

Hope for 2017

2016 was certainly an eventful year. We may think that is the case with most years but the year that has just passed seemed to be more challenging than usual.

The situation in Syria, Iraq and other areas of conflict appeared to get increasingly worse, despite temporary ceasefires and the retaking of areas from so-called Islamic State and others who commit acts of unspeakable cruelty and disregard for human life. That is not to mention the terrorist attacks nearer to home in France, Germany, Turkey and elsewhere.

There were natural disasters too, such as the earthquakes in central Italy. And then there were the major political surprises, in particular the results of the EU referendum in this country and of the presidential election in the United States. I could go on.

Many of these events have resulted in continuing uncertainty and apprehension in this new year of 2017. Will things get better, or will they get worse, we may well ask. Will the doom and gloom continue, or are there any signs of hope?

Today is the feast of the Epiphany, though we shall be celebrating it more fully on Sunday. At Epiphany we commemorate and give thanks for the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. That vulnerable baby born in Bethlehem was, we believe, God's incarnate Son, God's gift to the world to save humanity, to liberate humanity from sin and death. That gift was not just to one group of chosen people but to all people throughout the world.

The world into which Jesus was born was a cruel and dangerous one, not unlike our own. His witness and ministry was to lead not to earthly glory but to a painful and humiliating death on a cross. And yet the cross led to the resurrection, to victory over sin and death.

The underlying message of the Christian Gospel is one of hope. As St Paul reminds us in our reading just now (Romans 5.1-5) to follow Christ may well entail sharing in his suffering and pain. Yet far from defeating us, suffering can lead to endurance, to what St Paul calls character, and in turn to hope.

Just as through the wise men, foreigners from the east, the incarnate Christ was made known to the wider world, so we are called to share with others our faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are also called to share our hope. Despite all the many signs to the contrary we trust in God, in his absolute goodness, justice, mercy and love.

At the start of this new year let take to heart that hope for ourselves, and through our words and our actions make known that hope to others.

6 January 2017
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