

A NEW YEAR – A NEW FUTURE

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A new year is upon us and once again as we remember and celebrate the year past, people wonder about what the future holds. Popular talk shows consult astrologers to read the stars and invite psychics to tell us their feelings, to describe their visions, to communicate their perceptions as to what will be. And of course, we consult the experts in all fields to predict with guesses a little more educated, although only a little more educated, as to what the future holds in their particular area of interest.

There is another custom which, it is said, also foreshadows the future. It's related to the Scottish celebration of the new year called Hogmanay. For the Scottish, the celebration of Hogmanay is much more important than Christmas. It occurs, of course, on the 31st of December. The old year is driven out with bonfires and torchlight parades, and at midnight the new year is welcomed by opening the doors, clanging pots, bashing trays and ringing bells.

The highlight of the Scottish new year is the arrival at midnight of the First Footer – the first person to cross the threshold, to set foot in your home in the new year. It is the First Footer who forecasts the future for the coming year.

The worst kind of First Footer, one source says, is “a decrepit old woman asking for kindling, or a one-eyed immoral crone with bushy red eyebrows which met in the middle, who stood on the doorstep with her feet flat at 90 degrees to each other, waving a knife.” Such a person standing on your doorstep threatening to come in forebodes bad luck for the future, and I would say bad luck for the present.

The best kind of First Footer is a dark-haired bank clerk returning late from the yearend balancing the books. He would bring mistletoe symbolizing the return of spring, the gifts of bread, salt and coal, representing life, hospitality and warmth. Receiving such a guest into your home was a general harbinger of health and prosperity. Such a First Footer is the bearer of good news.¹

Who were the First Footers for Jesus? Who were the first guests welcomed at his birth, at the beginning of his first new year, who would foreshadow his future, and ours?

According to Luke they were shepherds. Like “the decrepit old woman asking for kindling” they were the disrespected. They had a dirty, unappreciated job tending sheep. They were of the lower classes, certainly not people with whom respected society associated. Were not these First Footers a sign of bad luck foreboding a bleak future? Perhaps, if the Cross is construed as bad luck. But for us such First Footers were good news. They were a sign that God cared not just for the respectable but for the unimportant, about the disrespected, even about the unrespectable and disreputable.

Jesus's life was lived in the same theme. As the psalmist says in Psalm 72, he will treat the poor with justice. He will defend their cause and deliver the needy. He has pity on the weak. He defends those who have no protector and redeems their life. This is the glory of God in Christ. The First Footers, whom the world considers bad luck, the shepherds, brought good news to us, to those who had the eyes to see.

The First Footers according to Matthew were Magi, astrologers and priests from the east. These appeared to be much more respectable guests more promising of good luck, except that these visitors to the One born to be King of the Jews were not Jews, but outsiders, Gentiles. These guests like the favourable First Footers brought gifts, not bread, salt and coal, but gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The gold was a gift for a King, for the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ of God, who would bring God's Realm of justice and righteousness. It was the symbol of good deeds.

The frankincense was a gift for the divine. Frankincense is an incense used in worship and at prayer. It was a gift for a priest. In Latin the word for priest is pontifex, from which we get the word pontiff used of the Pope. Pontifex means bridge builder. Frankincense was a gift for a bridge builder representing a renewed relationship with God.

Myrrh was a substance used in healing and in embalming. It was a gift for a healer, one who would deal with pain and suffering, one who would remove the wormwood and gall which invaded the human breast. And it was a gift for One who would suffer and be in pain himself and die, One who would sacrifice himself to undeserved pain and suffering in order to deal with the sin and evil which infect the human situation.ⁱⁱ

Gold, frankincense and myrrh, these gifts forecast the coming of peace, renewed relationships with God and the assuaging of our pain and suffering through the self-sacrifice of another. These First Footers, the Magi with their gifts, like the shepherds, brought good news for us, good news about what this new life lying yet in a Manger would mean for our futures.

Who was your First Footer this year? As Christmas draws to a close along with the old year and as a new year begins, who is the First Footer in the home of your heart? Shall we not be clear and blunt? My friends, is Christ the First Footer of your heart? Is your future determined by Christ, or by something or someone else?

There were others in this Christmas story, in this story of the beginning not just of a new year but of a new future. They treated this coming of Christ not as welcome news, but as an intrusion.

