

In the normal way I would hope to have a big, bold, entertaining visual illustration for an informal service like this - but I have none. What I do have is a pretty difficult subject to tackle, so how can I make it interesting and imaginative? Well, I've decided to do an experiment and make it conversational. Like you, I guess, I have more questions than answers so this is a way of exploring things together. It'll probably largely take the form of putting hands up and down but we also have a microphone available for anyone who wants to join in with a comment – and I, for one would certainly appreciate it if you did. So be brave, join in, and don't worry, the microphone will come to you so no need to leave your seat.

It's still near enough the start of 2024 to stop and take stock of the year ahead – though, actually, you could be forgiven for thinking it's still Christmas with the reading being the opening verses of John 1. But, as we shall see, that reading has a much wider application than just Christmas so it's nice to take it outside its normal context.

So, New Year. Would anyone like to tell us about something they are looking forward to in their family or personal life this year? Something that gives a sense of hope and meaning?.....For me, it's the wedding of my son, James, in May.

And what about the world in general? Does the prospect of 2024 fill you with hope and confidence?.....If I ask about your concerns I guess there will be a much greater response.....

Some of the topics that might be raised

Wars / Build up of powerful weapons/unpredictable world leaders

Poverty/widening gaps between haves and have-nots/corruption and scandal (Post Office)

Crime, violence, abuse, neglect

Health and wellbeing – Covid/NHS

Refugees and asylum seekers

Global warming and environment

Gender debate

Artificial intelligence

Some of these issues have always been around in some shape or form, but the last three are peculiar to our own era and are big contributors to the shaky way we feel.

Stuart and I made a momentous decision last September to stop watching the television News because the constant bombardment with bad news was seriously getting us down (though we still do read up on it, of course). Does anyone else feel the same?

Sometimes it's hard to stop oneself thinking I wish the world could be like it was when I was a child. I was lucky in having been born in the early 1950s when, I suppose, life was relatively stable and certainly old, traditional values largely held true. But, although I wasn't aware of it, the country had only recently come out of war – amazingly, the nearest I got to awareness of that was my mother saying "You've got as much butter on that piece of toast as we had to last a week in the war!" and I only understood how close to it we still were when I was very much older. The truth is, the world has never been a safe or stable place, however protected we were in childhood. It is always changing, never stands still, whether it be gradual or something cataclysmic like the Industrial Revolution or the Black Death.

Most disturbing and unsettling in recent years has been the breakdown of values and loss of the Christian heritage on which our society was built and of which most people had at least a vague knowledge and acceptance. There is, nowadays, a loss of the sense of certainty and truth, leaving everything relative, insecure and impermanent. Symptoms of this are all around us, from family breakdown to questioning of authority. I'm not saying we shouldn't ask questions or that there is nothing good, but there is a general feeling of uncertainty, fear, scepticism about the future and meaninglessness, often leading to depression and detachment from society.

Now, here's a more personal question! You don't have to answer, but does anyone here have a tattoo? The recent explosion of interest in tattoos is a 21st century phenomenon which has brought them from the back street to the high street, from the outside to the mainstream. Why? And what on earth has this got to do with the Christian message?

Looking around for ideas online I came across a reference to a book called *Flesh: Bringing the Incarnation Down to Earth* by Hugo Halter. I haven't read it myself but apparently it starts with him taking his teenage daughter to get her first tattoo. Whilst watching the process, he asked the tattoo artist, Sean, "Why do you think so many people get so many tattoos? And why is the art of tattooing growing exponentially around the world?" Sean replied "Because it's something permanent etched on someone's flesh that can't be stolen, taken away or corrupted. It's unique to them, deeply, irrevocably theirs, and represents a story that has formed them or at least means something to them". Tattoos represent the deep need for something permanent and unchangeable that cries out inside all humanity.

