

Along the track

2024, the Year of...?

Happy New Year! And may that happiness continue throughout the year too!

What will 2024 be 'the year of' for you?

I recently saw a sign outside a church in Brisbane 'Life is Precious. Handle it with Prayer.' New Year can be a reminder of what a gift life really is. New Year isn't just about surviving another year, although for some that may have been quite an achievement. It isn't just about making resolutions, although it can be an opportunity for that. Celebrating New Year does offer a chance to look back and look forward, to give thanks for what has been and to plan with hope for what might be.

I went to a number of funerals during 2023. Saying goodbye is never easy but what added a further touch of angst is that I left it too late to tell them what they meant to me while they were alive. It is so easy to take for granted family and friends, companions and colleagues. We are often reticent to tell people how they have helped us or what their friendship has meant and that is a pity. We just assume they know, but that isn't always the case. That doesn't have to be a long speech or anything special – often the smallest gestures have the most impact. Some of the most memorable events in Jesus' life were the simple ones – how he cooked breakfast for his apostles on the beach, these same followers who had so recently abandoned him, those who ran away when he needed them the most (John 21:1-14). Can you imagine how they must have felt just being with him around that fire watching him cook the fish. At other times, he took someone by the hand or embraced those considered to be unclean, untouchable as that would make you unclean too. In both examples those simple gestures made people feel forgiven and welcome. So this year I have resolved not to leave it too late. In some way I am going to seek out those who mean so much to me and tell them!

Sr Joan Chittister tells the story of being at a conference at the White House. In the midst of all the speeches and erudite papers an elderly Indian stood up slowly, folded his hands quietly in front of him, looked out over our heads and said softly, "I have spent my life teaching our children to say 'thank you': Thank you for the grass. Thank you for the rain. Thank you for the stranger. Thank you for all the people of

the world. I think that if we learn to say 'thank you for everything, we will come to realize its value, to respect it, to see it as sacred."

There is one time, recorded by Luke, where Jesus seems bewildered by lack of gratitude. Ten lepers came to him begging for healing so he sent them to the priests as was required as only the priest could deem them to be now cleansed. Along the way they were healed. Yet only one of them returned to give glory to God as he fell at Jesus' feet and, as Luke reminds us, he was a Samaritan. "Where are the other nine? Were not all ten cleansed? Jesus asked. Life is precious and we can make it more so for ourselves and others by showing appreciation and gratitude, even for the smallest things. And thanking God for that too.

So 'handle it with prayer!' Prayer isn't just asking for something, or reciting formulas no matter how helpful that may be. Rather it can add a richness to life, it can help us to appreciate the small things, the day to day routines, what we take for granted can take on a different hue when we learn how to pray rather than simply reciting prayers. Like this elderly Indian tells us, the most effective prayer can be giving thanks. Such a prayer leads us to an awareness of God and a response to the presence of the sacred in all of our life.

God of all time,
thank you for another year on my journey.
Help me to be thoughtful of others and,
mindful that my actions make an impact
and my words carry power to heal and to hurt.
May I walk gently with others
and speak only after I have listened well.
Help me to treat the world with tenderness
honouring Your creation rather than destroying
aware that you have made
every creature and plant, every person and habitat
with beauty and purpose.

Help us all enter the New Year joyfully,
alert to the many gifts you have been us.

May the grace and peace of Christ bless us now and
in the days ahead.

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au