

Column – New Year

It seems like only yesterday that I was seated in a tiny classroom desk and my second-grade teacher Mrs. Roberts mentioned the year 2000. In the mid-60s that date seemed a million lightyears away, so far into the future that it hardly seemed worthwhile to consider it. Now I find myself pinning up a calendar emblazoned with the numerals 2022! Can it be?

Putting up a new calendar is a good time to look back. As we do, no doubt, there will be a number of happy memories which will come to mind but also some painful ones.

The former will likely outnumber the latter. I remember Bishop Duncan Gray the Second of Mississippi explaining why the ‘good old days’ appear good. The element of uncertainty has been extracted. No matter how difficult the days, no matter how hard the struggle, we survived.

Moreover, these days may well have been catalysts for growth, maturity and greater trust in the Lord. Two verses from Psalms come to mind. The first says: “It is good for me that I have been in trouble, that I may learn thy statutes” (119:71).

The second focuses on the experience of the Old Testament character Joseph. His brothers, envious of the special status he held with his father, sold him into slavery into Egypt. There, in that far country, he got into more trouble. The wife of his employer falsely accused him, resulting in him being locked up in prison. What does the psalmist say happened as a result? “Iron entered into his soul” (105:18, Prayer Book version).

Trouble made Joseph strong. Upon looking back on your own life, you will likely find this same process has happened.

Once, while leading a tour in England, I had in my group a lady who was not a very confident traveler. As would happen, she darted into the toilet in Paddington Station as everyone else was getting into a railway carriage. Before she returned, the train pulled out from the station, leaving her behind.

As it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened. What she would never have attempted to do – travel on public transportation alone – she was forced to.

When the rest of us returned later that afternoon, she excitedly told us about her adventure getting back to the hotel. Armed with new-found confidence, she then walked to the British Museum, where she spent a lovely day.

Her travail pales in comparison to that of Joseph. Nevertheless, the principle holds. Trouble became a stepping stone for growth. We don't seek trouble out, but when it comes (and come it will), we can give it to God confident that He can use it for our growth and good.

Putting up a new calendar is an invitation to look back, but also an invitation to look forward. As we do, we find that it is still early morning. The sky is dark, the air heavy with mist, the roadway ahead hard to see. But that is alright. The hand that led us in 2021 is outstretched still and ready to lead us forward.

The hymnwriter Frances Ridley Havergal catches the spirit of the calendar-changing moment when she says: "Another year is dawning! Let it be, in working or in waiting, another year with thee."

O Eternal Lord God, who has brought thy servants to the beginning of another year: Pardon, we humbly beseech thee, our transgressions in past, and graciously abide with us all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Proposed Book of Common Prayer, Church of England, 1928)

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