

New Year 2005
Homily of December 31, 2004
by Father Brian Joyce

The oldest holiday, or holy day, we know in the history of the human race is New Year's. The earliest records we have are five thousand years ago. And we know that the ancient Romans celebrated New Year's by breaking branches off of what they considered sacred trees and giving branches to one another in exchange for "Happy New Year." A little later, they began to exchange coins, I guess when they got a little better off! The coins had the face of the god Janus on them. Janus is where we get the word "January." The one special thing about the god Janus is he is two-faced. He has a face looking to the past and a face looking to the future. That is why the god Janus became the symbol of New Year's where, just as we are tonight, we look at the past and give thanks for that. We look to the future and gather our hopes for that.

The looking-back part can be difficult. We look back to this past year, and one thing that dominates our minds has got to be Iraq and that quagmire of violence that we are involved in, endangering our young people and young people of the middle east.... Iraq. Another thing, if we look back to the past year, was the election which brought cheers to some and acute depression to others.... the Presidential election. Most of all, is the tsunami and earthquake and its victims, which has really gathered the hearts of all people, knowing that we are all brothers and sisters to one another and seeing the terrible loss of life and the terrible pain of victims. It has actually moved our whole planet. The North Pole is not where it was two weeks ago and the length of our days is different from what it was in the past, not by much, but the whole planet changed.

Looking back can be difficult, and it helps me to remember that, even though we speak of the celebrating of New Year's as the most ancient of the holy days and holidays, nothing is very ancient right now. We live in a very fresh new world. We have a long, long way to go. As a human family we have a long way to go to become fully responsible for each other. And as Christians we have a long way to go to digest and make part of our world the teaching of Christ and truly to become the Body of Christ on earth. I'll give you a brief example of what I mean by "we have a long way to go."

If you take the story of our universe, which is approximately fifteen billion years in length, give or take a billion years. (It's kind of like politicians dealing with the budget.... give or take a billion.) But if we take the fifteen billion years story of our universe and compact it into a single calendar year, say it was this past year, the year two thousand four. What would it look like? We know that in the first second of January first came what scientists call "The Big Bang" but believers call that unbelievable flaring forth of God's unconditional love that began our lives. That's the beginning, the Universe Story. And it isn't until September ninth that, for the first time, our Solar System appears.

And it isn't until a little later, about September fourteenth, that our Planet Earth appears for the first time. And then, if we do a little investigating, we find that on October second we get the first records of the first rocks ever formed on our planet. It takes 'til December sixth for the first worms to appear. And then, on the day after Christmas, December twenty-sixth, the first mammals appear. On December twenty-seventh, just a couple of days ago, the first birds take flight and appear. Finally, today, December thirty-first, for the first time, we have human life. For the first time, human beings appear. And really in the last ten minutes of this year we have all of human history, which means, if you think of it as today, 11:51, the cave paintings first take shape. Five minutes later, the Roman Empire appears and the birth of Christ. A few minutes after that, 11:59, comes Columbus. And here we are, milliseconds before the end of the day.

Now the reason I mention this and it gives me heart, first of all, when I think of it this way, we are just beginning and we are contemporaries of Christ. It was just minutes ago. We are just beginning. As a human family, we are just taking our first steps. We are still in infancy, and we don't get it right all the time.

And, finally, as a people looking to the future, we have a long way to go. So when we celebrate the end of one year and look to a new one, it helps me to realize we are just starting out here. We are just beginning to walk with Jesus. We are just beginning to fulfill the plan of our God. And it opens things up greatly.

I have three suggestions for the new year for all of us. First one is, we try to learn something. Look at the year past. Did you learn anything? My favorite learning was a reminder that Tom Bates gave me the other morning from the movie "Rudy" where the priest (He is supposed to be an older priest.) said, "In my thirty years as a priest," (That guy is a kid, but....) he says, "I have learned two things. There is a God and it's not me." That's not a bad lesson for all of us. Try to learn something from the year past.

The second thing I would suggest is to see if you can't let go of a lot of garbage (resentments, angers, what if, if-only). You can't let go of it. I remember the story of a lady who moved from her small apartment to a brand new house and the movers came in and they said, "What do you want to move?" And she said, "Take everything." They took her seriously. When she moved into her beautiful new house there was trash. There was garbage. There were orange peels. There were empty bottles. There were old newspapers. They took everything and they moved it along to her new house. Don't take everything into the new year. See if you can't let go of some of the garbage.

And, finally, look forward to a lot. Our world, we ourselves have a long way to go. And look forward to it with hope.

I finish with some New Year's resolutions that come from one of the great theologians of the twentieth century, Erma Bombeck. Now, she wrote these largely about her children. But I like the phrase that says to each one of us, "You are a child of the universe and you are all brothers and

sisters, children with and of one another.” So, with her resolutions, remember that we are children together and for each other.

1. I am going to clean this dump just as soon as the kids grow up.
2. I will go to no doctor whose office plants have died.
3. I am going to follow my husband’s suggestion to put a little excitement into our lives by living within our budget.
4. I am going to apply for a hardship scholarship to Weight Watchers.
5. I will never lend my car to anyone I have given birth to.

And the last one, and this is for all of us as children of one another and brothers and sisters together:

And just like last year, I am going to remember that my children need love the most when they deserve it the least.

Happy New Year!