

My question at the start of this new year is: are we on-board with what people openly associated with Jesus can expect?

The experience of Mary and Joseph was unique – nobody before or since has been asked of God to bring a child into the world through a miraculous conception; however, their story serves as a spiritual metaphor for our lives as Christians today, and at the start of a new year.

Matthew chapter 2 explains Jesus has been born and is firmly in the care of Mary and Joseph. Similarly, Jesus is in our care, so to speak, so that the world through us might be invited to draw near to God. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:

‘.. in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself..’

Let’s extend the use of metaphors.

For example, using the imagery Jesus chose for Nicodemus, **to be born again** is to invite and welcome Jesus into the centre of our life; so much so, wrote St Paul, our bodies become **temples of the HS**; and, as leaders in the way and representatives of the truth, we are to

‘... **guard (what has been) entrusted...to us ...**’

(1 Tim.6v20).

Many of us have entered 2021 with much less confidence than we felt a year ago. The pandemic seems to have changed almost everything; but if it has dislodged an undue self-reliance or an excessive independence, that may prove a good outcome.

When Mary and Joseph chose to trust God, they risked everything to provide a family and home for Jesus. In so doing they were modelling and reflecting the nature of God, even if they did not realise it at the time.

At the heart of the incarnation God placed himself, in Jesus, in our care; the word became flesh, inviting all of humanity to receive him. The Lord chose to go about the task of saving us by partnering with us. God had elected to place some dependency on us.

Marriage is another strong metaphor describing the relationship God wants with us through faith in Jesus. His preference is that we stick with Him ... *for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health ...* a relationship of mutual interdependence and support on a foundation of love.

In the middle of December, I conducted the funeral for a longstanding family friend. In the eulogy we were

reminded how the deceased had first met the man who became her husband. They bumped into each other at a local YMCA dance one evening not long after the end of WW2. Before heading home, he said to her:

“I’ll be here next week, will you?”

A relationship sparked by connection and togetherness.

The transfer of symbols is not a vain attempt to make God responsible for life’s difficulties; but it is a reminder that through Jesus He promised never to leave or forsake us, and to be with us in all we face.

As we lay a platform for 2021, let’s encourage one another with what it means to be those known as Jesus’ life-partners today; and what faith-driven expectancy means for the year ahead.

a) Expect the promises and purposes of God found in Scripture to be worked out in us.

Prophets had announced centuries earlier the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Luke chapter 2 records the Caesar of the day in Rome demanded a census requiring his Jewish subjects return to their tribal home to complete the census return. By this means the Holy family were in the

right place at the right time; thereby fulfilling what had been revealed through the prophet Micah. 2000 and more years later God continues to work with the weave and detail of our lives in equally practical ways.

I remember at the beginning of 1997 saying to Annie that - with my time as curate in Tamworth coming to an end – we ought to think and pray about where we might go next. We did that. A few weeks later, and having prayed about the matter, we agreed we would ask God to offer us a parish to serve that would stretch us, a home that would serve us and the children well for the next season and that we would be within 50 miles of where our oldest 2 were already settled at school.

In November that year we moved to Stoke-on-Trent to a parish needing healing and renewal, to live in a vicarage we knew would work for us, 44 miles from the boys' school. We felt God had partnered with our thinking and delivered on his promises to lead and guide in way personal and significant to us.

2021 can be the year when – as God made himself personal to us in Jesus – we make our faith personal to Him and see new practical

consequences we may not have experienced previously.

b) Expect some unexpected people to join us.

The Magi were Gentiles not Jews. Somehow, they discerned God doing a new thing; through a child born to be King of the Jews.

They were probably not the first visitors, but left their mark on human history, were able to offer gifts and return home with a testimony of having found God's Saviour.

It is very easy to fall into a way of thinking with the assumption the Christian church is an organisation run for the few and increasingly an anachronism on the landscape. Such thinking does not originate in heaven or from God. John 3v16 reminds us:

'For God so loved the WORLD that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

One of the consequences of church doors being open erratically and infrequently in the last year has been to highlight the church is first a people before the people need buildings.

We host God's presence and represent Him 24/7, whether inside our buildings or elsewhere; as we do the impact can be attractive, sometimes contagious.

We should expect people to want to find the Saviour, for us to be their hosts and guides, and not be fazed when they do not assume or recognise patterns in worship or fellowship we have taken for granted.

2021 can be a year when we celebrate a new breadth of people being added to the churches and God's kingdom.

c) Expect some to feel threatened, upset and wanting to maintain the status quo.

Many communities have their local 'Herod'. Such people prefer power structures, into which they have been born and may have prospered, to remain in place.

Down the centuries the church has not been immune to the activity of such people. Thankfully only a few have resorted to the sort of desperate measures such as the genocide of young children

we read of at the time Jesus was born. But desperate people are known to resort to desperate measures.

Jesus later would say, in Matthew 5v8:
'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.'

This helps us understand why the spiritual gift of discernment matters so much – so that we can see what is really happening and avoid being misled by otherwise beguiling behaviour.

Please notice an implicit warning from the cameo introduction to Herod and his fear-driven antics.

He was not lacking access to biblical learning, wisdom and counsel. But, in contrast to the Magi, Herod sought to use it to develop and terrible plan.

In truth his local priests and spiritual teachers were not much better. They did nothing with what they were able to share; they neither sought to correct Herod nor pursue and protect Jesus with what they should have known.

In John 8v32 Jesus sought to refine and sharpen the understanding some who were believing in him. He exhorts them to hold to his teaching and as a result:

‘... you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’

Jesus did not say the truth would set us free; it is the truth we KNOW that makes the difference; the word translated as KNOW really means intimately acquainted with so that it affects how we live.

d) Expect our understanding of worship to go to a new level.

The Magi knew it was not enough to appreciate from a distance God was doing a new and important thing. They needed to make a journey of discovery so that they would have news to take home and share with others.

The Magi refuse to settle for getting so near but not having arrived; they would not give up until they reached the place where the child was to be found.

The Magi express worship that is demonstrative, intimate and in full view of Mary and Joseph.

The word translated for us 'worship' in Matthew 2 is used for 'Kiss' in other places ... something that is up close.

Social distancing is essential for our safety with one another; but we have nothing to fear from getting up close and personal with the Lord.

The worship of the Magi was not about the display of their gifts; they were what they left to serve and honour the Holy Family not the reason they felt the need to travel so far.

Happy new year to everyone and may the God of surprises far exceed our modest wishes throughout the rest of 2021. Let's begin with the right and balanced expectations.