

New Year: Looking Back, Looking Forward - 8th January 2023

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 January 2023

Preacher: Ruth Edmonds

[0 : 00] So, it's 2023, and in this church there's a tradition that on the first Sunday back, you have to do a little bit of spiritual work. So I'm sorry about that, but I understand that that's the tradition I was told.

So New Year's, lots of people come up with lots of times where they look back and they think, how has the last year changed me? Who have I become? Am I going in the direction I want to? And you can see some people who get their planners out and they form this huge thing where they look back and they think, am I as fit as I want to be? Am I as tall as I want to be? Am I where I want to be in my career?

This isn't quite what we're going to do today, so be pleased. But I think it can be very tempting to start to think, how can I perfect myself in the next year?

How can I make myself into an endless self-improvement project which isn't going anywhere? And I think that is a temptation in society. You have all these people who think, what can I do to make my life better?

[1 : 05] What can I do to improve myself? And I think sometimes that's helpful because sometimes it's helpful to look back and think, oh, this isn't where I want to be. This isn't who I want to be.

And sometimes, you know, we've all been there. I mean, I've been one who has sometimes had the New Year's resolutions of horrendous fitness crazes as much as anyone. So who is going to get super fit this year?

Let's see a ray of hands. I mean, Julia, I don't think that you could be described as not super fit now. So I think that while you may have an ambition to run even more marathons, the truth is that we know that you can already.

So we're already very impressed by that. Has anyone got any other good New Year's resolutions this year? Oh, we've got one over here from Don. Very simple.

Be kinder. Oh, that's a lovely one. And has everyone else given up on their New Year's resolutions already? I guess it is the 8th of January, so we might be coming to this just a tiny bit late.

[2 : 11] But in this church, we take the first Sunday back and we use it as a chance to look back spiritually, which I think can be quite helpful. So it's a way of looking back at who you've become in terms of your relationship with God, in terms of your relationship with other people.

In terms of the habits that make your prayer life happen or the big events that spark it into life. So we're going to take some time to look at that.

You've got the pens and paper. Do use them if you'd like to. You could also talk in small groups. We're going to do this gradually. Or you might decide you don't want to talk to anyone about this, which is totally fine too.

That would be where I would be at. So I would be. But I'm going to talk it out from the front. So you're all going to be subjected to my ramblings. So it's a chance for us to look back to 2022 and think, who did I become in terms of my relationship with God?

In terms of who I am? And to look forwards to 2023 and think, where is God leading me? Who is the person God wants me to be? So to get into this kind of thing, I don't really think there's any way that I can do it without gratitude.

[3 : 28] And gratitude has become one of these self-help things in many ways. I think that's because throughout the world we've realised that when you look back and think, I'm really thankful for that.

It helps you recognise that there's more in your life that you should be thankful for. And it becomes a way of changing your mindset so that you can see some of the good things in amongst all the shadows and difficulties around there.

So perhaps just start by thinking, what are you grateful for today? So today, I'm very grateful that my knee hurts much less than it did yesterday.

Anyway, I'm very grateful that I got to see some old friends this weekend. I'm grateful that it's not raining like mad and that it's a little bit warmer.

And I'm grateful that I've finally given in and moved into Sensible Shoes because I twist my ankle far too much. And I was already clumsy before I was pregnant.

[4 : 32] So that realisation has come at the right time, I think. And I'm really grateful for James who dealt with waking up at the last minute in a panic this morning and being rushed around.

And he was really nice about it. So maybe you guys take some time and think, what are you grateful for today? Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. So now we're going to think back just a bit further and think, what are we grateful for in the last year? Yeah. So I think, what am I grateful for in 2022? There are lots of things. I think becoming part of this community is one of the things I'm grateful for.

Feeling more settled. I think we're grateful that we're going to have a baby in the next three weeks or so. Earlier would be better.

[5 : 59] Prayers, please. We're grateful. I'm really grateful for the times I spent with Kathy and Pathway talking about forgiveness, which has made some things really warm and the friendship there.

I'm really grateful for the time spent with all of you in the pub. And I'm really, really grateful that we've got another few years here.

What are you grateful for from the last year? Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. And now I think it's time to think a bit more broadly, which is, how have you changed in the past year?

I think sometimes it's difficult to recognize when you've changed because there are little habits, little patterns of behavior that become who you are. I think someone told me quite recently that you are the sum of the ways that you treat other people.

[7 : 53] And there is some truth in that. So when you look back over the last year, how do you think you've been? How do you think you've become? Do you think you've become happier and more content?

Maybe become more anxious, more worried about things? Could have become more impatient, more keen for things to happen fast?

I think a little bit of all of those things is probably true of me. Perhaps you look back and think you've become better at taking joy in the small things.

