**3rd January 2016**

**Acts 18.1-17**

There was joke doing the rounds the other week on social media that went ‘virgin birth I can believe. But **three** wise men? May God use my words to bring some wisdom to us as we approach the start of a new year.

Who knows what lies before us in this coming year. I heard about one poor fellow who decided to make only resolutions this year he could keep. He resolved to gain weight, to stop exercising, to read less and watch more TV, to procrastinate more, to quit giving money and time to charity, to not date any member of the cast of Baywatch, and to never make New Year's resolutions again.

At a party the other week I was talking with a guy who had been put on work placement to Pakistan. They had a 24 hour military guard. But early on in the visit he was summoned into an officials office and asked about his values and beliefs. Not the kind of thing that would happen in Britain. Did he believe in God? Does he believe his life has any purpose? Were the questions he was asked. The guy, like many British people, wasn’t sure about either question so gave an evasive answer. The experience made him reflect on Pakistani culture and their religious mind-set. Those are two essential questions: do you believe in God and does life have any meaning or purpose?

Our sermon themes in January will be about Good News and look at the accounts of the end of Paul’s life and his efforts to share the good news of Jesus Christ in the Roman world of the first century and how he would eventually die in doing that.

As the New Year begins most people have the odd moment of reflection and anticipation. The old has gone the new is beginning. We may reflect on what has been good news in the last year and what we hope will be good news in the coming year. We will all have our own personal highlights from the previous year and our personal hopes for the coming year. Some of us may regard the last year as a year to forget; some of us may be fearful of the year ahead. Such is life and the inevitable mixture of experiences in a large diverse community.

As a church last year, almost a year ago we opened the Vibe youth centre in the old Parsonage next door. It has been a challenge to work out the implications of that for our way of life and we are still working it through but we are getting there. The bigger picture is that young people have a place in the town to hang out and the sessions are very popular and the work by any measure has been a success so far and a benefit to the community. Our team including Carole and Emma, Liz and the treasury team have been the main players in making all this work. They have been good news to us this year. Two weeks today some of the leaders of the Door Youth Project, a Christian youth work organisation based in Stroud but who runs the sessions for Dursley town Council in the Vibe will share in our morning worship so you will be able to hear more about the work they do and how it is good news.

As happens every year, we have lost some people this year and we miss them from our fellowship but pray they are safe with the Lord. However we have also received new members, including one, Rachel, who became the first person to be baptised by full immersion in the actual church building, via the help of an inflatable birthing pool. We also praise God for the relative health of our junior church, with children and young people in our midst at a time when most churches have given up hope of attracting young families. It gives us cause to thank all who lead and help in our children and youth work. Ten of those young people want to go out to Nicaragua in the summer to serve God by serving the poor of that country. With the Peace and Hope Trust they will be building a school and leading a children holiday camp in what I’m sure will be a life changing experience for them and good news not only for themselves but for the people we will come into contact with.

Who knows what challenges we will face in the New Year and whether it will be good news or not for us as a church. We know we have to grasp the issue of what we do with our upper hall and access to it: whether we push on with trying to replace the lift or whether we consider providing ramped access to the upper hall via the community rooms and maybe use the lift shaft at the bottom of the reception room to provide a disabled toilet for easier access for those in the church. Then there is the issue of what to do with the hall and the kitchen upstairs and access to the upper floors of the parsonage.

Finance is always an issue in any church. We live by faith, hoping and trusting that God will provide for our needs. The provisional budget for this coming year suggests that we will make a deficit rather than a surplus as has been the case in recent years, so there is a financial challenge to the church to consider our giving and how we can back the church in its ministry and mission.

We have an ongoing challenge to build community here. What kind of events and meetings need to be planned that can encourage people to develop relationships that matter and enhance their belonging to the church community.

What energy have we got to do things which are good news for our local community and the wider world – whether it is campaigning for issues of global justice or working on behalf of the world’s poor. We already do a tremendous work as a church supporting things such as open door, child contact centre, foodbank, connect at, family café and many other things. I’d like to think we are good news for our community. How can we be good news this year, because the past is behind us and the future we step into? You cannot rest on your laurels and the good news stories of last year. How are we being good news this year?

The Christian faith was regarded by its first exponents as gospel: good news. One of the tasks of the church has always been to pass on and share the good news: the gospel. We have an Alpha Course starting in a couple of weeks which is designed to offer people a non-threatening and relaxed way of working through whether the Christian faith is good news. Please pray for the course but also whether God may be prompting you to ask friends or family to come along with you and take part. You may have had conversations recently about issues of faith and belief: go back to those individuals and say – you know we had a discussion about this; or you had questions on this matter; or I know you are searching for something: have you thought about trying an Alpha Course. Give them a leaflet let God do the rest. We do have a lot of opposition to having our message heard today.

