

Well, we stand again on the cusp of a new year and, while we realise that there's nothing really new about it, most of us can't help but think about what it might bring for us and for our community, and indeed for our world.

Many people, I suspect, might be somewhat concerned or even anxious about the future. Australia's Jewish community is certainly anxious about it, and I feel anxious for them, and I feel a corresponding anxiety about our community. I never thought I would see the day in Australia when Jewish school children are scared to wear their uniforms in public for fear of persecution and when synagogues and Jewish schools feel the need for armed security guards. What have we come to as a society, and where are we headed?

There are, of course, other factors that are creating anxiety for particular groups within our society. Younger Australians, for example, are increasingly squeezed out of the housing market as house prices rise faster than their savings. Many of those who do have a home and a mortgage are concerned about the cost of living and rising interest rates. Older Australians are concerned about their financial security and the possibility that their health might deteriorate as year follows year. And you would need to be an ostrich not to be concerned about the international situation, and how that might develop over the next twelve months.

The thing is, that often there's little we can do about what might happen over the next year. Granted, we can do what we should to maintain or improve our health; we can be prudent about our finances; we can voice our concern about the direction our community seems to be taking, and so on. That said, much of what happens, for good or ill, will be beyond our control and hence might be a source of anxiety. How will we, how will you, in the next 12 months, navigate through what the Book of Common Prayer calls 'the changes and chances of this fleeting world'? What will guide you, what will provide equilibrium if and when the going gets rough? Well, I think, today's Gospel reading can provide us answers to those questions - or more probably remind us of the answers we already know but need to re-incorporate into our lives. In that reading an old man called Simeon finds what he needs to die in peace. As Simeon takes the infant Jesus in his arms he declares:

*"Master, now let your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word; <sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation (Luke 2.29 -30)*

It's important, as we think about what Simeon is saying, that we understand what the Bible means by the word 'peace', because it differs from our everyday usage. Today we tend to think of peace as an absence of strife, either between people or in our personal lives, but the biblical concept of peace is much richer than that. It derives from the Hebrew word 'shalom'. 'Shalom' includes the idea of peace as an absence of strife - and sometimes it's used in that way - but where shalom is linked to God, where it is God's shalom, it goes way beyond that. Shalom flows from a realisation and acceptance of God's love and faithfulness, and might be described as a comprehensive contentment in life which transcends both individual achievement and difficult circumstances. Think about that for a moment, peace or shalom, God's shalom, means a contentment in life which transcends both individual achievement and difficult circumstances. This quality of shalom, this quality of peace, is always recognised as a gift given by God. We can accept – or ignore – this gift but it's not something that human beings can achieve through their own efforts. Returning to our text, old Simeon declares that he has been granted this shalom, this contentment in life as he gazes at the infant Jesus because in him, in Jesus, Simeon recognises that God's salvation has entered the world.

Salvation, in the NT, is a big wide word which encompasses all that God has done and will do in rescuing and restoring an errant humanity and indeed the whole of creation. The apostles 'ransack their vocabularies' (Morris) to find words to describe the length and height and breadth of what God does for us in salvation – and all of this, Simeon recognises, is so closely tied to Jesus that he declares simply, 'My eyes have seen your salvation'. To recognise Jesus is to recognise God's salvation, and the recognition of God's salvation brings God's shalom – a contentment in life that transcends life's circumstances. For Simeon even his approaching death, certainly one of the most extreme of life's circumstances, doesn't disturb him, he is quite ready to depart content with God and with life, which is to say, to depart in peace.

Now, you might be thinking, 'Well, I've come to faith in the LIX, I've recognised him and recognised God's salvation in him but I still get anxious about things and I still, at times, don't feel that contentment with God and with life that you've been talking about.' If that's the case for you, you're not alone, I'm the same, and I'm sure there are a good many others who feel that way. Our problem is not lack of knowledge of salvation, nor is it lack of faith; our problem is

forgetting. I think I've said before, and I'll probably say it again, that one of my professors at Fuller Seminary used to say that the chief problem of Christians is forgetting (Maloney). He went on to say that Christians generally have a clear knowledge of faith and they have a clear experience of Jesus as Lord and Saviour in their lives but that in the complexities and pressures of life, with all the demands and weariness they involve, it is too easy to forget the sheer greatness of what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus, and when that is pushed out of our mind, fear and anxiety are waiting to enter in. I should say, by the way, that not all anxiety is bad, there are things we should be mindful of, but worrying about everything, especially things that are beyond our control, wastes emotional energy and can drain us of life. God's desire for us is that we should know a contentment that transcends the circumstances of life, whatever they are. This doesn't mean we'll avoid difficult times in life, nor traumatic situations that may well come our way. What it does mean is that we won't be conquered by those situations, nor intimidated by those circumstances that we think may lie in the future.

If our chief problem is forgetting, what do you think might be the path to recovering a life lived in God's shalom? That's a pretty easy question really – if forgetting's the problem the answer must be remembering!

Particularly in those circumstances in life where we feel under threat, or we are feeling anxiety, we need to hit the pause button and take time to reflect again on God's promises to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. You might like to look up a Bible passage that is meaningful for you, or which speaks into your anxiety, and to reflect on it for a while, and let it sink in. It's not enough, you see, to remember those promises with our heads, we also need to re-experience them in our hearts, because it's only as we re-experience the greatness of God's love for us, and of the salvation God has wrought for us, that we can regain the shalom God wants for us – that contentment in life that transcends any particular circumstances. Regaining shalom chases away panic and allows us to engage constructively with those around us and with challenging circumstances.

There are other ways, as well as personal reflection on God's word, that can help us regain a sense of God's shalom in our lives. Our Christian community, the church, and its worship is a key support in remembering and re-experiencing God's love. In worship we hear again God's

promises as God's word is read and expounded; our community prayer and praise re-invigorates faith; and there are times when the bread and wine of Communion will speak, more powerfully than any words, of the depth of God's love for us in Christ's body broken and his blood shed for us. Praying, with one or two fellow Christians who you know and trust, is also a valuable way to re-experience God's love in those challenging circumstances of life which come to us all.

The thing is, we can't know every member of the congregation well enough to create that level of trust, that's one reason why Rev Jo and I are keen to foster small bible study and prayer groups. We must remember that the church is not primarily an organisation, it's first and foremost the body of Christ, and as members of the body we're meant to pray for one another and encourage one another. We have to find ways to help that to happen.

The future is uncertain, it always is and always will be. There will be things beyond our control, but as we remember and re-experience the greatness of God's salvation, the greatness of God's love for us in the Lord Jesus Christ, then whatever the circumstances of our lives, we can know God's peace, God's shalom. There may still be grief, and there may still be tears, as well as joy, from time to time, but it is also possible for us to know a contentment in life that transcends our circumstances and which is God's gift to us.

At the close of his letter to the Philippians St Paul writes:

*<sup>6</sup>Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4.6-7)*

That's God's promise to us, it's for us to take it up.

*May the Lord bless you and keep you:*

*<sup>25</sup>The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you:*

*<sup>26</sup>The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you his peace. (Numbers 6.24-26)*