

Sunday 4th January 2026 - Looking Back, Looking Forward

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Just some thoughts, really, as we begin this new year together, because 2025 is no more. Another year has been and gone. Yeah, it's left us, I imagine, with plenty of memories and no doubt a little bit of food for thought as well.

So maybe if you think about some of the big cultural events that were perhaps on your radar over the past 12 months or so. Let's start with sport. Let's think about Rory McIlroy.

He won the US Masters and managed the Ryder Cup as well. We had England's footballing Lionesses. They won the Euros back in the summer. You had England's Red Roses, won the Women's Rugby World Cup.

We had Lando Norris recently winning the F1 Championship as well. All sorts of great sporting stuff going on. The less we need to mention about the Ashes, and in particular West Ham, we don't need to mention that.

They were far from memorable things going on last year. That's the sporting world. On the big screen, there was things like family movies dominated by Minecraft and Lilo and Stitch, and the sequels for Wicked and Zootropolis as well.

[1 : 01] And then on the small screen, you might have taken in one of the biggest shows of the year. It was Adolescence, an important show for many folks. We had Stranger Things, which I think is just reaching its crescendo now as well.

That's been popular. Maybe you got into the traitors, particularly celebrity traitors. That was very popular, and maybe you were wanting Angry Ginge to win I'm a Celebrity, which you did indeed do. Maybe you were glued to that as well.

That's on the small screen. In terms of music, we had Rod Stewart doing Glastonbury in his 80s, I think he was. We had Coldplay's Kiss Cam. I don't know if you recall that one. There was a couple who were playing naughty beggars, and they got caught kissing on the big camera, and it caused some problems on them.

It was Taylor Swift once again dominating the album charts. And then Alex Warren's Ordinary was the biggest song of the year. That's all the kind of surfacy sport and media and music stuff.

But then if we look at the political situation going on over the past year as well, in terms of our news cycles, all sorts of coverage of all sorts of things, ranging from, if you recall, Trump and Zelensky and the White House as the Russian invasion of Ukraine continued.

[2 : 09] There was this fragile ceasefire that was brokered in the midst of ongoing desolation in Gaza. There was a new pope chosen, Pope Leo.

Well, here the displaying of flags coincided with a rising of far-right nationalism in our land. And at the end, it seems, of the two-party political system, with people generally feeling increasingly disillusioned with mainstream politics.

All sorts of things going on in our world and in our country. And indeed, the word of the year, apparently, for last year was this one.

Rage bait. Which is online content deliberately intended to stir up negative reactions in order to get more clicks and views.

Anger, it seems, has never been monetized in quite the same way before. Rage bait was all the rage in 2025.

[3 : 09] All of which is a bit of background, I suppose, for better or worse, for what we're about as people and as a church. Interesting background, perhaps in many ways, to our shared life as a church community here at St. John's.

And indeed, in terms of what we've been learning about God and hopefully trying to apply to our lives during the past year, if you've been with us, you'll recall perhaps we looked at various Sunday series, including the significance of the names we have for God and for ourselves.

We explored making prayer a way of life. We spent a good few weeks looking at how to read the Bible. And then most recently, we've unpacked some of the significance of those involved with Jesus' birth.

That's on Sundays, while we also have services on Mondays. And in that, we've looked at women of the Bible. We've looked at the life of James, one of Jesus' brothers. We've looked at various meals that Jesus shared with folks.

And because we like meals, every Monday morning after the service, we meet for drop-in for tea and coffee and cake and snacks and so on. That's been a popular morning straight after the Monday service, to which you'd be most welcome.

[4 : 19] If you're around on Monday mornings, make a double header of it. As a church, again, if you've been part of things with us here, various events which have been highlights for us, including the big play in the park day in the summer.

We had the Christmas fair back in November, including a festive-looking Laura. Our curate there, on the bottom right, she joined us in the summer as well. We've had events like the Hong Kong-style afternoon tea.

We've had little friends' parties. We've had pub clubs and watercolour dabblers. We've had summer walks. We've had festivals that a number of us have gone to. We've had schools coming to visit us. And we've had big community services like the recent carol service. There have been various highlights, like weddings and baptisms, of which Seth is another highlight as we start this year. And then most recently, we've had the biggest Christmas Day lunch I think we've held. All sorts of events, all sorts of highlights perhaps from 2025. And there are many more.

[5 : 17] We could go on with what this year has been about for us collectively. As I say, all sorts of gatherings and events and services for which we can be grateful to God for enabling us to be involved with.

