



Happy New Year!

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene - during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. [Luke 3:1-2]

Some years ago, a particularly earnest preacher used these words from Luke's Gospel to seek to prove the historical accuracy of the accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. Apparently other records from the time differed from Luke's catalogue of the great and good, but more recent research had revealed he was indeed right. It would be hard to disagree with anything the preacher said, yet it also feels that he was somewhat missing the point! Surely the key message lies in Luke's brilliant comic timing rather than his historic research. He concludes a list of political heavyweights with the simple but devastating observation that when God had something to say, they were all overlooked in favour of a somewhat eccentric desert preacher.

2016 will forever be remembered as a year of unexpected yet significant events. "Bexit" and the election of Donald Trump are likely to particularly stand out for many. This of course leaves us to ponder what 2017 might bring, as we continue to speculate about the consequences of these and other events. As Christian people, we can be susceptible to two reactions in such circumstances, neither of which adequately reflect our true calling and identity. The first is to largely ignore what is happening around us, or at least to treat events as irrelevant to a faith and church life that simply becomes a cocoon into which we retreat to "escape" from them. The second is to unquestioningly absorb the messages, predictions and conclusions that our world offers to us - to "fit in" and conform without stopping to ask deeper questions.

As New Year dawns, the echo of Christmas remains, and within those events there are repeated reminders that amidst the grand political narratives of the day, God was at work in quite unexpected ways and places. The same realities emerge through the adult life of Jesus. He was neither immune from the political realities of his day, but nor was he contained by them - for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, God was speaking; God was at work.

The application of this is somewhat obvious - as we enter a New Year, it is an opportune moment to re-focus on our identity as a people of God, to seek afresh God's will and purpose for our lives as individuals, congregations and a community of churches. Yet as we look at Luke's catalogue of movers and shapers, included among them are some key religious leaders. The underlying message is to challenge a "business as usual" attitude in any aspect of our life and identity - including religious activities.

Our 2017 call to be "Prayerful Listeners" is not simply to embrace the regularity and routine of church life with greater fervour and energy, but to stop and listen afresh; to pause to question familiar routines and priorities and ask "Is this still what God requires of us?" daring to ask ourselves "how do we know what we are doing is God's will and purpose?" - "How is God speaking to us today?" - "What is God saying?"

We live in a society that is seldom at ease with uncertainty. In that society will be a place for those who can speak messages of quiet assurance. But to be credible, they need to be more than narratives of vague optimism, but rooted in the calm confidence and prayerful reflection that is the strength of a Gospel people.

In the year that Donald Trump becomes president of the USA, the British Government negotiates its way out of the European Union; while military factors struggle for power in the Middle East and innocent lives are blighted and destroyed by conflict; where migrant people make arduous journeys in search of refuge - what will God be saying? Through whom will God speak?

Prayerful
Listeners

A stylized orange heartbeat line graphic that starts as a horizontal line and then curves upwards and to the right, ending in a small vertical spike.