

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
New Year's Day, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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How did you celebrate New Year's Eve?

The folks on TV give us the impression that every American is supposed to do something wonderful on New Year's Eve.

1,000,000 people crammed into Times Square to watch the ball drop. They arrived at 2 in the afternoon to get a prime spot. Then they stood there. And stood there. Some years it snows on all those people. This year it rained. Every year, those one million people realize how difficult it is to stand in the same place for 10 hours, without a public restroom nearby. Happy New Year!

In Australia, there were fireworks in Sydney harbor.

In many places, people go out in the winter weather, they strip down to their bathing suit and jump into a river that is 34 degrees. They call it the "polar bear plunge." I call it crazy.

In parts of Italy, they understand that New Year's day is a chance to let go of the old, and to embrace the new. So, all over Italy, at the stroke of midnight, people throw old household items out the window into the street below. They don't just throw a broken glass, or an old piece of clothing out the window. A friend of mine personally saw people throw the following things out of Italian windows: a couch, a loved one's ashes, and an old toilet. Happy New Year!

So how did YOU celebrate New Year's eve?

When I was growing up, New Year's Eve was less glamorous than what we saw on TV. We never dressed up like Cary Grant and attended an elegant party.

Typically, my parents hosted a pinochle party – a card party – which promptly ended at 10:00. We would clean up the house, and sit down in front of the old Zenith TV to watch "Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians," live from the Waldorf Astoria Hotel.

My mother would always say, "Wake me up at midnight so that I can hear them play Auld Lang Syne." And three minutes later, she'd be asleep. Dad was already snoring. About two minutes before midnight, we'd wake everyone up. The countdown happened, everyone would scream "happy new year." Guy Lombardo would start playing his song, while mom sang along:

Should old acquaintance be forgot

*and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot
And old lang syne?*

One year, after all the commotion, my brother asked, “What does that song mean?” There was silence in the room. No one really knew what an ‘Auld Lang Syne’ was!

Years later, when I was studying at St. Andrews in Scotland, I found out that the Scottish poet, Robert Burns, wrote the lyrics based on some older Scottish poems.

And if you read the whole text, you discover that the song is basically about one thing. It is an invitation to remember.

The first verse, which is the verse that most of us have heard, is really a rhetorical question. On New Year’s Eve we ask each other, ‘should we forget what has happened in the past?’ Especially, ‘should we forget the friends and acquaintances who have been good to us in the past?’

And that phrase, *Auld lang syne*, is a Scottish phrase which literally means “old long since.” In other words, it means “long, long ago” or “for the sake of the old times.”

The song is an invitation to remember the good times we have shared with good people. It is an invitation, as a new year begins, to hold on to the memory of blessings, laughter, love. It is so easy to forget. But old acquaintances need to be remembered. They are a blessing.

In Luke’s Gospel, it is not Guy Lombardo who provides the music. A choir of angels takes care of that. And they are not singing a Scottish poem. They are singing *Glory to God in the highest*.

But as we listen to today’s Gospel passage, we discover that there is someone who understands how important it is to remember. And that person is Mary, the Mother of God.

So much has happened so quickly to this young woman from Nazareth. Luke is almost breathless as he describes everything that happens to Mary: the unexpected visit from the angel Gabriel, the news of her miraculous pregnancy, the pregnancy which put her marriage at risk, her reputation at risk, her life at risk.

There was Joseph’s decision to stand by her (we hear about that in Matthew’s Gospel). Then came the long, hard journey to Bethlehem, just as Mary was ready to give birth. There was the lack of room at the inn. There was the pain of childbirth, then the joy of holding her baby for the first time. The unexpected visit from the shepherds from the fields.

Now, the shepherds were headed back to their flocks, glorifying God.

And what does Mary do? Luke tells us that she *remembers*. Luke says that she “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”

This wasn't just a simple act of mental remembering. She *thought* about all that had happened. *Pondered* it. Tried her best *to understand* what God was up to, and what role she was supposed to play in God's great plan for the world.

Keep in mind – the angel was no longer sitting right beside Mary, explaining everything. Luke mentions that the angel had already *left* Mary. So, she had to use her brain, her faith, her strength, her wisdom, to discern what God was up to today. She used her skills to discern how God had guided her in the past, and how to say ‘yes’ to where God wanted to take her in the future.

She kept these things. She reflected on them. She remembered.

Brothers and sisters, you may have made many New Year's resolutions for 2019. You may have resolved to lose weight, or to stop smoking. You may have resolved to stop being angry, to be more charitable, to pray more often. All of these are good.

But on this feast of Mary, Mother of God, perhaps God is inviting us to another resolution. Perhaps God is asking us to remember.

Perhaps God is asking each of us to spend some time – in days ahead – to remember the *auld lang syne* – ‘the times which have gone by’ – in 2018. And specifically, to gratefully remember how God has been there for you throughout the last 12 months.

Remember, with gratitude, how God woke you up every morning and gave you the opportunity to live another day.

Remember, with gratitude, the people you love, and who love you.

Remember, with gratitude, how God gave you strength to handle the tough times, and to rejoice in the good times.

Remember, with gratitude, how God gave you the chance to recognize the face of Jesus in every person, especially in the faces of the poor, the suffering, the stranger, the ones seeking safety and a place to call home.

Remember, with gratitude, whatever beauty you experienced, and how you recognized Christ in the world's beauty.

Remember. Reflect. Ponder. Pray. Christ was with you at every step of 2018, whether you knew

it or not. Christ is with you today, enabling you to let go of what is not from God, and to hold on to God's blessings. Christ will be with you, guiding you so that you can play the role that he has planned for you in 2019.

Long before Guy Lombardo made an old Scottish song popular, the Virgin Mary was showing us, by her example, how important it is to remember. If *auld acquaintance* should never be forgot, then how much more are we supposed to remember what God has done for us in Christ? That is worth remembering, and celebrating, and retelling, until we sing again in 2020.

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