

A Message from the Rector . . .

In the *Stay in Touch* section of the Sydney Morning Herald last week, one Sacha Molitorisz drew attention to the fact that New Year resolutions go back to ancient Rome. Janus, god of beginnings, possessed the uncanny ability to look back to the past and look forward to the future. To quote - "*In Rome Janus was the symbol for resolutions, which mostly meant seeking forgiveness from enemies and exchanging gifts with friends. He's the bloke who gave us January, month of fresh starts, unbridled optimism and blood-curdling hangovers.*" The author, who had his ear to the ground, was collecting the best resolutions he'd heard. Among these he quoted the rather depressing one - "*Realize this whole stinking mess of a world is pretty much on its last legs, so drink up.*"

That comment sounds appallingly pessimistic, and hardly the stuff to inspire you to experience a Happy New Year. It seems we have moved significantly away from Janus' emphasis on 'fresh starts' and 'unbridled optimism'. Since Sunday I have had to counsel two people caught up in situations which might be akin to despair, even hopelessness. It struck me that the experience of many people is far from 'the good life,' and that exhortations 'Not to worry' and 'Be happy.' can sometimes fall on deaf ears. When despair and a spirit of hopelessness overtake us we are in very deep trouble.

How far this is from the spirit of the Bible where God is described as "The God of all hope." (Romans 15:13) When things start to go wrong in our lives or when people behave badly towards us, how easy it is to retreat into a negative frame of mind. We can begin to adopt destructive self-talk and quickly find ourselves dragged down into a spirit of helplessness and hopelessness. That godly man Job in the Old Testament, who experienced more than his fair share of suffering, had a very different attitude. When passing through the blackest period in his life when he had lost all his family and possessions and might have succumbed to the temptation 'to curse God and die,' listen to what he says - "*Though he slay me yet will I hope in him. I will surely defend my ways to his face. Indeed this will turn out to my deliverance.*" (Job 13:15-16)

As I look around at the extent of hopelessness in our community, I become more than ever convinced that people need to discover 'the God of all hope.' One of the letters in the New Testament, First Peter, is sometimes called 'The Epistle of Hope.' It is saturated with expressions of hope, even though the recipients were going through suffering and persecution. But how do we get people to consider this afresh, when many have given up on Christianity as unworkable or too difficult? When people have dismissed Christianity (or think they have) as offering them no help, how do you make progress in helping them make the first step.

James Engle and Wilbert Norton wrote a book some years ago called '*What's gone wrong with the harvest?*' The book paints a picture of the church like a piece of harvesting machinery which has ceased to be able to move into the harvest field. Instead of communicating effectively with those outside the church, a huge gulf has appeared between the church and the world. In the book they suggest that what is required is a new understanding of how to reach people with the good news. Today, an individual needs to pass through a series of steps before they are even close to a 'decision to act.' Even though they might have heard something of the Christian message, they continue to reject it until they reach a point of repentance and a willingness to put their faith and trust in Jesus. The first goal that Engel and Norton suggest that we have to work towards with our hearers is 'Awareness a Supreme Being' even if there is no effective knowledge of the Gospel. Concerned Christians will want to remember that 'proclamation and persuasion' are the key activities we must engage in (along with earnest prayer) if we want to see our friends and family come to faith in Christ. They say today that today most secular people will need to have the Christian message explained to them on average 4.5 times before they come even close to making a commitment to Christ. That means we need to be patient and purposeful too.

But as the old song puts it - 'People need the Lord,' and we must continue to have confidence in the Gospel, and hold out the Word of life to them. The world is slowly awakening to the fact that unimpeded materialism and economic growth carry with them the deadly price of environmental pollution, depletion of natural resources, and debilitating effects on the individual. War, terrorism, and the prospect of nuclear annihilation are a never-ending threat. What is the hope? Is there any answer?

More than ever people need 'a place to stand' in this troubled world. While many might lapse into despair in this situation, the message Jesus brings is one of eternal hope. "*Take courage; I have overcome the world.*" (John 16:33) "*If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.*" (John 7:37) "*God so loved the world that he gave his Only Son...*" (John 3:16) How much we need to be agents of hope being confident in Christ and confident in his Gospel.

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