

The First Sunday after Christmas
1st January 2017
St David's and St Michael's

A local tyrant is sustained in power as the puppet of a dominant foreign army. Brutal repression followed by an uneasy ceasefire is presented as peacemaking, persuading nobody. Innocent children become victims as opposition is ruthlessly destroyed. A family seeks refuge in another country where they are not sure of a warm welcome.

Is this the story of King Herod, the Roman army and the Holy Family? Or is it the story of President Assad, the Russian airforce and the children of Aleppo? Are we in Bethlehem or across the Golan Heights in Syria?

Are we on the verge of a new year in the 21st century? Or two millennia ago on the verge of a new era in human history? The scale of weaponry has changed, the brutality is the same. The names of the victims and the names of the powerful have changed. The names of the ruthless and the helpless are different but their roles are as old as time. Seeking power and exercising power are a constant factor in human history. More than that, they are the dominant narrative from the caveman to the nuclear arsenal.

One big difference now is that the massacre of the innocents in Aleppo is taking place under the eyes of a watching world. Here we are 2807.3 miles away, painfully aware of the suffering of children in Aleppo. Painfully aware of our complete inability to do anything about it. It's only the exceptional circumstances of Jesus' birth that earns the massacre at Bethlehem any more than a footnote in history.

Our generation has a unique perspective on world events. Armenia, Auschwitz, Rwanda, Srebrenice have become almost household names, as Aleppo is now. We have said "Never again" and really meant it, but still it happens. So what hope is there at the beginning of a new year that things might be any different in the future?

Meanwhile we have our own lives to be negotiated. Work, family, personal issues, illness, change and loss. We try to live honourably in the midst of complexity, to follow a Christian way. But the sheer intractability and scale of the suffering in Syria leaves us bemused. We already have enough to deal with, and only so much compassion. No wonder we are tempted to put it out of our minds, to shield ourselves from too much reality.

The Roman god Janus gives his name to the month of January. He is the spirit of doorways and beginnings, and he is depicted on coins and statues with two faces, sometimes an

older bearded figure alongside a clean-shaven youth. He looks both ways, back into the past and forward into the future.

As we look back into the past and forward into the future, all of us have to face the truth. Whatever our hopes for the world, it remains in many ways a cruel place.

Whatever our hopes for ourselves in the coming year, we know we'll still be the same people, same old faults and hangups. Same capacity to mess up, given half a chance.

It's a New Year but the same problems persist. How do we keep on hoping that things can be different? How do we trust that there is a loving God still present in the world and in ourselves?

Well let's think of two familiar images from this time of year. The first one is birth. Jesus was born in the dark of night, in the dark of history, in the dark of human cruelty. Maybe this is always the pattern. God coming among us in a new way when we are most in the dark, fumbling, despairing, unable to see the road ahead. I don't present this as an answer, but as a hope. A new born child may be the most powerless creature there is, but it brings hope. God's answer to worldly power is a baby. Let's dwell on that in this Christmas season.

The great medieval theologian Meister Eckhart asked this question. "Of what use is it that Christ was born at Bethlehem, if he is not born in the ground of our being?"

The next image I mentioned just now. The door. Picture yourself at this new year, standing at the door and knocking. Have the courage to turn the handle. You will find the door has been opened from the other side, and there is someone standing with his hand held out. Glancing behind you see the dusty room of your past. Ahead is an invitation to hope....

Hope is not a blind optimism, ignoring the facts. But a trust that something new can be born in you and in the world. A trust that the one who was born at Christmas still shows a different way to go. The way of compassion.

May the darkness of the world not leave you bitter or despairing or cynical, but still caring deeply about the suffering of the world. May 2017 find us still looking with God's eyes of compassion. May the new year find us still weeping with God's tears at the pain of his children. May we continue to be people who care.

