

New Year thoughts 2021

As we emerge from this most challenging of years, many of us are looking to the coming year with a mix of anticipation and possibly trepidation and fear. Finally there is light at the end of our very long tunnel, but do we have the strength to make it to the end?

I've had a number of thoughts which I hope will provide at least a little encouragement. First though some big challenges and questions from the last few months...

Facing unanswered prayers and the God of the long view

This past year has been so hard for so many of us – including for me personally! As many of you will know, I broke my shoulder very badly in early March. Thankfully it has healed enough for me to play, although it will never be as good as it was before the accident (barring a miracle). It happened on the last live event Epiphany was able to be involved in for many months, so I'm sure God's hand was on the timing, but I'd be foolish to suggest that I understood all the reasons for this accident. The big question 'why' hasn't been fully answered.

But of course that paled into insignificance compared to the tragic news of friends who've succumbed to this terrible virus or other illnesses. We prayed and we prayed! Seemingly to no avail. Our 'instant' God seems to have hidden His face and all our impassioned prayers seem to have fallen on deaf ears. We try to rationalise it, but reality keeps hitting us in the face, and if we're honest, our once easy faith has been severely challenged! There are a lot of hurting and confused people out there and we're not immune ourselves. Where is God's voice in all of this? The 'prophets' have had plenty to say, but again much of it has been shouting in the wind as the reality of this pandemic has taken hold. I'm not saying all that's been said has been wrong, but we do need to be careful in speaking for God whilst ignoring the reality of where we are. The Psalms are a great comfort in all of this with their honesty, mixed with faith, even when answers aren't forthcoming.

What is truth – and do we care?

I debated with myself whether to leave this next bit in, but I've decided to as I feel so strongly about it – and because it's about caring for others (which is part of the theme of this post), so I think it's relevant...

This has been a year of fake news and conspiracy theories. I've been appalled at the propagation and ready acceptance of conspiracy theories abounding on social media – in some cases even spread by Christians. At the extreme end it is belief that the virus isn't real or that the government is seeking to bring in a totalitarian world government where we're all microchipped and controlled through the very thing that will bring us freedom – the vaccine. How utterly absurd and dangerous is such thinking! In spreading such disinformation, we show an unbelievable lack of care for others – the very opposite of how our Father in Heaven wants us to be. Rather than celebrating the scientists and health care professionals who've spent months seeking to find a way out of this pandemic, we share 'fake news' that could literally kill thousands if they become suspicious of the very thing that will set them free! We are right to be angry at such lies. Let's examine ourselves and not be among those who disseminate such dangerous falsehoods rather than truth.

When the Israelite spies came back from the promised land, most of them brought back a bad report and spread false rumour about the land that God had promised to give them. This caused the people to fear and they spent much longer in the wilderness as a result. Let's rather be like Caleb and Joshua who believed the truth of God's promise and encouraged the people to go up and take possession of the land without fear. See Numbers chapters 13 & 14.

So how do we go on from here?

I believe there are a number of things we need to embrace – each of which has the potential to cause those around us to find freedom and to flourish!

Blessing and celebrating other people and their ministries

Firstly a challenging question! How do we view our personal skills, gifts and ministries - and do we compare ourselves to others?

If we're honest, we sometimes fall into the trap of believing that our ministry or theology (or whatever!) is better than that of others. We too easily compare our ministry to theirs and find it hard to celebrate and encourage their God-given calling. Interestingly, the Bible suggests that we should consider others *better* than ourselves (See Philippians 2: 3-4).

As we move forwards into this New Year, God wants to use all of our gifts. They are going to be keys to bringing healing and hope to others around us. How can we encourage, support, promote and celebrate ministries other than our own? None of us is perfect! God loves the variety that each of us brings in our different ways. And each of us is going to be needed in this challenging new world...

The role of music and the arts in this new emerging world

I believe that all of us are going to have a significant part to play as we begin to be freed from lockdown. The mental health crisis that's emerging from this pandemic is vast. And it's not just others 'out there'. Some of us reading this have not been immune as we've been badly hit by loss of work, income and, of course, human contact.

All the well-meaning words in the world will not be able to bring healing to such wounds. Words are important, but often it's music and the other arts that are best able to articulate these deepest wounds in our lives. As Hans Christian Anderson wrote: '*Where words fail, music speaks*'.

All of our skills are likely to become crucial in the months and years ahead as people are looking for a way of articulating their pain and confusion. I suspect some of us could become rather busy as we learn to follow the promptings and leadings of God's Spirit and feel the compassion in God's heart and hear the cry of the hurting people around us.