And yet, I think, aside from all those more visible, perhaps more photographed activities, it's also been a year where there has been a huge amount of maybe less visible, perhaps more quiet, but maybe even more significant happenings going on among us.

These won't always find their way on social media feeds and so on. But as a church, I know there have been countless conversations when lives have been shared, where prayers have been offered, where worship has been experienced, where encouragement has been given, where grief has been expressed, where anxieties have hopefully been calmed, and perhaps most of all, where our faith in God has been deepened or challenged or stretched or sustained in new ways through the support that we can offer to one another.

Indeed, looking back over the past year, past 12 months, I wonder, as you sit here perhaps, how are you feeling about the year that has now ended?

How are you feeling about 2025? Yes, we can think about the more public stuff, the sport, the TV, the politics, the music and so on, and we can remember the bigger church community events that we've maybe been involved with.

[6 : 59] But I wonder for you, how would you summarize your 2025? How would you describe your journey as a person over these past 12 months?

Your relationships perhaps, your mental health, maybe your time at school or work, your home life, maybe your hopes, your joys, your struggles.

And in all of that, that we can recall and reflect on, I wonder what are the ways in which you can identify how God has been with you in those times as well.

Perhaps what you've learned about yourself, and maybe about God through all that you've experienced over the past year. And so this morning, as we've done for the last few years now, we do it on the first Sunday of each year, because you'll find on your seats, hopefully a pen, and there's two sheets of paper, and there's an envelope as well.

And what I'd like us to do is take one of those sheets of paper and a pen, and we're going to do a little exercise, which will hopefully help us to first look back at the year we've had, and then in a bit we'll look ahead in a kind of prayerful, reflective manner as well.

[8 : 21] So if you want to, if you've got the pen and a sheet of paper with you, if you want to, if you want to write 2025 on one side of the sheet, and then on the other side of the sheet, you want to

write 2026.

And if you turn to the 2025 side for a start, over the next few minutes, I'll invite us to feel free to write down, maybe you can doodle, you can draw if you wish, some of the key things that you remember from the past year in your life, could be highlights, could be challenges, joys, disappointments, but also, how has your understanding, perhaps your faith, perhaps your appreciation of God changed or been with you in the past 12 months?

In other words, what have you learnt? How have you grown? What have you struggled with? So jot down some thoughts of what the last year has been for you, and maybe consider this kind of like a prayer of reflection, really, as you write.

A prayer that might enable us to process the past. And knowing that the year is done, as we write things down, might help us to leave that past year in God's hands.

So I'll give us a couple of minutes to do that. This is just for you. No one else is going to see this, all right? So you can be as candid as you wish in this. We'll put a little bit of music on, and I'll give you a couple of minutes to do that.

[9 : 55] Let's pause, though. 2025 reflections for a moment, because if we turn to looking ahead to this new year, 2026, if you've seen on this week's newsletter, one of the areas that we as a church are going to be focusing on for the year ahead are what our values might be as a community for 2026 and beyond.

Now, values, for any kind of gathered group, they're different to plans, they're different to strategies, deeper than that, really. They're really about not what we want to do, more about who we want to be as a church, the kind of church, the kind of people, the kind of community that we want to be, that we aspire to be under God.

What do we want to be known for, characterized by, shaped through? You know, what kinds of things do we feel that God might be calling us to focus on being more of as a church?

And how might these values then guide us in making decisions about what we do and how we live out our lives? So that the PCC, the elected trustees of the church, we've been thinking and praying about these things for a good few months now.

And in terms of thinking about our values as a church, we've settled on six areas of life that we feel are right for us to place particular focus on going forward.

[11 : 34] And there are lots of other ones we could have chosen, lots of priorities or values that we could have settled on. But these six seemed right as a basis through which we hope for now God can nurture and refine our lives and our faith so that we can become more of the people God longs for us to be.

So you'll see on the screen, it's on the newsletter and I'll give out a little postcard of this next week as well when we start thinking about these in more detail. But the six we've chosen are kindness, humility, integrity, openness, generosity and inclusion.

and there's no order of importance to these. They're in no way intended to be comprehensive either. But taken together, we feel that they cover a lot of the areas of life that we'd like to grow in depth with God through this coming year.

So kindness, humility, integrity, openness, generosity and inclusion. And so over the next six weeks of services here, we're going to be looking at each of these different values in turn.

Seeing how Jesus embodies and models each one in his life and then exploring what it might look like for us to do the same with God's help.

[12 : 51] As I say, we'll give out a postcard with these on next week as we start that series. But one of the hopes I think of the PCCM for me is that these values might become increasingly part of our identity as a church.

