

# Time and Eternity

## A Sermon for New Year's Day

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James Lower Hutt January 1 2023.

Celebration! Yes we are still in the Christmas season, and with it now a time to relax. Then too there's further cause for celebration, with New Years Day – on a Sunday. With less busyness now, I invite us today to be like Mary of the gospel story – 'Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.' We can reflect back over the past year, and anticipate the next.

First then - at this time of the year leaders highlight 'State of the nation'. I'd invite us to think of '*State of the planet*.' It's been a momentous year, especially with the all-pervading effect of the Covid pandemic – world-wide, and right here at home, affecting families, and communities and church. And it seems it's not over yet. We are reminded also of a senseless war in Europe, with its ripple effect involving other nations as well as Ukraine and Russia. Thinking also of the planet – scientists are constantly reminding us of the effect of 'climate change' – or climate changing, with increasing levels of extremes – floods, storms, hurricanes, droughts, high and low temperatures, rising sea levels much attributed to the burning of fossil fuels warming the atmosphere. Yes there's been international concern and conferences. But as one writer has expressed it: 'turning promises into action won't be easy even if the will is there.' These too along with plastic in the environment, and microplastics in the sea and lakes getting into aquatic life.

But that's not all – in the environment there's threats to biodiversity of living creatures, with some likely to become extinct with not being able to adapt to climate change.

Other problems are present in society with concern about the rising cost of living and inequality in the economy, noting the number of food parcels distributed at Christmas. Also a very stressed health system with staff shortages being a cause for concern. And in some countries overseas attitudes and practices towards women, and people of colour.

We may well ponder the situation of humanity as we enter a new year. And it can be depressing – but need it be that way? Can it be turned around? And the 'theological question' – where's God in this? This brings me to the theme of the sermon: '*Time and Eternity*'. The scenario of the planet in strife takes place in chronological time.

Yet there's another dimension of time which scripture takes into account, and I'd suggest we need to look in that direction for a sense of hope and positive outcomes. It is 'eternity.' There's a common misconception that this refers to the future. That's true, *and* it also can refer to the present – as Jesus said, 'As you believe, you are in eternal life.' That is as we believe, we are given signs of the qualities or aspects of eternal life. Whilst we rely on our watch or timepiece time isn't as constant as we might think – for example as we are enjoying something time goes quickly, and conversely something onerous, time drags. Thus in the time we are given on planet Earth may I suggest we build values towards *living in eternal life* – present, in the 'now' of daily life and anticipation of the future.

Returning for a moment to the gospel of this morning – of Mary as Luke notes pondered the events of the birth of Jesus – the miracle of birth, the support of Joseph, the visit of the shepherds to the manger, awareness of angels praising God, and magi bringing gifts.

For us then, what might we 'treasure' and 'ponder in our hearts'? Let me share some possibilities. For these to turn to scripture.

First, in *values in life*. Think St Paul's description 'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things'. Note - *think* about these things. That is for those values to be how we live our life, positive values. St Paul suggests that as we live this way, his insight was of 'the God of peace will be with you.' (Philippians 4.9) He further

emphasises this being God's will - ....'Work out your own salvation ...for it is God at work in you, enabling you both to will and work for his good pleasure'. Living in the Eternal NOW. Another human quality as we build up our soul life is of *memory*. Getting older might mean some forgetfulness, and yet one can bring to mind events, picturing the past, the association of favourite books we've read. As I cast my eyes on books on shelves at home they trigger 'associations' – of having been there, of experiences, of times of adventure and discovery. Similarly in downsizing, casting one's eyes over family photographs, memories that have accumulated over the years.

2) *Valuing our whanau* – family, friends and church family. Love for humanity extends to ones in need. At the heart of the gospel message is Jesus' bidding 'love one another.' He brought 'fresh life' to this awareness of love and loving: 'A new commandment I give to you.' Despite technical advances, there's still huge needs – thinking for example of a hospital system under pressure, of the need for foodbanks, shortages of affordable housing, and ethnic relationships across communities and nations. Whilst much needs professional help, we can nevertheless play our part in financial support and food provision.

3) *Valuing the Planet*. From the account of creation of the universe – '*God saw everything he had made, and it was very good*'. St Paul wrote prophetically that 'Creation waits' ...for humanity to care for creation. As we slow our pace of life there is more opportunity to appreciate all that is around us. A 'positive' of the covid pandemic and with lockdown, was it enabled this. Thus to appreciate nature, and Jesus' 'Look at the birds of the air..'. Where we live there's lots of birdlife, and I ponder the miracle of flight – they've got it so good! What views! When we slow down we more can take in the encompassing dimension of growth, of plants, and fragrances and beauty. That's valuing our Planet. Hence my enjoyment of photography – capturing moments in time, and of beauty. Cumulatively I believe that in the valuing we are building up the wholeness of living in life eternal present. I'm mindful also that in so doing we can't take material things with us into life eternal future, but we can have mindfulness of the beauty of creation, and to 'think about these things.' And it prepares us for 'life eternal future'.

On a broader scale, with all that is a consequence of 'climate change' the awareness of the implications are hard to comprehend. As I think about it, I'm mindful of two aspects – first 'There is no Planet B' – the likelihood of intelligent life elsewhere is literally remote. It emphasises how much humans need to conserve what we have and as need be change our ways. The second is Bishop Justin's declaration the 'climate change is a spiritual issue.' Which means it's a responsibility we need to attend to as believers. Its for all humanity and is under God, and our task being care for creation. For St Paul it wasn't only in human's thought. There was also an 'action component' – as he wrote – '*keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me....*'. And he affirms 'the God of peace will be with you.' There's a sense of satisfaction that comes from action. So as we begin a new year in regard to the planet we can put our resolves into action. Thus each can play a part – reducing waste, recycling, lowering our fossil fuel use ('multi-tasking' our vehicle use), attending to eco-focus activity including gardening and planting. It is likely our parish will move to an eco-church model, whereby we intentionally attend to such. As each plays their part whilst there's so much to do, there's action.

*In summary* then as the year of 2022 has concluded we need to put it behind us and move on in chronological time, hopefully overcoming whatever tribulations beset. Like Mary then let's 'treasure' and let's ponder.' Then in the present we come to realise a sense of eternity – of those values and a way of living endorsed by the people of God in scripture living and teaching.

May I conclude with a prayer from our NZ Prayer Book:  
God of opportunity and change, thank you for giving us life at this critical time.

As our horizons extend, keep us loyal to our past; as our dangers increase help us to prepare the future; keep us trusting and hopeful, ready to recognise your kingdom as it comes. Amen.