

## Happy New Year!

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Well it seems Christmas is over. The nativity scenes are disappearing. The Christmas lights are mostly down and because we celebrate Christmas at the end of our calendar year, it has become a conclusion to the year and a wonderful way to end another 12 month chapter in our life's journey.

However, I overheard someone the other day saying to a friend how glad they were that Christmas was over! It sounded like something she had endured more than enjoyed and she was glad the end had come. I found that that not only sad, but also indicative of the way so many people view Christmas and miss the miraculous truth within this timeless story.

The entire Christmas message, if told correctly, is actually a story of beginnings – not endings. It's a story full of promise for the future, not a bookend at the end of the shelf we call 'a year'. But the world is telling us, and most Churches are telling us that Christmas is over for another season. Sadly, that may be true – but that should never be the case.

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the wise men are safely back home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks ... then the *true* work of Christmas actually begins:

- ... to find the lost,
- ... to heal the broken,
- ... to feed the hungry,
- ... to release the prisoner,
- ... to rebuild the nations,
- ... to bring peace among the people,
- ... to make music in our heart
- ... to worship our Messiah and King
- ... to embrace His mission to bring heaven to earth and advance His kingdom every day!

Christmas is never 'over' and it certainly does not signal the end of a year or the end of a chapter or the end of anything ... it is **always** the beginning. Now I know that 'Merry Christmas' is followed very closely by 'Happy New Year' and so we make *that* the beginning. But January 1st is just a date on the calendar.

The truth is this: unless the reality, power and wonder beneath the tinsel, bells and carols of Christmas is a daily reality, a present power, an embraced truth in our lives today ... this year will be no happier than the last. We can gather up all the 'happy new year' blessings we like and they will mean nothing, produce nothing and just make us a little more skeptical about that phrase next year!

Unless Jesus has truly come to more than a manger in Bethlehem ... unless the blessed Child in that nativity scene is also the crucified, risen and reigning Lord in our lives, our Church, our families and our world, then Christmas really *is* over and any new year 'happiness' we experience will only be worldly and superficial.

This past year has been a journey for us all. For some, the road has brought great joy. For others, pain – unspeakable pain. We look around and we see a broken world. As we gaze at the chaos around us our hearts might beat to the rhythm of uncertainty. Our future seems anything but secure. We wonder if hope is losing. So as this new year gets going, what do we do if we want it to truly be a happy new year? We do the only thing we can do. We do the only thing we should do. *We turn our eyes upon Jesus and look full in His wonderful face as the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace!*

I cannot imagine how many millions of times the words ‘Happy New Year’ have been uttered across this dysfunctional world over the past two weeks. But is a ‘happy new year’ just a vain hope, or even a reasonable expectation? A happy new year is something we all hope for, wish for, pray for - but a happy new year can so quickly become a hard year, a broken year, a sick year, a painful year, a messy year, an exhausting year, a stressful year and even a failed year.

All too often our hopes and dreams for a new year are de-railed by the circumstances of that year as they unfold, many of which we have absolutely no control over. Well therein lies our problem. Trying to control the circumstances of life is like trying to compete against a gusty wind with a leaf-blower. Some days the wind is behind us and life is easy. Other days our pathetic leaf blower is just no match for a head-wind. Forces beyond our control can rise up without notice. If we truly want this to be a happy new year, then we have to look beyond our circumstances in our pursuit of true happiness.

As this new year rolls out before us like a blank canvas, we need to be praying for *true* happiness – the kind of happiness that only comes from faith in an all-knowing, all-powerful God. The news broadcasts will continue to bombard us. Evil and loss and pain and suffering and injustice will still dominate the landscape in this new year. The date on a calendar means nothing to those forces which work against us every day – they are constant – some will even increase in 2018.

What needs to change for us to have a truly happy new year, is us. Our attitude, our focus, our faith, our trust in a God Whose love and grace is always greater than our sin and failure or the sin and failure of others which impact us. A God Who is willing and able to do exceedingly, abundantly more than all we ask or even imagine. A God Whose heart breaks over the injustice, oppression, evil, sickness and death we have just endured in 2017 – but a God Whose power is made perfect in our weakness and in Whom we have hope, redemption and eternal life.

So yet again, as I do week after week after week in this very place, I need to point you to the only place where happy new years are dispensed – Jesus Christ. You have a choice as this new year unfolds, it’s the same choice you have every day: you can choose to move towards God and His kingdom purposes or you can move away from Him. There is no in between. That is the only New Years Resolution you need to make: *“In 2018, I choose to embrace God and His kingdom more personally, more intentionally and more completely.”*

Throw away all your other resolutions – none of them will amount to anything anyway, unless this resolution is your highest priority. For as you draw near to Him, He will draw near to you. As that happens, everything else will come into focus and whether this is a problem-free year or a crisis-filled year for you, the only thing that really matters is you and God, side by side, as you allow Him to transform you more and more into the image of His Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Millions of Christians are crying out to God right now across the world and asking Him to reveal His will for their lives in this new year. What a tragic waste of energy – when He has already answered that prayer over and over and over again.

