

Sunday 3 January 2021

New Year

Sovereign God,

we come to worship you,
setting aside these few moments
to consecrate ourselves afresh to your service,
to remind ourselves of your constant presence,
and to learn more of your love.
As we draw near to you, draw near to us.

As I come into God's presence, I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 66:1-4, 16

- ¹ Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
- ² sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise.
- ³ Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!
Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.
- ⁴ All the earth worships you;
they sing praises to you,
sing praises to your name."
- ¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for me.

As we say goodbye to 2020 and welcome in the new year most of us find ourselves in a place we never imagined this time last year. There is reason to hope that things will be different in 2021: new and improved vaccines against the coronavirus will be more widely available, the political situation may be more stable, lessons learnt over the past year will change the way we approach a wide variety of issues.

When Israel stood on the border, poised to enter the promised land, with high hopes of a better future, Moses had a warning for them. "You are going to be blessed in the days ahead," he told them, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.'" (see Deuteronomy 8:17) As an antidote to future failures Israel looked back to the past, reminding themselves of a time when they had to rely on God, and God alone.

⁴The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not."

¹³In the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. (Exodus 16:4, 13-15)

So important was this memory that a portion of manna was sealed in a jar and 'placed before the Lord, to be kept throughout the generations' (33). The story of the bread from heaven reminded God's people of so many things: God's provision in the wilderness, the centrality of obedience and trust in Israel's relationship with God, the unending and unconditional faithfulness of God, and much more. Remembering and retelling the stories of Israel's encounters with God was at the heart of Israel's faith. So much of what follows in the history of God's people is built around these memories, not only in their retelling but also in their interpretation and reinterpretation. Centuries later people were still drawing on this very story (see Psalm 95, Amos 5 and John 6).

Remembering and retelling remains essential to our walk with God today. As we gather around the Lord's Table, we remind ourselves of the historic foundations of our faith, taking bread and wine in accordance with Jesus' instruction to do this 'in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19). It is important to look back, even, and perhaps especially, to difficult days, like this past year, and find, remember and retell the stories of our present walk with God in the light of those older memories. And such remembering not only helps us make sense of our experiences, encouraging our faith in strange and difficult times, it also gives us a story to share with those as yet outside that faith, and so be a calming, healing, strengthening presence in the turmoil around us.

Remembering, however, comes with a warning. The purpose of remembering the past is to give encouragement for today and hope for tomorrow, not to stifle us or lock us into dead tradition. Isaiah reminds the exiles that they are not to dwell on the past or think of the past as the template for the future, for God is always making all things new (Isaiah 43:18f; Revelation 21:5).

So we pause and pray, looking back at God's mighty deeds in generations long past, and over the past year to those times when God has seemed distant as well as when he has been close. With those memories guiding our thoughts and prayers we look to the coming year and the new thing God will do in 2021.

Pause and pray

All this points us to Jesus. It was not Moses who gave bread to the Israelites in the desert, it was God. It was not through the strength or piety of past men and women that faith was spread and the church grew, it was God working among his people. It is still God, working through Jesus, who is the fulfilment of the past and the hope for the future.

[Jesus said,] "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:47-51)

May the world continue to surprise us,
love continue to astonish us,
life continue to captivate us,
faith continue to sustain us,
and may God go with us always,
now and for evermore.
Amen.