Perhaps you look back and think, sometimes I've rushed past people and missed them, even though them being there was really the big thing.

And the thing I was rushing to didn't feel half as important. It's hard sometimes to look back and see these patterns, I think.

[8 : 57] And sometimes it's really positive. You look back and you think, oh, I used to be really tied up in that knot and really worried about that. And somehow that's just fallen away. Sometimes insecurities, worries do fall away.

I think that is true. And I think that that's part of one of the joys of growing older is that you can look back and think that never really mattered. No one ever really worried about that.

I don't need to worry about that. And we are all changing all the time. We're drawn into a God who changes, who came to earth, shaped by the people around him, shaped by love.

And I think that God is drawing us all to gradually move from being caterpillars to butterflies. So the change is good. It's leading us in a good direction. But yeah, let's take some time and think about that.

Thank you.

[10 : 31] Thank you. and now we're going to think about how we relate to God and how that might have changed in the past year. Now that's such a big thing to think about that I've come up with about a thousand prompts, ignore any of them that are unhelpful, but yes, how has your relationship

with God changed in the past year? There are lots of ways of thinking about this. I guess you could think about, are there times when God has felt distant or far away? That happens to all of us. Times when you feel that you can't hear

God, that your prayers feel distant. That's normal part of faith. But sometimes when you think about what the circumstances are around God feeling far away, that can be helpful. I think sometimes I find that I find God feeling far away when I don't make time for some of the people who remind me who I really am. So when I lose touch with some of my joy, I sometimes find it harder to feel God. Or when I insulate myself from other people, I don't know, lots of people think about God feeling far away in different ways. Sometimes it's a sign that your prayer life is maturing. There are lots of spiritual directors and spiritual leaders who would say, when you first start praying, it's very exciting. Every single time you feel the feels and you feel that God is really there. And then gradually, as you fall into the habit, it's almost like going to the dentist. You don't get a sticker every time anymore. And instead, it becomes a deeper relationship, not based so much on instant feelings, and instead on trust and faith. So God feeling far away isn't always a bad thing.

Think about in the last year, when has God spoken to you through other people? That's one of the ways that I find God speaks to me most profoundly. Sometimes I just don't see something. And someone says, but that's right there. And you think, it was always there, wasn't it?

There was always that joy, that beauty there. And I didn't see it. And I wouldn't have seen it if God hadn't prompted me to speak through someone else. There'll be times when God has directly spoken to your heart, where you feel drawn to something in a way that you can't explain, where you feel that there's a warmth or a joy somewhere that you didn't expect it. I think that's quite a lot of people's calling stories. Personally, for me, being drawn into the church was initially horrifying and gradually became the place where I found my joy and the place I got moved towards. And so you can never tell where God's taking you. But sometimes I think following the sense of joy, the internal heart movements that God sometimes speaks through can really lead you to exciting places. And one of the other times that I think sometimes you can tell something really important spiritually is going on is when you suddenly feel, no, I've got to pray about that.

[14 : 28] No, I need to pray about that. And you don't know why. Why am I praying about this person this week? Why am I praying about this situation? Why has that been important to me? I think that happens to all kinds of people. I remember a friend of mine who was fully president of the Atheist Association, who said that there was one night where he just went out for a walk and ended up on his knees.

He didn't become a Christian, but he was moved to prayer. So it happens to all kinds of people in all kinds of places. Sometimes, perhaps when you're thinking about your relationship with God, it's easier to think about things that happen. So like, how has your prayer life been? Have you been regular in praying? Does it feel like a structure you can depend upon? Are you surrounded by people of faith? I think it is important to see the people of your community of faith regularly.

They kind of hold you to account, remind you what the love is about, and help you understand God in a deeper way. I think it's very hard, almost impossible to be a Christian by yourself. I mean, I guess there are some people who are drawn to be a monk in a far-off hut or a hermit. I think unless you have that very specific calling, it's almost impossible on your own. Certainly, I would find it impossible on my own. Sometimes when my faith wavers, I turn to the people around me, and I'm held by the faith that keeps them going. I think most people feel like that sometimes. And sometimes you'll feel that it's your faith that someone else is relying on, that someone else needs to hear. And between us, we keep it going. And I think faith is held in community. Held in community when you stop remembering all the things that you remember. Held in community for the smallest babies who don't really understand what they believe. All of these people are held together by God in the church, in the people around them. I think prayer is great, but one of the other important spiritual things is when do you spend time quietly listening? This is one I'm not so good at. When I'm praying, sometimes I'm talking and I'm talking and I'm talking. And I think, why is God not answering me?

And the answer may be because I haven't given him any chance to get any words in edgeways. There is a Russian Orthodox priest called Metropolitan Antony. He was quite an amazing chap. So he, back in the Second World War, he was a secret monk when it was illegal to be a monk in communist Russia.