His will for us is the same as it has been all our lives: **God wants us to be transformed by the renewing of our mind as we become more and more conformed to the image of His Son, our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.** All the rest is open to negotiation: Where you live, who you marry, what career you choose, what house or car you buy, what Church fellowship you commit to, what friends you choose, what ministries you connect to and minister through. Where you go for holidays this year. Who you visit and spend time with. Of course God cares about all that stuff and by all means talk to him about it ... but the essence of God's will for us has nothing do with any of those things. It is all about who we are in relation to Him. He wants us to do all those things in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. He wants us to reflect Jesus in all areas of our lives. God's will for you this year is the same as His will for you last year – He wants you to live and move and have your very being in Christ. Everything else will flow from that.

What is God's will for you in 2018? Jesus answered that question over 2000 years ago when He told us to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will then follow on and flow out of our strengthening walk with God, through Christ. Now at times, being in Christ will take you to the mountain top of ecstasy and joy and wonder - where you feel like you can reach out and touch God Himself. At other times being in Christ will take you deep into the darkness of fallen humanity where sickness, death, betrayal, despair and suffering are the only things you can see on the menu of life. But whether you are on the mountain or in the valley is not the real issue – what's important is whether you are in that place with Christ, in Christ and for Christ.

*That* is the key issue. That is the *only* issue. *That* will be an indicator of whether you are fulfilling the will of God and that will be the source of true happiness, which comes in spite of our circumstances. *This* is how we live the Christmas Story 365 days a year. This is how we make sure 'happy new year' is far more than a platitude. This is how the incarnation – God entering humanity – moves from a theological principle to a daily, empowering reality. Jesus, the man, our brother, the Carpenter from Nazareth, the human just like you and me ... showed us a very long time ago how we should live and how we can make every year our year – lived for good and for God.

In John 5:19, we read where Jesus said the most amazing and life-defining thing about His ministry and life and, by extension, your life and mine today. He said, *"I only do what I see the Father doing."* Every day of His life and ministry, He was led by the Spirit into whatever situation God the Father determined and was active in at that time. This moment by moment commitment to only do what the Father was doing led Jesus to some amazing mountain-tops:

- > the feeding of the five thousand
- > the mount of transfiguration
- > the raising from the dead of his friend Lazarus and Jairus' daughter
- > and who can forget that Palm Sunday celebration with hundreds of thousands of people lining the streets crying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

But this commitment of Jesus to only do what the Father was doing also took Him into some awful valleys:

- > that battle with Satan in the wilderness
- > the oppression of the Pharisees
- > the betrayal of a friend
- > being disowned by an even closer friend
- > and what could be worse than the agony of Gethsemane, and the horror and pain of Calvary?

Well, let me tell you what could be worse – Jesus not following the will of the Father into the depths of those valleys – *that* would have been worse!

Only doing what He saw the Father doing and only speaking the words the Father gave Him to speak, led Jesus into the best and the worst circumstances of life as a human being and through His commitment to follow His Father into hell itself, if needed, Jesus brought victory and freedom and eternal life to billions of people, including you and me.

So when I wish you all a happy new year, *this* is what I am wishing for you. That you will face whatever this year dishes out to you with faith, with confidence and with the same determination that Jesus had to only do what the Father is doing – whether that places you on a mountain or in a valley or both this year - won't ultimately matter. As you press into the heart and purposes of God, your attitude to and your ability to cope with the circumstances of life will be what changes for you this year – and then ... then there is no limit to what God can do for you, in you and through you, as you let Him.

Let me pray with you and for you now:

*Gracious and loving God, we pray that You would grant us a truly happy new year - not by shielding us from all sorrow and pain, but by strengthening our faith in You so we can bear whatever may come our way; not by making our path easy, but by making us sturdy enough to travel any path this year will set before us; not by taking hardships from us, but by removing all trace of fear from our hearts; not by granting us unbroken sunshine, but by teaching us how to let Your Son, our Lord, shine in us every day – even, and especially in the shadows and the times of darkness. Lord God, remind us again as this new year unfolds before us that true happiness is never found or lost in the circumstances of life. If we truly hope that 2018 will be a happy new year – then help us to stop trying to control our circumstances, or run from them, or scream at them, or even rejoice in them. Help us to simply be still and know that You are God; You are good; we have been bought with a price.*

*You called us to be Your children before the foundation of the earth, and whatever this year throws at us, You will catch it all and build something precious, something unique, something wonderful – for us, in us and through us! May we let your Spirit remind us of the truth – that nothing, nothing at all will change Your love, your mercy, your forgiveness and your amazing grace towards us - each and every year!*

*And Lord, show us the faces of all those people to whom we have wished a 'Happy New Year' already this week. Then bring us to our knees in prayer for each and every one of them in the days and months ahead, as we pray that they will find a new depth and reality in their relationship with You, for unless they do – unless Jesus is more real and more present for them this year than last year ... then our 'happy new year' was just a meaningless, superficial platitude – a fingers-crossed, childish wish upon a star – a customary greeting which we know has no power to deliver any change in person's life.*

*So Lord, grant us the gift of faith to believe that as we lean more into Jesus, as we live and move and have our very being more in Jesus; as we relate to those around us more through Jesus ... then this year will truly be a happy new year in the kingdom of God ... and we will truly make this year our year. Not one which just rolls over us as we helplessly face whatever comes.*

*This year can be a year when we truly take You at Your word and seize the day – every day - and make each one count for You! We pray this bold prayer in and through the name above all names, Jesus. AMEN! Which means: **May it be so!***