



THE NEW SHOFAR

"I know the plans I have for you", declares Yahweh, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11)

New Year

Gospel irony: 1 January is New Year's Day and the World Day of Peace

New Year's Day is always a challenge for believers as it is joined to the day the Church celebrates the World Day of Peace. What makes it difficult for us is the inner conflict which risks growing a sense of pessimism or cynicism within our hearts. We imagine it as a day for new beginnings, but our mind tells us that the world, and we ourselves as part of it, will continue mostly unchanged. Have we not all, at some time, made New Year resolutions to live a changed and better life, only to find that three or four weeks later we carry on living as before! Similarly, the World Day of Peace holds before us an ideal world where conflicts will stop, nasty social media postings will turn to encouragement, bombs and guns will be allowed to rust away, and family fights will be resolved... *the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the young goat, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them* **Isaiah 11:6** Yet we have seen each year that wars continue and that peace remains an impossible ideal. Part of us will wonder: *where are you Lord?* The prophet were well aware of these inner conflicts. They lived in a world of violence, selfishness, moral bankruptcy and the distractions of powerless gods. Despite all of this, the biblical prophets spoke over and over again of a new peace through the grace of God. It was simultaneously a peace to come and yet a peace already open to them in the midst of crisis and confusion. We struggle with this spiritual hope when we look around and see how war continues in the Middle East, Africa and the Ukraine; conflict around the world between people of varying ethnicities, skin colour, wealth, privilege and much more. What happened to the promise of **Micah 4:3** - *They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.* They remain firmly in our hands rather than rusting away in our paddocks from lack of use.

How is Australia going to celebrate the New Year?

This conflict between the way we like to imagine the breaking New Year and our experience of past New Years makes it difficult to celebrate new opportunities, new hopes and the possibility of a whole new way of living. Many people around

our nation will drink solidly through the night, shout, sing and blow car horns for ten minutes or so at midnight, drink some more, and then, when the sun rises it sees them with a headache regretting the night before, but rallying themselves to watch the Test match against South Africa, backyard cricket with mates, a boat race or two, all of which continue tradition from the past. We do our best to anticipate a bright future, one full of hope and biblical fulfilment, but those hopes collide with the reality of the world outside of our spiritual aspirations. How many resolutions survive February?

Can we radiate a different sense of the New Year?

Not every culture and religion celebrate the New Year with such pessimism. In some Buddhist cultures and traditions, for example, people commemorate both the disappointments and the hopes as part of the same reality. They wipe their faces with scented water to wash away the old year but also to wipe in the new. The ritual acknowledges the failures and betrayals that tarnished their lives in the year that has passed, but it also serves to commit to the hopes offered with a new beginning. The burdens of the old year are not left to fester and so undermine what might be coming their way in what is a new world. The reality is that they have been set free from the past and choose to move forward in hope, with confidence into a time that is totally unknown and filled with prospects for a transformed life.

This New Year, the reminders of life as a continuous struggle are strong. We are unable to isolate ourselves fully from the pains the last year brought our way. We remain very much aware of the power of the coronavirus and of the need to live carefully to limit its recurrence and spread. January and February also echo experiences of past bushfires and raise terrifying pictures of what could be lying ahead for those who are ill prepared. None of these, however, changes the Christian realities of New Year's Day. It remains is a time to look back on the year gone, to give thanks for all God has given to us, to repent for our failings; but it also a time to take up the graces open to us now at the beginning of the new year and commit to the way we wish to live personally and as a community in the coming year.

What makes our Christian approach distinctive? In Christ we emphasise the goodness of our world, the holiness of people in it and our certainty that because of God's love there is hope in every moment of what might be presumed to be a darkness. The image of the New Year is the same as that of Christmas: a helpless newborn child, a symbol of innocence and hope within all the perils of nature and

of a murderous king. When we see the Christ child, we see both our present and our future.