

For the New Year 2016

It's only taken me a year, but I've just started reading one of last year's Christmas presents: the life of a Lake District shepherd, organised according to the seasons, and what must happen at each point of the year. He reflects on how his life is lived through different parts of the year: an awful winter, a bad haymaking, a glorious summer, and he describes how those patterns are such a part of him – and of the whole farming community – that he doesn't know how they got there.

Even in a technological and industrial age, where most people are urban and built up, the seasons affect us, and patterns emerge. I notice when, only by degrees, the daylight lengthens and the weather warms. In the autumn there's a competition in our house to say that it's getting 'backendish'. We are creatures of time, and rhythm, and shape. Those who feel those patterns most deeply do us all a favour when they remind us of that.

Perhaps it's not that surprising then that people can reflect on a calendar year and give it a personality. How will you think of 2016? Lots of commentators want to kick it into touch – not just politically, but because of the number of much loved people who have died, especially in the last few days. There will have been events for you – good and bad – which will define the last twelve months, and I hope this service will help you to give thanks, or reflect, or both.

I have preached at every one of these services since I came, in 2009, and this is my last one. As I look over what I've said some patterns have emerged. Last year I said that, for many people, 2015 was a year to forget, as world events and acts of terror dominated the headlines. And I also said that one of my patterns was to read the New Year's Honours list through, very carefully, over breakfast. Like my Lake District shepherd, I'm not sure how this pattern emerged, but it has.

I love finding occupations, and names, which will stick in the memory. A man called 'Fabulous Flournoy' has got an award for services to basketball. Another person has an award for services to the welding industry. Those are fun. But what the list really teaches me is that, in the midst of despair and devastation the qualities we want to celebrate shine more brightly. There are awards this year for those who stood up for justice after Hillsborough, not least a knighthood for our former Bishop of Hull, James Jones. Others have been recognised for selfless work across the charitable sector. And the achievements, against the odds, of many athletes, are also an inspiration.

This is a recurring pattern, a repeating inspiration, not defined by one particular year over another, but seen to be part of the rhythm of our humanity. Not just tomorrow but every day marks the beginning of a new year: the opportunity to make a start, make a difference, right a wrong. Every evening gives the chance to seek forgiveness, look for healing, express a regret. We make that large tonight, and look for a new year which will bring hope not despair, peace not war, community not division.

It will take our wisdom to live each day new, yet find reassurance in the patterns which emerge. It takes a lifetime, and the wisdom of a whole community, for a shepherd to know how to look after their sheep. It takes our collective human wisdom to know how to respond when a metaphorical bad winter or hard haytime comes. That human wisdom is seen at its greatest when we recognise that we, even together, have few real answers, and when we place

our lives in the hands of the God who, in Jesus, shared our DNA, breathed our air, shared our hunger, expressed our joy and wept our tears.

May God bless your 2017, and each day it contains. May you find all joy, and healing, and fulfilment and forgives. And may we do that together, sharing the patterns we see and the hope we look for, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Dec 31 2016*