted him on the streets of London!

The journey returning home, is full of mixed emotions. It is fraught with fear and uncertainty, **and** filled with hope and visions of a future.

As we transition one year to the next, our Christian understanding of life, as described in the Bible, is that we are another year closer in our journey home, to the place Jesus said He was preparing for us.¹ Our journey back to our Father's home, is not dissimilar to a refugee's journey home, it is fraught with uncertainty and fear on the one hand, **and** also full of hope and the promise of a future.

¹ John 14:2-3

The question before us at the start of this new year is, will we journey through the year, frozen by fear, paralysed by uncertainty, and intimidated by doubt, or will we journey through the year in anticipation and with hope, looking forward to God's guiding hand, His care and protection as we journey to our future home Jesus promised, ... *I am going to prepare a place for you. When everything is ready, I will come and fetch you, so that you will always be with me, where I am*².

This tension between the problems and dangers facing us here and now, and God's promise of a better future, is not new. Marian read from the book of Ecclesiastes, the 3,000 year old book of Solomon's wisdom, which presents the same contrasts and tensions.

Now hear this from a 150 years ago.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."³

These are the opening lines of the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens', *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which Dickens skilfully reflects the novel's central tension between opposing pairs, the ebbs and flows in the lives of people and in society during his time.

This is the reality of life: do we focus on all that is negative, or do we indulge our senses on the positive, filled with real, achievable hope?

As 2017 opens its door and beckons us to step in, we look down at the row of 12 months with markers on significant dates, anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, and special events. How shall we approach each

² John 14:2-3

³ Opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

marker? Some approach it with foreboding and dread, others with positive, hope-filled anticipation.

A week ago we celebrated Christmas. The festive, coloured decorations and lights remind us, the birth of Jesus is the dawn of a new day, a new age. Jesus comes to correct our perspective on life, to change how we view life which has been distorted over thousands of years: God is not concerned with religion; God wants a relationship, the relationship lost by an act of disobedience.

Jesus comes to remind us, we are not able, by our own strength and wisdom, to overcome Satan's agenda of separating us from God and continuing to fracture our relationship with God. Jesus comes to remind us, in our weakness is God's strength. We only need ask, and it is ours.

Jesus also reminds us, it is God who comes to us - ***Emmanuel*** - in the person of His Son, Jesus our Christ, to change, and continue to change ***us***, to prepare us, to be fit for life in His Kingdom.

As we journey home, to the place Jesus is preparing for us, we could be like Jane Garvey's guests on "Woman's Hour" and lament we have been given a bad hand, it's not what we wanted, we don't like it and will not be a part of it; or write our own script and make our own ending, like Mary slapping Joseph when he tried to kiss her; or be totally distracted by Mary as an icon of contemporary fashion.

Or, we could be like Nathan or Omar, who recognised their lives and times are in God's hands, that when things don't go the way they planned or expected, despite difficulties, struggles and problems, God who sent His Son to be one of us, to die for us and redeem us by conquering death, has not dumped, deserted or ditched us. He cares for us; He has done His part by coming to us as His Son. He is now waiting for us to call on Him, to admit our weakness, our inability to solve our own problems, and invite Him to take control over our lives and direct us home.

This is our challenge for this year as we continue our journey back home: will we place our absolute trust in God to care, provide and guide us through the year?

Joseph's plan was to return to Nazareth sometime after Jesus birth, when Mary had recuperated the ordeal of childbirth, the baby Jesus was more manageable. Herod changed his plan. He, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt.

At God's appointed time, He directed Joseph to journey home. Joseph trusted God's every direction; so what stops us living our lives, like Joseph lived his?

AMEN.