Risk-taking, courage & bravery, imagination and mess!

All of this will require our willingness to take risks, to be brave and courageous! Are we willing to think imaginatively? I personally believe that imagination is an amazing gift of God! Let's think and dream creatively as we seek to stay close to our Father in Heaven.

Linked to that, are we willing to make mistakes, and even to be messy at times, as we learn to explore new ways of doing things? Let's not be crippled by fear, or by what we think others think of us. And let's encourage each other along the way. I believe we've only scratched the surface of what is possible as God's Spirit inspires us.

Not going back – embracing change

Many of us, I believe, are being asked to re-examine our ministries, to see if we should simply try to get back to where we were before the pandemic, or to take the opportunity to explore new possibilities and ideas. No doubt we'll still do some things in the same way, but it would be a hugely missed opportunity if we stayed exactly the same in our vastly changed world. Be bold and courageous! The world is hurting, and it needs musicians and artists more than I think some of us have realised.

Driven by compassion

All of this needs to be driven by compassion. This was what caused Jesus to care so much for those around Him! He healed, He forgave, and He spoke in parables, encouraging people to explore the truth for themselves. Interestingly He rarely spoke in 'plain speech'. Jesus ministry was always creative and captured the imagination and hearts of those He met. Such ways of creative communication provides hope and healing – and ultimately a genuine hunger for truth.

Remember that art and music has the capacity to speak for itself, especially if inspired and initiated by God's Spirit. It doesn't need to have a spoken or written gospel message pinned on to it for it to be valid! God speaks in more ways than simply spoken words (though words definitely have value at the right time!).

One very public figure who has inspired me over the Christmas period is the artist Charlie Mackesy, who is also a Christian linked with Holy Trinity Brompton church in London. He was featured on BBC News main bulletins recently for his inspiring work with NHS staff and other key workers. He doesn't mention faith at all, but he is bringing the truth of God's love to millions! If you've not seen the news report, here's a link: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-55305286>

Believe in your giftedness, however 'insignificant'

Each of us has something to offer. Some of us struggle with feelings that others are better than us as musicians, artists, speakers – or simply as Christians. Let's encourage each other, especially those who are quieter and less confident than us. I've found over the years that it's often those who don't often have the courage to say much who have the greatest wisdom – and with whom people feel the safest to become vulnerable. Let's learn to listen and give everyone safe space to contribute.

If you feel that you have little to offer, consider the parable of the loaves and fishes in all four gospels. The five loaves and two fishes the young boy brought seemed so insignificant, but as Jesus blessed them, they fed a multitude!

If, on the other hand, you are confident in your own gifts and experience, don't be tempted to lose your dependence on God. You could be limiting what God can do through you.

In the little book 'Secrets of the Vine' by Bruce Wilkinson, he quotes a prayer by John Piper:

'Lord, let me make a difference for you that is utterly disproportionate to who I am'

Think about that prayer and pray it regularly, believing that God can multiply however much or little you are able to offer.

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think (Col 3:20)

Community, not individualism

One thing we have seen over the last few months is that we have the capacity to bring communities together where before there was little interaction. In our road here in Poynton, we're blessed to have six Christian musicians living within a few doors of each other. We've had the privilege over the last year of putting on several concerts for our road, playing for neighbours' birthdays and so on. The response has been amazing! It's brought nearly all of our neighbours out into the road, and everyone talks to each other regularly now, either in person, or on our very active WhatsApp group. Here are a few New Year messages that have been posted on WhatsApp just in the last couple of days:

Thank You to you all and especially to the Musicians for the music and for making 2020 so special on Ivy Road

Moving to Ivy Road has made our year, couldn't have imagined moving to a road with such lovely, caring neighbours. Loving the community feel, thank you to the musicians, I've loved your concerts.

Thank you for the music throughout the year. It has lifted our spirits.

And I know many others of you can testify to seeing the same results where you live, which has been wonderfully encouraging. Let's celebrate our communities and seek to continue blessing them, even when this pandemic has finally become a distant memory.

Final thoughts

I believe our fellowship with each other through the Musicians Network and within our various ministries is going to be very important in the years ahead. Let's continue to encourage, support, challenge and celebrate each other (See 1 Thess 5:11). We have some challenging times ahead, but there is huge potential for us to make a difference, so let's look forward to this New Year with hope and excitement as God reveals to us how we can bring blessing, healing, hope and renewed joy to those around us.

Very much love to you all

Richard Williamson