

Time to stop and think

The sermon given by David Lewis to the congregations
of St John the Baptist, Newport, Barnstaple and St John the Baptist, Bishops Tawton
on New Year's Day, 1 January 2023
The readings were: Psalm 8 and Luke 2:15–21



Good morning, goodbye to 2022, hello to 2023 and a Happy New Year to us all. I wonder what this new year might bring ...

We do get the chance on New Year's Day to think back over the last twelve months and indeed to look forward to what is to come in the new year that lies ahead. As we remember 2022 and recall the start of the war in Ukraine, the damage caused by extreme weather, the beginnings of the current cost of living crisis, the strikes, and the death of our late Queen Elizabeth, not all of our memories will be happy ones. And as we begin 2023 there may be a sense of trepidation: not all of 2022's worries are now behind us and neither is the coronavirus.

But there may be some hope as we think of this new year as a new start, a new beginning, chance to wipe the slate clean and have another go. This year might finally bring that special holiday or a wedding or an anniversary or the significant birthday that you've been looking forward to. Or you may just shrug your shoulders thinking it'll just be more of the same, so we might as well get on with it.

If that's where you start the new year, then I do hope it gets better as it goes along. Because we do get this day at the beginning of the year when we should dare to dream. To dream that maybe, just maybe, this could be our year.

What are our new year's resolutions, if not the chance to dream? I'll be honest, I can't remember ever hearing someone tell me about a new year's resolution that they've actually managed to keep. Plenty that have been broken, never one that's been kept. If you have ever kept a new year's resolution – which means of course that you are still keeping that new year's resolution, I don't think that if your new year's resolution is to give up smoking that you then start again at the end of the year, these things shouldn't really have an end date on them, a new year's resolution is never finished or complete or done – if you have ever kept a new year's resolution then I would love to catch up with you after the service and hear about that. And I will shake your hand and say 'well done'. Because I don't think that new year's resolutions are really meant to be kept. Let's be honest, if we were going to do it we could have done it yesterday, or last week, last month, last year even. A new year's resolution, which hand on heart we know that we probably won't keep, is there to remind us of what is sometimes called the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference". A new year's resolution is not a stick to beat yourself with. Do what you can.





At the same time I don't really agree with those people who say 'I make the same resolution every new year, and that's to not make any new year's resolutions'. That doesn't really work either. You'd only need to make that resolution each year if you'd broken it the year before. And the only way to break it would be by making a resolution. If that's the case then maybe we need new year's resolutions after all, even if we do think that we'll only end up breaking them. Something to help us think that we can change things, and change them for the better. To dream that maybe, just maybe, this could be our year. What I would say is that if we make a resolution thinking that we're only going to break it, then we've probably made the wrong resolution in the first place. The only way that I've found around this is to resolve to do something that you already want to do. To look back at all those things that you thought you might like to have a go at and get on with one of those.

And that's not cheating. A new year's resolution doesn't have to be about deciding what's going to make you miserable and then forcing yourself to try it. A new year's resolution is not a stick to beat yourself with. Do what you can. But that raises an important question: what can I do? What can I do?

This last week, the week between Christmas and New Year, can often seem strange, a bit quiet. A lot of people choose to take that time off work and so there's a sense of not much going on. We spent all of that time and effort getting ready for our celebrations on Christmas Day, and suddenly it's all over. And all of the things we're going to get on with in the new year haven't started yet. There's this pause, this time to stop and think. It's there in our reading this morning too. The angels

who heralded Christ's birth have returned to heaven, the shepherds have come to see what all the fuss is about so there's all this coming and going, much as we know there can be a lot of coming and going over Christmas with friends and family visiting or maybe we go off to see them. But after all that has been going on, angels appearing, that journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, then the birth of this child that the angels spoke of, and now all of these shepherds turning up, there is this moment of calm. This chance to reflect on all that has been. Maybe too, to wonder what will be. And we find it right in the middle of this passage that we read this morning. Mary treasured up all of these things and pondered them in her heart.

Part of me wants to leave Mary alone, to let her have that moment, to have some time to herself. I imagine that most new Mums would probably be grateful of any me time that they can get. But there's another part of me that wants to know what she's thinking. What are these things that are being treasured up? What is it that she is pondering in her heart? Early on in my working life I was a journalist, and there's still part of me that wants to bombard her with those kinds of questions: Mary, what did you think when those angels appeared? Mary, how did you feel when then they said that you'd been chosen? Mary, what's it like to be the Mother of God? And as soon as you say those questions out loud you realise how ridiculous they are. It makes Mary sound like a contestant who's been voted off of Strictly and now gets to say how wonderful it's all been. How can we expect Mary to answer these questions? Maybe she doesn't even know the answers yet. Perhaps that experience is one she would prefer not to talk about. Even if we want





to know, it doesn't mean that she wants to tell us. Is that word 'treasured' saying this experience is something she wants to keep to herself? It certainly suggests that it's something she values. Either way it tells us that it's hers, and she can decide what to do with it and when. And for now, she wants to ponder it in her heart. At this time, it's not for us to know. Or maybe that tells us all we need to know.

I think that pondering gets a bad press. It sounds indecisive. Like we should be getting on with something. Not just pondering it. But right from Advent Sunday, way back at the end of November – and doesn't that sound like a long time ago now – right from Advent Sunday we've been hearing about what's going to happen: prophecies, angels, a long journey, a star and then, Christmas morning, the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, the word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with us. Now it's happened. And Mary's response isn't to say, right, what's next? It's to treasure up all of these things, and to ponder them in her heart. We can't say she's doing nothing, she's pondering.

And although it sounds like a rather funny old-fashioned word, that is what she's doing. It's not decisive, and I believe that's the point. It's a moment between what has happened and what will happen, turning from the old to the new, much as we are all doing on this new year's day. And that place we go where we ponder things – maybe a favourite quiet place, maybe just somewhere in our minds – is somewhere God can meet us all, where our hearts, our minds, our very souls are open to him. It is chance to listen to that still small voice of calm as we try and work out what's just happened and now what's going on. Maybe even a time to pray. Take time to ponder. Give others the time they need to ponder

things too. And if we had to choose a word to describe the quiet time in the middle of this reading, somewhere between the angels and the shepherds, this moment of peace as Mary stops, treasures these things, and ponders them in her heart, a good word for that moment would be serene. And of course that word takes us back to the Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference". Serenity is a gift from God and it gives us all the chance to ponder these things and to treasure them in our hearts.

So the Serenity Prayer is a prayer of peace as well as a prayer for peace. It's a prayer for change and a prayer for stability. It's a prayer for now and it's a prayer for the future, and that means it's a prayer for New Year's Day as we look to what this new year will bring and what we will bring to it. And I'm going to end now with another prayer that I hope will bless us all as we say goodbye to 2022 and hello to 2023. As we ponder things that are now past and the things that this new year holds for us, it gives us chance to offer all our plans and hopes and fears to God, knowing that like Mary, our true calling is to follow the calling, the plans, the resolutions that he has made for us, given life in his Son, revealed to us today through the presence of the Holy Spirit. And it is our chance to pray the prayer sometimes called the Prayer of Affirmation on this New Year's Day: "For all that has been; thanks. To all that will be; yes."

Amen.

The picture by Priscilla Du Preez was made available on the [Unsplash](#) platform.