There was King Herod. Herod's reaction to the news was hatred and hostility. He was threatened. His power and position, his status and stature were under attack by one whose power

was greater, whose position was at the right hand of God, whose status was divine and whose stature was immeasurable. He didn't want Christ showing up as the First Footer at his door. That would be bad news for him indeed. Instead, he tried to be a First Footer of Christ showing up at the stable door waving a sword in his hand, but the Magi returned home another way, and Herod was too late. But Herod is still trying.

At this year's Royal Carol Service, King Charles requested this poem to be read.

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.ⁱⁱⁱ

Herod is still alive today trying to kill and muzzle those who would dare interfere. Herod, you see, represents the principalities and powers, and they are right to feel threatened. But strike out as they may, their reign is only temporary. They cannot kill the Anointed One of God. Like Herod they too will die, and the victory of Christ will be final. Whether they like it or not, Christ is the First Footer in the doors of the principalities and powers, and the new future is in Christ's hands.

And there were also the chief priests and scribes in Herod's court. They didn't even try to show up at his door, nor would he be welcome at theirs. They reacted with indifference and apathy. Certainly, they could read in Micah where the child was to be born, but so what? His coming lacked importance in their futures, at least as they perceived them. There was no room in their hearts for Christ.

During a poll of a local radio station, a reporter asked three people, "Do you believe there is a God?" The first one replied, "Oh yes, I believe there is. But whether I have just been brought up to believe it as a child, I don't know, but I suppose I believe there is a God."

The second one said, "I have always been brought up to believe there is a God. Sometimes I wonder. I won't argue about it."

The third one replied, "Well, yes, I think I believe in God. We've got to believe in something, don't we?"

Is there not something pathetic about these responses? With such vagueness certainly Christ is not the First Footer in their lives. Christ does not determine their futures.

It was only outsiders by status and race, position and geography – shepherds and Magi – who reacted to the coming of this First Footer, Christ, with adoration, excitement, anticipation and joy.

Is Christ your First Footer? How do you greet his coming? With hostility? With indifference? With vagueness? Or with joy and expectation which transforms your new year with a new future?

Herod, in spite of his hatred, was somewhat more perceptive than were his chief priests and scribes. Indeed, his perception was the cause of his hatred and hostility. In the coming of the Magi, he saw the sign of the coming of Christ's world conquest. He saw in Christ the turning point of history, the watershed in God's economy. Darkness was being replaced by light; hiddenness with openness; mystery with revelation; ignorance

with knowledge. What was invisible is now visible, and that visibility, that person standing on the doorstep of your heart, at the threshold of your future, is beckoning, calling, demanding that we clarify our commitment. In that commitment is a new future.^{iv}

The commitment to which we are called is more than the vagueness of the three people interviewed by the radio reporter. We need a commitment which, as Isaiah said, reflects the glory of God, a commitment which attracts others, not to itself, but to Christ, a commitment which creates a new future for others. It means being a First Footer in someone else's life.^v

I think for most of us that it is a frightening, even threatening, and apparently impossible, prospect. It seems much easier to profess a vague belief than to lead a vibrant life founded upon commitment and motivated by faith. It's difficult to believe that we might actually make a difference in someone's life, a difference real enough to be of God. It's easier to believe in an abstract Christ who came upon a time in the flesh, than in a real Christ who desires to come now in your flesh.

Every year on New Year's Eve there are parties and celebrations everywhere. At City Hall in Toronto there is always a big party with famous as well as upcoming entertainers. There is skating on the rink if it's cold enough. However, there are also vigils by those who care about the poor and about justice. There are vigils in churches, other places of worship and other venues for those who want to establish justice for the disrespected poor. The hope is that through prayer and through making others aware of the injustices in the world those with influence will make changes that change our society.

People can make a difference. We can alter the future making it clear and bright. When we open our hearts to Christ he will come in as the First Footer of our future bringing us confidence and courage, caring and comfort. What is more he will bring us the challenge to commitment as he seeks to use us as the First Footer in someone else's life.

May we begin this year with Christ at the centre of the home of our heart, and may all that we are and all that we do reveal the glory of God and bring good news into the futures of both God's world and God's people. So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Victoria Stevens, "First Footer kicks off New Year," *The Toronto Star*, December 27, 1988.

ⁱⁱ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Doubleday, 1977, p. 199; J. Robert Watt, *The Stars of Christmas*, Abingdon Press, 1963, pp. 69-71; William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1 (Revised)*, Welch, 1975, pp. 32-33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Malcolm Guite, "Refugee", read at the Royal Carol Service by Dame Kristin Scott Thomas DBE, Westminster Abbey, December 15, 2022.

^{iv} Cf. Ephesians 3: 1-12.

^v Isaiah 60: 1-6.