

This week we will mark the beginning of a New Year, as we leave 2025 and move to 2026. Yet while many will reflect on the year that has been, and others make plans for the year to come, I am always mindful that it is just another day after the one before.

So how do we account for the passage of time that we live?

We mark the moving time with birthdays, or anniversaries or the reminder that the New Year brings. Before Facebook or Google photos used to remind us of our memories with a 'ping' each morning ... it was up to us to consider what photo's we wanted to look back at, or what experiences we wanted to remember, or the friends we called to mind.

I recently saw a cartoon about the coming of the changing of the year that asked – was your glass half full or half empty this year – or were you just grateful you had a glass.

I wonder what memories you take from 2025, do you allow them to make you smile, or are they tinged with regret, maybe they are memories that hold grief or even thankfulness. How are we thankful for the passage of time that is another year lived?

This Sunday, only 3 short days after we celebrated the hope of Christmas in the story of the Nativity and then in the promise of Emmanuel – God with us – we hear this quite painful passage from Matthews Gospel. It is a story that is too familiar to all of us, not just because we know the story of Matthew's Gospel, but because the story resonates with other stories from Nigeria, Pakistan, Ukraine, Somali....and from refugee camps on nearly every global border.

The story of families with children needing to flee persecution and hatred, is too familiar – but I wonder if that is all we hear in this difficult exert from Matthew. Because in the midst of the fear and the need to flee is something else.

God comes two times in this passage, and three in this chapter to Joseph to warn him. Matthew tells this story in a way that is reminiscent of the Exile, and in many ways parallels Jesus with Moses – but with some interesting twists.

In Joseph's dreams God guides Joseph, and "the child and his mother" first from Bethlehem to Egypt and finally to Nazareth. Even the locations are intriguing and ironic. Egypt was historically a place of oppression for God's people, yet it provided a place of refuge for the Messiah. And while there were many famous cities in Galilee including Tiberias - Nazareth, an obscure village, would end up being the childhood home of Jesus.

These images hold the stark reality of human behaviour and the trials that face many, with the promise, the reassurance that God draws us to surprising places, and is with us at the most amazing moments, and in ways we might not expect. This starkness invites us, as it did Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds and Wise Ones, to trust in the promise of God, the promise of Christmas.

I wonder then, are we prepared to trust in this promise of Christmas – that we have a God who comes to save – who is with us always, but especially when things are hard, and who draws us to unexpected places.

In the endless footage we see on our screens; we glimpse a world which continues to create refugees, which allows poverty and wars, and experiences natural disasters – and we may well ask ‘where is the Christ child – where is our saviour’? Where are Christ’s footsteps, and can we follow them?

The writer to the Hebrews brings us an eternal answer to this – *Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested* – God became human in Jesus, so that we might never suffer darkness alone, so that we need not walk where God has not already trod. This is the promise of Christmas and is the key to our message today.

Within a few days of his birth, Jesus is a threat to the establishment – a threat to those in power – for God is to be feared by those who do not want to bring justice and peace. Even as a baby, Jesus has his opponents because of the promise that God brings. Because of this, Herod orders the murder of all children under 2 years old, to ensure that his throne is not threatened – to maintain his power – to not submit to God. It is a violent act to achieve his desire.

In the midst of this horror – which even with familiarity is hard to understand – appears Joseph, the earthly father who does not lose sight of God’s promise. His world has been turned upside down within a short period of time. He is a young man who understands footsteps, a young man, awaiting his marriage, is suddenly told his wife will carry another’s child – but he is still to marry her – he trusts and he follows! He is commanded to go to Bethlehem, with a vulnerable pregnant young wife, and he must allow his son to be born in a borrowed room. He does not run even when angels, shepherds and magi arrive to acknowledge this child, who he is to parent as the son of God, but he walks in faith. And now within a few weeks of the child’s birth he is told in a dream to escape – to be a refugee – to run to the land of Egypt. Joseph must have desired to ask the question ‘What am I doing?’ And yet if he did – it doesn’t show in the narrative, rather he trusts in God’s presence with him and walks in God’s footprints. The Holy family – the divine family – become refugees. They become the outcasts, the unwanted and the homeless.

A Family unable to be safe in their own nation - And through this, God reveals that in our faith, God will always be with us – sustaining us through hard times, always walking with us, wherever the journey leads.

But more than that is it the embodiment of the incarnation, the promise of Emmanuel – God is with us.

Today’s gospel reminds us, that God was, and is, the refugee in Jesus, as God is with each one of us in our most vulnerable situation – *in our wailing and weeping for our children.* – God walks with us, and most importantly God will not leave us.

So maybe the question we need to ask on this transition into a new year, as we review our memories, as we plan for what is to come, is to notice this within our own lives – the Emmanuel of our journey this last year. Where did we recognise God who walks with us? And maybe if we didn't recognise God at the time, can we recognise God was with us now? And can we be thankful?

Joseph continued to be faithful – continued to understand that God is there – that God does not desert us.

I am aware, that it can be too easy in our modern world to believe we have done everything in our strength, and to only blame God when we fail. But after such a challenging year, which I know many have experienced, it is God who has provided the strength to preserve, to continue to put one foot in front of the other...it is even God who embraces us in such a way that allows us to be thankful.

God is with us, in our humanity, in our fragility, in all that happens to us. God came in Christ that we might know that God is vulnerable with us. If only we have the courage to act in faith.

My favourite Poem to read at New Year was written by a former colleague of mine Dorothy McRae McMahan – I wonder if it might be our prayer as we step into the New Year.

*We walk in footsteps of those who have gone before
and know that we are not alone on this journey.
We walk in the footsteps of those who are older
and know that they go before us.*

*We walk in the footsteps of God
for the feet of our God have walked this way.*

*The footsteps of God will become for us,
the way, the truth and the Life.*

Thanks be to God.¹

¹ P95 *In this our* Liturgies for Pausing – Dorothy Mc Rae-McMahan