I don't know what your favourite TV programs are. As it's an informal service and this is all getting rather deep let's sidetrack a moment and find out. It will be interesting to see if one of Stuart's and my top programs gets a mention.....Well, our favourite is *The Repair Shop* where people bring in old artefacts with sentimental associations for restoration by amazingly skilful experts. The repair process itself is interesting; so is the human story behind the object; but the most striking thing, in this context, is the effect of the object's transformation on the owner. To me, it illustrates time and time again people's love of family, tradition, permanence and continuity through the desire to save and pass on their heritage. I see it too in another favourite, *Long Lost Family*. In a shaky and uncertain world, these things MATTER.

OK, so how does this relate to today's reading? Well, here, if we will accept it, we have the answer to all our longings for something permanent, unchangeable and trustworthy.

"In the beginning was the Word". It, the Word – Jesus, the authority, Wisdom (as He was personified in the Proverbs reading), the source of life that brought life to humanity – was there before the creation of the world, outside time and space.

That's the beginning but it carries on. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out". That takes care of the present.

The implication, however - made explicit in the New Living translation which reads "the darkness can never extinguish it" - is that that will not change in the future either.

So, for those who will accept it, here is what the human soul yearns for, something solid, secure and unchangeable to set against the shifting sands of life. The tragedy is that though "the Word was in the world, and though God made the world through Him, yet the world did not recognize Him. He came to His own country but His own people did not receive Him".

This is what we see in our world today. Over the centuries there has been a concerted effort to dispense with God in favour of a supremacy-of-human-beings philosophy, culminating in the rejection of and hostility to God we see today, leading to a crumbling away of the Christian foundations on which our security was built and replacing it with.....well, what? It seems to me that when humans have the running of the world to themselves it's a rather desperate place!

For those who will receive Him, God offers a comfort and security which overcomes the world. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end, holding the world together in the same way that the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet hold all the letters in between. He is the rock on which we can safely build (Matthew 7.24), a faithful God who keeps His covenant of love (Deuteronomy 7.9) and who shelters us under His wings (many references in the Psalms), the shepherd who leads us through the valley of the shadow of death to green pastures (Psalm 23) and seeks and saves the lost (John 10), to select a few of many metaphors.

And so to the biggest question of them all – how do we know all this is true? John gives his answer in verse 14 "The Word became a human being.....and lived among us. WE SAW HIS GLORY." Yes, it's right to examine things rigorously – we must ask questions and there is no shame in doubt. But in the end, it's down to the evidence. John saw Jesus at work in his life. We can too, if our eyes are open. God's power to withstand the world is there for all who turn to Him.

Now, that's where I was intending to end. And in doing so, I was aware that there is another huge, unanswered question.....How do we keep our certainty through the times when there seems to be no evidence of God's glory at all?

Stuart came up with a surprising insight through, of all things, watching the recent Chelsea – Middlesborough football match. He's turned it into a modern parable:

Faith is like a football club supporter.

Hello, my name is Mathew and I support Christian City football club. We are an enthusiastic and loyal bunch, cheering our team on in good times and commiserating together in bad times. We are faithful to our football club in good times and bad.

On one occasion we had gone to play Atheist Athletic in a cup match. We had beaten them 1 0 at home and had high hopes of a great victory at their ground. But at half time we were losing 4 0 - a complete disaster!

There was no way back. Why had our high hopes been smashed to the ground so emphatically?

Glumly we watched as the Atheist Athletic outran and outplayed us. They seemed to have all the answers leaving us with lots of questions about our Christian City club.

As the fifth goal went in, we suddenly realised, as one, what we had to do. We stood and waved our scarves and banners. We sang our songs. We laughed and cheered. And our team Christian City began to fight. They ran harder. They held their heads high. They began to play more convincingly.

At the end of the game Atheist Athletic won the match 6 .1. But we were not downhearted.

Christian City may have lost the match, but we had won the game in our eyes. Christian City is the best club in the world and will always have our undying admiration and determination to follow them, confident that better times lie ahead.

Dear Lord,

When we fail to see Your glory and are tempted to despair, may we be like the Middlesborough (Christian City) football fans, believing in and praising You all the more, knowing You will not let us down,

Amen