

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”

And he replied:

“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

Words spoken by King George 6th in his Christmas address to the Empire in 1939. They struck a chord with a nation facing into the uncertainty of war. These are words that have struck a chord with succeeding generations, particularly at this time of year.

We stand at the end of 2017 and the start of 2018. We look back on the past year and forward into the next. On the international stage we are still coming to terms with the Presidency of Donald Trump, of Brexit, of increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the Yemen. Nearer home we have seen the emergence of a new Taoiseach, continuing problems with homelessness, problems in the Gardai and continuing implications of the banking crisis that brought this country to its knees, leaving many homeless while those that triggered the whole debacle yet to be brought to account.

Within our own community, for some this has been a good year – a year of births, of marriages, new starts in school or college, in employment, in relationships, in new homes, maybe even retirement.

For the parish we have seen the work on the roof, the whole experience of worship in the Parish Centre, the joy of our return to our Parish Church.

This of course is not the whole story – there are families within our Parish who have experienced loss, for whom this Christmas was the first without a loved one. Others have experienced different crises in their lives, anxieties over loved ones facing ill health or other uncertainty in their lives. We will continue to support them with our love and our prayers.

We journey on into the New Year, wondering what lies ahead for us. As the shepherds journey on, back to the hillsides, back to resume their daily routine, the joys and sorrows of family life. Mary and Joseph prepare to move on, beginning with the first of the ceremonies following child-birth, the circumcision of their first born son. In Luke's Gospel, we hear at different points of Mary, hearing people talk about her child, 'pondering these words in her heart.' What lay ahead for her? What lay ahead for her child?

That is the story that, Sunday by Sunday, we will now take up.

We look back into 2017; we look forward into 2018. And it is here that the image of Mary & Joseph, the shepherds, moving on, journeying on chimes with those words I quoted at the outset

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These words were written as a preamble to a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins. This poem, written shortly after she arrived in India to work as a Methodist Missionary, reflects on presence of God amidst all the uncertainties of life.

So heart be still:
What need our little life
Our human life to know,
If God hath comprehension?
In all the dizzy strife
Of things both high and low,
God hideth His intention.

God knows. His will
Is best. The stretch of years
Which wind ahead, so dim
To our imperfect vision,
Are clear to God. Our fears
Are premature; In Him,
All time hath full provision.

Then rest: until
God moves to lift the veil
From our impatient eyes,
When, as the sweeter features
Of Life's stern face we hail,
Fair beyond all surmise
God's thought around His creatures
Our mind shall fill.

We go forward into 2018 with our hopes and fears and plans for the future. For some this will be a year of new beginnings. Children will be starting school, moving on to secondary school, college or employment; people will be getting married having children of their own. For some there are clouds on the horizon, uncertainty about themselves or loved ones. The God who has

accompanied us on our journey to this point will not leave us or forsake us.
We may lose sight of him but he does not lose sight of us.

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And as a Parish we will continue our journey into the future, as we seek to show something of Christ to this community and society in which we are set. I would invite us this coming year to reflect on the challenge laid down to us by the Archbishop on his recent visit to dedicate the work on the roof. Before coming, he asked of us two questions: ‘What is your history and what is your vision?’ Picking up on the title of the illustrated Gospel, the Garland of Howth, featured in our East Window, he urged us to offer a Garland of Welcome and Inclusion to those who come to live among us, to those who come to worship with us.

As we look forward into the future may we ‘put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to us better than light and safer than a known way.’