

Psalm 50:1-5, Exodus 16:1-8

Sometimes in ministry you are faced with sermons which pose a real challenge. I can think back to Christmas Eve 2010, when I was given the task of celebrating Holy Communion at St Martin's Church. A few months prior to this, the churches of St Christopher's, St Martin's and St Patrick's had finally agreed to amalgamate into a new parish called Ballymacarrett and St Patrick's would be the place of worship. At that joint service, for the people of St Martin's in the congregation this was to be the last formal service in their church. I was very conscious of that and I had to reflect that in my address.

In some ways tonight is similar to that. For the past 24 years Philip conducted this service, in which he always reflected on the year which was about to end, and then he would challenge us and remind us of our Christian responsibilities for the coming year. I would have been sitting in the pews listening to him and how he applied the Bible to everyday living. Over the past months it has been an honour and privilege to stand here; as an individual I learnt so much from him and some of his sermons have been repeated in churches where I have been asked to minister. As we reflect on 2013, we could make reference to events in our province with the success of the G8 summit, but also the concern of an increase in terrorist activity; we could comment on the slight signs of recovery in the economy; the fact that the Queen celebrated her 60th Jubilee and there was an addition to the Royal Family with the birth of Prince George; worldwide there have been areas which have experienced extreme climatic conditions, the most recent being the Philippines; there has been unrest and bloodshed in Egypt, Syria and most recently South Sudan and concerns still exist about the future of Afghanistan; there was the death of Margaret Thatcher and in the past month there has been worldwide focus on the death of Nelson Mandela and the impact he has made on humanity.

However, for us here in Knockbreda, the most significant impact was the sudden death of Philip. We were all so touched by his moving letter in the May edition of the church magazine, the funeral service which was conducted with such warmth and dignity and then the dedication of new Bibles in Philip's memory. Such a wonderful gift from the family and this will be a constant reminder of the gospel of hope and resurrection which Philip stressed in his preaching. Over the past few months I have been visiting some of our house bound parishioners and all of them told me of Philip's pastoral care to them and it gave them an opportunity to grieve, and allowed me

through prayer to give thanks for Philip's ministry and to pray for Eleanor and the family. In 2013 we lost our beloved Rector, but there are many other families in our parish who celebrated Christmas Day without a loved one. Our thoughts and prayers are with them all.

We stand on the verge of 2014 and none of us knows what lies ahead for us, as an individual; as part of our family; as a member of this church and as a citizen in our community and country. We are about to start a new journey, with its annual ups and downs. We are a bit like the Israelites we read about in our lesson from Exodus chapter 16, when just over one month away from the oppression of Egypt, they are rapidly losing their faith. The journey from Egypt towards the promised land had begun with great joy and worship, miracles had been performed at the Red Sea, and the tangible presence of God was evident in the cloud by day and the fire by night. And yet within a month the mood of expectancy and exhilaration was quickly evaporating as they faced hunger. In this story we can learn 3 valuable lessons as we look ahead to 2014 here in Knockbreda.

(A) DON'T CLING TO THE PAST

Faced with a difficult situation the Israelites began to think that they would have been better off if they had stayed in Egypt. They said to their leaders Moses and Aaron, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted". (v3a) They were quick to look back to the good old days and sometimes as Christians we are exactly the same. We should never forget the past, but we need to be ready to move forward and face the future. As we pray for God's guidance as the nominators carry out their responsibilities, we need to realise that a new appointment here in Knockbreda will ultimately result in change.

(B) DON'T GRUMBLE ABOUT THE PRESENT

The Israelites had for some reason forgotten the bondage, the beatings and the misery of their forced labour as slaves. They accused their leaders of deliberately leading them into the wilderness to kill them by stating, "You have brought us out into the desert to starve this entire community to death". (v3b) As God tested the Israelites, they responded with grumbling and complaints against God and their leaders. As we look at our own individual lives is there criticism, gossip, resentment, grumbling and bitterness? These are things which quench the Holy Spirit working in our lives and can keep us in a spiritual desert for years. When the pressure is on, don't we look for someone on whom to offload our frustration and anger? Surely we need to pray about the situation and seek God's power and wisdom to help us deal with the cause of our stress. One of the striking features of the Exodus journey was that

in times of challenge and difficulty Moses turned to God. Prayer is the focal theme for our diocese for 2014 as we prepare for a year of mission.

(C) BE FULL OF FAITH FOR THE FUTURE

In our story God heard the Israelites' murmurings and in his grace and mercy met their needs. He told them that in the evening they would have meat to eat and in the morning he would rain bread from Heaven. However he also decided to test their obedience. God wanted to see if they would obey his detailed instructions. Like the Israelites we can learn to trust and faith in him as our Lord only by following his teachings. As we face 2014, let us never forget that God is able to do new things, that he is in control of history, that he is the same yesterday, today and forever! He wants to change the moral and spiritual wilderness that is evident in our land and sometimes in our lives, into lives filled with the fruit of the spirit. What do we need to do to achieve this on a corporate and personal basis?

The answer can be found in Psalm 50 v 14-15. "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and fulfil your vows to God Most High. Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you shall know me". Earlier in the Psalm God acknowledges that the people were active in religious observance and in meticulously offering the appropriate animal sacrifices. However he wanted more than their gifts, he wanted them! God's people had forgotten to relate to him, and he wanted them back. In our worship are we just going through the rituals and have no real relationship with God? To rectify this the Psalmist advises:

(A) GOD WANTED HIS PEOPLE TO THANK HIM

Saying 'thank you' is evidence of a healthy relationship with God. Those who recognise who God is in their lives and know how much they depend on him to intervene in their experiences are people who know that all they are and have come from God. As they recognise this imperative and vital connection with God, they overflow with gratitude. Is thankfulness a key element in your prayer life?

(B) GOD WANTED HIS PEOPLE TO FULFIL THEIR PROMISES (14b)

It was God who took the initiative and told the people of Israel that he would be their faithful God. In response, for example at Mount Sinai, they assured him that they would be his faithful people. The closest of relationships was born, but as we read the Old Testament and especially the books of the prophets, there are many examples of how the people tended to forget the covenant they had made. As a result the vows lay unfulfilled, the promises were ignored and the relationship deteriorated. But God longed to have his people back again, as is clearly evident in the book of Hosea. At our

confirmation, or when we made a personal commitment to God, are we still striving to fulfil the promises we made?

(C) GOD WANTED HIS PEOPLE TO TRUST HIM (v15)

Imagine God's pain when his children get themselves into trouble and then turn away from him to find help in other people and things. He wants people to turn to him and ask him for his help. He is more than ready to give it.

What God wants is no mystery – he wants us to be thankful, trusting and faithful; he wants us to keep our promises to him in a live relationship with him; he wants us to delight in him. Let us make that our New Year Resolution for 2014.

Let us pray

Eternal Lord God, the same yesterday, today and forever; as we begin a new year we ask your help in forgetting the mistakes of the past, in facing the problems and challenges of the present, and in renewing our sense of hope for the future, as we go forward in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord with thankful, trusting and faithful hearts. Amen