

Time To Prepare

I recently received the gift of a pre-owned “Metric Units and Measurements” poster. It is well-designed and contains lots of interesting information. One of the facts headed “Did you know?” reveals that a year is actually 365.25 days long! It explains:

“This is the time it takes for the earth to travel once around the Sun. Every fourth year is a Leap Year, where an extra day is added to make up for the extra quarter (0.25) day over 4 years.”

I was intrigued by this fact and began to think about the idea of saving up little bits of time to spend, at some future point, as one whole extra day! Many learned people have stated that “time is a human construct”. It is true that we human beings have developed a method of pacing out our lives using time. We have created concepts of past, present and future to explain how we progress from conception to adulthood and beyond. Nature has also helped us with our understanding for, as we observe the changing seasons, we sense changes in ourselves and a little of the notion of time, flowing through and past us into the future, becomes possible.

On one rotation of the sun, in a time far in our earth’s past, an angel called Gabriel was sent by God the Father to bring a message to a young woman betrothed to be married. Gabriel’s message was of great surprise to the virgin Mary, for she was told she had found favour with God, and she had been chosen to bear the gift of new life within her. The Holy Spirit would make it so, and the child to be born would be called the “Son of the Most High”.

I am sure that in the moment of silence that occurred after Gabriel had shared God’s extraordinary plan and before Mary responded, time slowed down to a single tick-tock. Perhaps all heaven breathed a sigh of relief when Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant, may Your word to me be fulfilled.” We read that after the angel left her, Mary travelled to a town in the hill country near Judea to stay with her relatives, Elizabeth and Zechariah, at their home.

Travelling provides people with time to think, and, for Mary, the distance between Nazareth and Judea would have been an ideal opportunity for her to reflect on what the angel had told her. Her journey was around 80 miles, which meant she travelled either for 3 days on a donkey or 5 days on foot as part of a caravan. When she arrived, we read the bond between Mary and Elizabeth was instantaneous, as their experiences of divine intervention were so extraordinary.

The opening words of Mary’s song are “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed for the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is His name.” This captures so perfectly the calming and restoring work of the Holy Spirit that enabled Mary to rejoice in the gift of this new life within her, and to be confident that all people, including Joseph, would know the child was Holy and came from God Himself. Her heart had been prepared for a lifetime of service in faith along her journey.

As the evenings darken earlier and the twinkling lights in the shops shine brightly, we are reminded that Christmas is just around the corner. Countless families worldwide are beginning to make the familiar and time-honoured preparations for this special time of year. We send Christmas cards and wrap gifts, we plan meals and go food shopping. We visit family and enjoy evenings out with friends; we attend church, singing carols and hearing

again the wonder of the Christmas Story. In amongst the busyness, we ask ourselves “Are these preparations enough?” We often try to measure what we do against what we see and hear happening around us. We look up and out at the wider world and recognise our responsibility to do what we can.

Throughout the world, as I write this Christmas article, many people are walking from one place to another, uncertain of where they will celebrate Christmas, but compelled by circumstance to walk in the hope of securing a better future. This Christmas, we can pray for all people seeking a new home, that they are welcomed and treated with respect.

As we watch the news, we are concerned by the many political discussions taking place between countries, and so we must continue to pray for peace and good accord between nations.

As we visit our town centres, we are moved by the sight of so many homeless people living difficult and perilous lives, and so we should continue to donate when we can to charities that support the homeless, and stop and chat to the individuals we meet, when it is safe to do so.

We can continue to support our families and friends, many going through difficult and challenging times. We can offer friendship and practical help, a cheerful smile and the opportunity to have a cup of tea and a chat. We can pray that we might be led by the Holy Spirit to spend time with people who need our time.

And finally, each one of us can pray that we can experience the joy, peace, exuberance and excitement of the coming of the Christ Child this Christmas for ourselves. We can pray for renewed faith and bravery, like that of Elizabeth and Mary, to strengthen our resolve as we move forward into a New Year together.

Wishing you joy, peace and friendship this Christmas and every blessing for 2019.

Anna Smith