Sadly in 2016 in Britain, the Christian faith is largely regarded as old news and as bad news, false news, or out of date news. With the wider culture expressing such views it will be no surprise if people within the church are having second thoughts about whether what they belong to is good news; what they give a fair proportion of their lives to, their time, money and energy – is it worth it: when the rest of society have moved on and just think we are either deluded, eccentric or crazy?

Last year at this time, Actor and TV presenter Steven Fry launched a rant against God saying he is mean minded and stupid.

A video clip of the famous atheist describing what he would say if he got to heaven went viral online.

In an interview with Irish broadcaster RTE, he said: "I'll say 'bone cancer in children - what's that about? How dare you. How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault. It's not right, it's utterly, utterly evil.'

"Why should I respect a capricious, mean minded, stupid God who creates a world which is so full of injustice and pain."

The comedian's attack on the Christian faith has had over two million views on YouTube.

He is then asked if he thought he would get into Heaven and replied: "No, but I wouldn't want to. I wouldn't want to get in on his terms. They are wrong."

He added: "Because the God who created this universe, if it was created by God, is quite clearly a maniac, utter maniac. Totally selfish. We have to spend our life on our knees thanking him?! What kind of god would do that?

"Yes, the world is very splendid but it also has in it insects whose whole lifecycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and make them blind. They eat outwards from the eyes. Why? Why did you do that to us? You could easily have made a creation in which that didn't exist. It is simply not acceptable.

"It's perfectly apparent that he is monstrous. Utterly monstrous and deserves no respect whatsoever. The moment you banish him, life becomes simpler, purer, cleaner, more worth living in my opinion."

[Responding on a blog post Pete Greig from 24-7 Prayer said the question of why there was evil in the world was a good one.](http://www.24-7prayer.com/features/2445)

"And the answer is, of course, that he shouldn't, he mustn't, respect such a deity. And neither do I. Let's not leap to defend a god we don't believe in. We have a name for a 'capricious, mean-minded, stupid' being, but it isn't 'God'"

He added: "Of course, none of this would convince Stephen Fry. Arguments rarely change anything and I'm hardly in his intellectual league.

"But I'd love to take him to meet some of my friends who are hospital chaplains and aid workers and counsellors and priests.

"They work amongst those who are sick and suffering, and would tell him in no uncertain terms how Jesus often brings such people unspeakable hope.

"Multi-millionaire celebrities may rail against the injustices of life, but meanwhile the poorest, most oppressed people on earth frequently exhibit resilient faith in the goodness of the God Stephen Fry currently rejects on the basis of the tragedies they themselves endure."

There is a true story of a minister’s doctor who was an atheist and who liked to make mocking remarks about his faith when the minister made apportionments to see him.

One day the minister found out that the doctor had lost his brother and so made a condolence call. The minister walks into the doctor’s surgery and says how sorry he is to hear of his loss. The doctor says with an angry face ‘I envy you’.

Why do you envy me?’ says the minister.

‘Because when you lose someone you love, you can curse God. You can yell. You can blame God. You can demand to know why. But I don’t believe in God. I’m a doctor? And I couldn’t help my brother.’

The doctor was near tears. Who do I blame? He kept asking the minister. There is no God. I can only blame myself.’

That is a terrible indictment. Almost worse than unanswered prayer. It is far more comforting to think God .listened and said no, than to think that nobody’s out there.

Our bible text from Acts 18 has Paul arriving in Corinth in Greece where he reasons in the synagogue and tries to persuade the Jews and the Greeks living in that city. But he meets opposition and aggression and abuse. In verse 6 Paul shakes out his clothes in protest at the reaction of the local folk to his message that Jesus is the Messiah. He decides to go only to the Gentiles and finds greater success there. The Lord speaks to him in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in the city’. So Paul stays in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching the word of God.

Some of the Jews there complain that Paul is persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to their traditions. But the proconsul can’t be bothered with what he regards as trivial religious disputes.

In this short passage I suggest there are a number of points that can be made as we consider how we share good news today.

First of all Paul was convinced that Jesus was Good News and he was prepared to suffer abuse and opposition for him. This is a real test for how real our faith is to us. Are we prepared to stand up for it despite others people ridicule and opposition? It is the acid test – the acid of ridicule, cynicism, scepticism and derision, that tests your conviction.

