

Dear Friends,

I am incredibly grateful to everyone who has gone beyond the call of duty to make it possible to celebrate the birth of Christ together, and who have arranged Zoom social and fellowship events to keep our churches together.

As I write, on a damp grey January morning, the apostle Paul's words come unaccountably to mind:

*'Rejoice in the Lord always: and again, I say, rejoice.'* Phil. 4:4.

It occurs to me that to rejoice is a behaviour that we can choose to do, and we can deliberately turn our thoughts towards the blessings God has given us, to commit ourselves to appreciate them and to thank and praise God who is the giver. As James tells us: *'Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.'* (James 1:17). Peter tells us, *'His divine power has given everything needed'* (2 Peter 1: 3). The well-known verse in John's Gospel tells us that *'God so loved the world that He gave'* (John 3:16). So, we have four of the leading apostles, Paul, Peter, James, and John teaching us of the generosity of God and that it behoves us to celebrate God's gifts.

And so, as I wish you 'Happy New Year' in this first missive of 2021, I fully recognise that our resilience is being put to the test, as individuals and as churches, by the persistence of the pandemic and its consequences. I also acknowledge the anxiety, loneliness and grief suffered by many people as 1 in 50 people in the UK are infected. I am especially aware that the pandemic is very unequal, unfair even, in its social consequences. Young people, students, poorer people and people with insecure jobs or housing are being hit especially hard.

Nevertheless, I personally feel the need to have something to look forward to. We can use Lent (Ash Wednesday is 17 March) as a season for prayer and remembrance, lamenting the losses we have suffered, as well as thanking God for His gifts. I would very much like us to have robust plans for Holy Week and Easter which can withstand whatever circumstances may yet emerge. I would also like us to turn our imaginations to a future time when restrictions are eased. Imagine waking up and finding that a miracle has happened, and this testing time has come to an end. How would you like to celebrate? What could we do to revive the spirits of our circuit and local churches after all these months of wilderness wanderings finally come to an end? Are there flexible

preparations that we could be making to have in place for when the time comes?

I wonder whether there are people with musical, dancing, dramatic or artistic talents who would have suggestions to make. I wonder if there are people who would enjoy other kinds of events, such as quiz tournaments, sports competitions, spelling bees, baking competitions etc that could form part of a festival of celebration to bring the circuit together and lift our spirits.

This is all part of the blue sky thinking that I like to indulge in at the start of a New Year and is by no means a firm proposal for circuit policy at this stage. My thinking arises from a desire for us to be proactive rather than reactive, to regain a sense of control, even if we can only gain that sense of control through our dreams and visions. We can use the third lockdown as an opportunity to gain a fresh vision for our personal discipleship, our local churches and communities and our circuit. My vision would involve celebration, thanksgiving, and even corporate fun!

A strange coincidence is that, as I now write, with Radio 4 on in the background, a guest speaker is talking about '*finding things to be grateful for*'. I might suggest that we go even further and *create* things to be grateful for, through using the dreams and visions that God can give us and turning them into SMART goals. Instead of dwelling on the worst that can happen, let's choose to focus on the best that could possibly happen, by God's grace.

We can rejoice. We can rejoice in all that God has done, is doing and will yet do. We can rejoice in the Christian hope of eternal life. We can rejoice in all the wonderful gifts God has given to us which we so easily take for granted. We can rejoice in remembering the words of Jesus: '*These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*' (John 16:33).

I do pray that God will richly bless you and keep you safe in 2021.

Warmest wishes,

Keith

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