

This morning we turn a page and make a new beginning. In the coming year our gospel reading will allow us to look through the eyes of Luke with a little help from John. It means that we get to revisit Jesus' life and the things that he said and did in a different way.

Turning the page and making a fresh start is a powerful thing to do. When the computer freezes up the most effective way to address many problems is to turn the computer off and allow it to start over.

There are many times in life when turning the page, hitting the reset button and moving forward is highly desirable. It enables us to begin to create a new life canvas.

As individuals and as a parish the future lies before us. We have been shaped by those who have gone before. But the future belongs to us and to those who will follow us.

So it is up to us to decide how we will fill this new canvas. What is it that you want for yourself and for this community of St Paul's Ipswich?

None of us is that same person we were last year let alone three, five, ten years ago. Doing what we have always done and thinking that that is all we need do means that as a parish we will almost certainly cease to exist.

The skills and abilities that you have are different from the skills and abilities of your predecessors in this place. The broader community and the environment in which St Paul's finds itself is very different now to the context that confronted those from a bygone era.

Many of us are in a very different place to where we were when we began to look at Jesus story through Mark's eyes this time last year. Some will be living in a different home to the one you were in three years ago.

Jesus taught about love and forgiveness. Forgiveness is about the ability to forgive others and offer them a new beginning. It's about the capacity to acknowledge wrongdoing and receive forgiveness.

So what do we notice about Luke's gospel and how does it differ to Mark's? It is thought that Mark was the first to document the life of Jesus. There may well have been for Mark a sense of urgency about recording things before the memories were lost. Hence a sense of immediacy.

By comparison Luke's gospel has a more reflective feel. Being written after Mark's meant that the events had already been recorded. Luke therefore was able to embellish the kernel of the story with additional material and reflections. He presents us with much of the poetry and the prose so familiar to us through the liturgies in our prayer book.

So noting that we are different people in a new situation we ask ourselves what is it that Luke wants us to pay attention to in this morning's gospel reading? Luke tells us that Jesus spoke to the disciples about the end time.

The disciples were warned that speculation about this and the events that would accompany it would unsettle some and he warned them not to become distracted and encouraged them to be alert and to pray.

They were reminded of their capacity to identify the changes in nature and by implication: if they remained alert they would be ready when the Lord appeared. The key was that they were to remain alert.

Our reading concludes with a description of Jesus rhythm of daily teaching in the temple with evenings spent on the Mount of Olives. It is this that I think that Luke wants his reader to note.

Speculation about the “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars ..... distress among nations” causing people to “faint from fear and foreboding” can suck up a lot of nervous and often unproductive energy. In the description of Jesus daily life we see Luke's more reflective style emerging.

Jesus was aware that his life was at risk and did his best to prepare the disciples for what would happen when he was no longer with them. But there was little sign of panic in how he went about things.

What Luke describes seems to have a pattern, a flow: “every day he was teaching in the temple and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives, ..... And all the people would get up early .... to listen to him.”

Over the years many have speculated about when the end times might come. It has been used by some to frighten others into actions that they might not otherwise have contemplated.

The message of Luke's gospel this morning is: yes there can be disturbing events taking place that might suggest that life as we know it is under threat. But don't fail to use your God given ability to look at and learn from nature and to wait on Jesus' words.

Above all settle into a regular pattern of life in which you reflect on the teaching of Jesus and attend to your own wellbeing and the needs of those you love. In other words focus on serving God; living as you believe God would have you live and when the end comes you will be ready.

So what do you need to reset in your own life? And what do you need to reset as a community of faith? Have you allowed the “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars ..... distress among nations” to unsettle your faith? Do you need to establish a more reflective style of living and develop a rhythm of reading and reflecting on the scriptures and attending to your wellbeing?

The challenge for you as a parish is to action the aspirations articulated in the consultation you had with Bishop Cameron. There you identified that you wanted to deepen the spiritual life of the parish.

Some of us have begun a pilgrim course. This will be offered next year in the parish as a Lenten study. I commend it to you. It is a course that has been developed by the Church of England and is described as “a course for the Christian journey.”

There is much else that can be done to deepen the spiritual life of the parish. It might require some redirection of individual and corporate energies so that you give this aspect of your life together the priority it deserves.

So having turned the page onto a new liturgical year how will you experience Jesus this year? Will you adopt a more reflective style of living and being and will you join with your fellow

parishioners in deepening the spiritual life of St Paul's Ipswich?

What do you need to leave behind so that you as an individual and as a faith community can fully embrace having a fresh beginning? If there are things in your personal life or in your life together that make it difficult for you to think about the future then now is the time to address them.

We find it hard to move forward with a dead weight on our shoulders. A bundle of worries and woes can act as a dead weight on our lives. Instead of being able to see the leaves sprouting; if all we can see are the worries and wrongs of the world, we are incapable of taking advantage of the opportunities before us.

We have noted that Advent heralds a new beginning, presenting us with a new canvas. It invites us as individuals and as the faith community of St Paul's Ipswich to think about how we intend using this opportunity.

As we look at Jesus' life through the eyes of Luke we see a rhythm of attention to Christ's teaching and personal wellbeing. And we are encouraged to think about what that might mean for us individually and as a faith community.

Owen Strong

Locum Priest.