And then he also went to work in the French resistance and also as a doctor. So he has this extraordinary kind of hero life. And then he has this spiritual life. And he said that when people came to him and said, I can't hear God speaking back to me, if they were an older lady, probably because he's stereotyped terribly. He'd encourage them to knit towards God rather than to speak. He'd say, if you keep knitting towards God, then God will have the space to talk to you. Whereas if you're talking at God, then what you'll hear really is your words. I've never been any good at knitting, but I think it's something that perhaps I should try. But something with that kind of pattern that gives you the space to quietly listen. So few of us have space to quietly listen. So how do you build that in? And I think sometimes spiritual life is kind of awesome. It can almost strike you around the face. This was one of the harder words for Kathy to translate because I realized that when you speak in metaphors, they don't always translate between languages. Though of course, the Hong Kong community are amazing at translating everything. But there are other times when you almost feel that God is there. And it's almost just slapping you around the face when you've been struck by awe or wonder or adoration. I hope that all of you get that sometimes.

[18 : 41] It can be rare. It can be exciting. And there are a few people, mostly nuns in my experience, who receive this kind of awe or wonder very regularly. I think the music here really helps.

So sometimes that takes people into a place of awe, wonder or adoration. And then there are kind of practical ways. Where has God been? Has God been there in the way that you've spent your time? Would you have spent that time if you thought that the Lord was coming tomorrow? Which is how we're all called to live, even though it almost feels impossible.

Has God been there in the way that you've spent your money? Has God been there in ensuring that you do the things that keep yourself fed and sustained?

Because at this church, at all churches, we strive very much to help others. But I don't think you can feed people unless you are fed yourself. So has God been there in providing sustainable patterns where you are fed, where you are cared for, where you are reminded that you are a love child of God who is as much worthy of space and love as any of the supposedly more needy people you might know around you?

And I think sometimes, perhaps for me, the most important thing when I'm looking for God in my life is where did you find joy? Because where joy is, I find God dancing.

[20 : 17] I think that it can be very easy to make God into this very serious, morose figure. And yet, I think sometimes you see it really nicely in the videos we use here.

You know that Lumo clip where Jesus is splashing water everywhere? That's how I like to picture God, with a sense of humour and a smile. And I think God wouldn't have made people like us if he didn't have a sense of humour and a smile.

So, when I look back, and I think these were the really joyful times, I often find that they are the times I look back to spiritually and think, that's what's going to keep me going.

That little spark of light in the darkness, that's going to feed me for another month or so. So, now that I've asked you all of those huge questions, now it's going to become an even bigger question, because I guess when you add all of that up, when you look at who you are, who you're becoming, where God has been, how your spiritual life has been, when you look back at the past year, do you think, overall, you've been becoming the person God has been calling you to be?

And it's quite difficult to think, who is the person God's calling you to be? I mean, first of all, I guess God is calling us all to be loved children of God. People who God loves beyond measure and thinks are worthy, and understand that they're loved by God.

[21 : 48] That can be quite hard to hold. I think, increasingly, I have a sense when I'm being the person God is calling me to be. Perhaps, perhaps you do too.

I think, when I can look at other people and see the best in them, I feel more like the person God is calling me to be. And I'm not defensive.

I'm open. When I'm more smiley, and less caught up in endless negative ramblings, which I do fall into sometimes, where this is terrible, this is terrible, and I never get round to doing the washing up. That can be a cycle one can fall into. But it doesn't matter, really. God has never cared whether the washing up is done, and the house looks beautiful. But it can be a way of expressing love to other people, which is important.

So when you look back at the past year, do you think you've moved towards becoming the person God is calling you to be? Amen.

[23 : 08] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Do you think you should keep moving in the direction that you're moving at the moment? Do you think you should take a step back and re-evaluate some things? Do you think that it's possible God is calling you on an entirely new adventure next year?

As terrifying as that might be, as exciting as that might be. It's almost impossible to imagine what the next year will hold when we look back over the last four.

[25 : 09] But perhaps you've got an inkling. A sense that something's going to be more important. That someone might be more important. That there's a space of warmth you haven't explored yet.

So if that inkling is there, what direction do you think God is calling you in? How will you become the person God is calling you to be next year?

And I think how will you help yourself move in this direction? So you thought about your spiritual life. Thought about your prayer life. Thought about the things that feed you.

And the things that give you joy. The people who help you become yourself. In the truest and deepest sense of the word. How will you help yourself become the person God is calling you to be next year?

Thinking about all those things that shaped the last year. How will you help you?

[26 : 56] How will you help you?

The music and use it to keep praying if that's helpful. To let all of this mull over if that's helpful. Or just to lose yourself in awe and wonder.

At the feet of the most amazing God. Amen.