You know, part of our DNA. Set of values that we can pray through and with God's help live out more fully. And I'm quite excited about this.

I think it will give us a decent focus as 2026 gets underway. So more will come on these values in the coming weeks and months. So that's what the first kind of few weeks, if you like, of 2026 for us as a church will be focused on.

But I wonder for you, again, more personally perhaps. I wonder what your hopes, your dreams, your values, your plans might be for the year ahead.

What are things perhaps that you know are coming up, maybe that you're expectant for, but also what in a year ahead is perhaps giving you cause for concern or leaves you a bit apprehensive.

[13 : 58] What do you hope for in your work, your home, your play, your relationships? What do you hope for in your faith and your understanding, your relationship with God?

What are your hopes for us as a church if this is your regular place of worship and the part you might play with us here going forward? So just as you did with 2025, do you want to flip the page over, turn to 2026 and then begin to put down some thoughts perhaps or doodles as a way of praying and laying the year ahead before God.

Knowing some things that are coming up but other things will be obviously unknown to us but it's our way of saying with 2026 in mind all that's going to be ahead. We ask for God to guide and provide for us, for you in the coming year.

Again, we'll put some music on but as best you can maybe let's use this to reflect on what 2026 might bring for us our hopes, our concerns and as we write that will place it into God's hands.

I appreciate that one's a bit harder to do perhaps because you don't know what's coming up necessarily but I know there'll be things on our minds good and bad that we're excited for or anxious for the year ahead.

[15 : 30] Part of the point of doing this really is a way of just acknowledging those things and being able to hand them over to God and so when you're ready and you don't have to stick the envelope up if there's still things you'd like to perhaps add to that when you get home but you want to pop it in the envelope fold it in half pop it in the envelope and then you want to write your name on the front of the envelope and if you're satisfied with what you've got inside there you can seal it up if not you can leave it open if you want to add to it a bit later on but no one else is going to see this unless you choose to show it to them this is between you and God and the idea is that you don't look at this for another year that in the beginning of 2026 you can get it out and you can see where you were at at this stage in 2026 and our prayer is hopefully looking back we will see how God has been with us in a year ahead and where we were at at this time and hopefully have moved on in our lives with him

I know if we've been doing this for a number of years some people have kept them over the years and it's an interesting exercise to see and remind ourselves of the journey that we've been on with God but then one final thing you'll see there's a second sheet of paper that you've got so this time what I'd like to invite you to do on this sheet of paper is to write down a prayer request for the year ahead there's no need to put your name on this there's no need to mention anything that might reveal any details of who you are but I wonder what might be one of your deepest prayer needs one of your deepest prayer requests for 2026 again could be something to do with your health or relationships could be a desire to grow in a certain area could be a wish to put down something that you know has become unhelpful could be for a friend or family member could be something practical financial could be anything but that thing perhaps that keeps you awake at night that thing you wake up thinking about if you could have one prayer request you can have more but if there's one main one what would it be for the year ahead and this is going to be anonymous so you can feel free if you wish to be as honest or as vulnerable as you like because in a moment what I'm going to ask us to do if you'd like to once you've written that prayer request is to fold up your piece of paper and we're going to collect them all in and then we're going to give them all out again as a kind of lucky dip so someone else will have your prayer request and you won't know who's got it they won't know who wrote it but we can take those prayer requests away with us and just commit individually to pray for that person who we don't know it's anonymous but we know that God knows and so as you write those prayer requests we'll give them in then we'll give them out again you can take anyone from any of the baskets that will come round we may never know who we're praying for but God knows and that's enough but let me just say a prayer for us as we perhaps close these written reflections and prayers and as we turn to focusing on God in worship so Lord God thank you very much as we were saying at the top for this time of year where we can come aside with you we can put aside the year that we've had in all of its highs perhaps in all of its lows but we're grateful Lord for the rhythm that we have and we can embrace a new start in a new year with you and for ourselves and so in all that we've been reflecting on in a year that's gone with all that we're anticipating for the year that lies ahead and perhaps with the prayer requests that are uppermost in our mind we want to offer ourselves afresh to you today and for the year ahead and just as we've committed and dedicated Seth to you afresh today perhaps that might be our prayer for ourselves that we would dedicate and commit ourselves to you and to trusting in your provision afresh for our lives so in all that this year will be about in all that is to come we pray that we would follow you closely that we would learn to hear your voice more clearly and that you would help us Lord in all

we're about to become more of the people you know we can be with your help people of love and joy and peace may your values be our values we pray amen amen