Being in the Holy land this summer was a great fillip to my faith. It reminded me again that my faith in Jesus Christ is based on something that happened, that is historical. It is not made up. It is not on a level say with Star Wars, a good story with allusions to real life and issues but something that is a fantasy, a made up good story. The Christian faith has real-life issues, it is a good story, but it is also a story based in history on what really happened.

I have always been thrilled to stand at historical sites and see X marks the spot. It always brings things home to me. This is where a battle took place. This is where a king was enthroned. This is where a declaration was made. In the Holy Land you have good archaeological arguments to believe you are standing at the spot where Jesus was crucified and where he was resurrected. You can stand by the shore of Galilee and know that this was the area he started his ministry and called and trained his disciples. X marks the spot.

 We will look at some of the historical arguments that underpin our faith in the Alpha Course. But it is not all history. Paul had an encounter with the risen Lord that totally changed his life. Many of you here have had such encounters that you cannot deny. Those encounters have left their mark and although you may get bored or disaffected or tired at times, all of which is normal and to be expected, you cannot deny the touch of God on your life. Some have had visions, dreams, answers to prayer, healings. We testify not just to the historical dimension of our faith but the present lived experience of our faith.

Maybe you haven’t had such experiences but rely on the testimony of others: that is no bad thing either. But pray too for an experience of God for yourself. Ultimately we all depend on the testimony of the first apostles to what they saw and experienced that shapes so much of our understanding of Jesus and God.

*Here’s what the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby said to the question why I am a Christian:*

*People often ask me why I'm a Christian. Here's what I tell them.*

*I’m a Christian because Jesus Christ found me and called me, around 40 years ago. I’m a Christian because it makes sense to me, because Jesus rose from the dead - he conquered death and sin and suffering.*

*I'm a Christian because in Jesus I see the God who didn’t say, "This is how you lot have got to behave, and I’m going to watch you and judge you." Instead he came alongside us and lived in the middle of the absolute foulest mess, and died unjustly young in great agony, and bore all that was wrong in this world on his shoulders.*

*I'm a Christian because in my own experience I’ve run away and God has met me and yet not been angry with me. When I’ve failed he’s picked me up and healed and strengthened me.*

*That’s why I’m a Christian. And that’s why, whatever happens, whatever stupid mistakes, I know that even at the end of it all, even if everything else fails, God doesn’t — and he will not fail even to the end of my life.*

Inevitably we all at some point feel a bit jaded and weary and wonder whether all this Christian faith is worth it. Can we believe it? Most people have their questions, the things they struggle with. Again the Alpha Course can be a good opportunity to ask those questions and to refresh your understanding of the Christian faith and how to live it. Paul created more questions in his writings that he gave answers too. The challenge is to keep in the faith, fight the good fight, keep in the relationship with god and his people – it is a dialogue of faith and doubt, courage and fear, temptation and perseverance. It is never easy; but life’s great adventures never are. If you want a comfortable life you will be granted a boring life. Be careful what you wish for.

Hopefully in this New Year, this church will be the kind of community that is inclusive for all: those with strong confident faith and those who struggle with faith but want to hang in there as best they can. We as a church will do our best to nurture all who are willing to be nurtured.

But here is the second point from this story of Paul. Some have decided beforehand that they won’t listen, won’t respond and are not open. People are free to respond but some people you are just wasting your time and efforts and like Paul you need to move on. Faith is as much as decision of the will as it is a decision of the mind. Do you want to believe? Do you want to struggle with faith? It is often a question of desire as much as intellectual obstacles.

The third point is the good news is eternal but comes in ever changing packaging. Paul got it in the neck for persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to their tradition and what they expected. Worship wars are nothing new – there has always been a tension between generations about what is the appropriate way to worship and express your faith. Long may that continue because it is a sign of vitality. Faith is not static. Good news needs to be expressed in ever new and relevant ways otherwise it may feel like old news.

In this last year we have discussed same sex marriages, refugees’ crisis, politics and the election and bombing Syria and combating Islamic extremism. How the gospel relates to those issues keeps your faith fresh and stretched and applied. What would Jesus Do? It is always the question before us in our walk of discipleship. If you don’t ask the question you are meandering aimlessly and if you don’t watch out you will fall down a hole.

But the final point in this passage is that Paul is courageous enough to keep on speaking. He doesn’t give in to fear and intimidation. He is not silenced and God blesses his efforts and calls forth followers of Christ as a result. Find your voice. Speak up for your Christian faith. Witness to Christ in deed and also in word. Paul writes in Romans (10.14) How can other people hear good news unless they are told.

May God bless us in this new year to be bringers of good news and receivers of good news.