

Happy New Year!

I hope everyone enjoyed their traditional way of letting in the new year, whatever it might be. I didn't grow up with any. My father moonlighted as a taxi driver, and New Year's Eve was the best night of the year for taxis, so he was out from early evening to next morning, and the rest of us just went to bed.

That all changed when I married a man descended from highland Scots through his mother and lowland Scots through his father. The Allison clan came from exactly the same border area as the families who founded our parish church, and their new year rituals are very specific. They are also absolutely mandatory, even for Sassenachs who find it hard to stay awake past 9 o'clock (like me!).

First Footing requires that the first person over the threshold on January 1st must be a tall, dark man, bringing a piece of coal or firewood, and a bottle of whisky. He must be greeted with silver coins and a mince pie. This ritual ensures that the house will not want for warmth, food, drink or money in the coming year. And, to make sure that the tall dark man is the first person over the threshold on January 1st, this ritual must take place right after midnight. The man has to go outside before midnight and wait until after 12 to knock on the door and come in.

My husband became the tallest, darkest man in his family when he turned 13, so being the First Foot became his job then, and it still is, every year, all these decades later. I still have a problem staying awake, and every year I muddle up the ritual. Once a Sassenach, always a Sassenach, I'm afraid.

However we might choose to mark it, the New Year falls two-thirds of the way through the season of Christmas. By sunset on the 24th, as the season changes from Advent to Christmas, the preparations and planning are complete and everything comes together, ready or not. By sunrise on the 26th, the 'fridge is full of leftovers, the house is a cheerful mess, and you can finally sit down and take the next few days to reflect on another year gone by and a new one beginning. Christmas is all about beginnings, and just one week after we celebrate one new beginning with the traditions we cherish, we celebrate another new beginning with more cherished traditions.

One Christmas tradition that is widely shared is to enjoy a re-telling of *A Christmas Carol*. Ever

since it was published in 1843, this particular story, in one form or another, has been part of Christmas. As we all know, it's a story about a man who really, really, needs to make a new beginning, but has missed every chance so far, and needs some serious supernatural intervention to set him right.

Dickens published a new Christmas story every year for quite a few years, but the other stories are not well known. They haven't captured the public imagination quite like the reclamation of Ebenezer Scrooge has, but every one of these stories has something special to say about the season.

One of these Christmas stories – *The Chimes* – is set specifically on a cold and frosty New Year's Eve, as the cathedral bells ring out the passage from the old year into the new year. It's another story about a man who gets to see what the future will look like if he carries along the path he has chosen, but this man is a very poor man, who has always been good and kind and faithful.

On this particular New Year's Eve, as he braves the cold to earn his living, this poor man is facing a number of difficult decisions and possible misfortunes. He is very much afraid of what the new year will hold for him and his family, and he is losing his faith. He has always been generous and faithful, but life has been very difficult for him. He is starting to doubt whether God cares about him and the people he loves. He can no longer muster up enough hope and trust to carry on. He is drowning in despair.

In the bitter cold of the last night of the year, as the cathedral clock chimes the hours, he sees visions of alternative futures, and gradually learns that the thing he should fear most is despair itself. He learns that there is a bigger picture that he cannot see, and an unfolding of events that he cannot understand.

He learns that there will be sorrows in his future, but if he gives in to despair and dwells on those sorrows, they will overcome him, and they will prevent him from seeing the joys that are also there. He learns that if he holds onto his faith through difficult times, he will know that God is walking with him. At the end of a long, cold night, he has learned to trust and hope, for God will not leave him.

Our celebration of Christmas marks the beginning of a new relationship between humankind and God in the birth of Jesus. We celebrate this event energetically every year, and a week later, we mark the beginning of a new calendar year just as energetically. This twelve day break is just what we need to restore our spirits and gird ourselves up for what is ahead, so that we can renew our trust and hope, knowing that whatever the future holds, God will be walking with us.

Today our gospel reading took us ahead to Epiphany, when the mysterious visitors from the east found the child, most likely as much as a year or two after his birth. The gifts they brought recognized who he was, and also foretold his future: gold to signify his kingship; frankincense to signify his holiness; and myrrh to signify his death.

We celebrate Epiphany as the time when the birth of Jesus was made known to the rest of the world. It's a word we still use to mean a sudden revelation of something very important, and the beginning of a new understanding. Up to this point only local shepherds and a few others had shared the news, but now it was out, and a whole new time was beginning. And not everyone was pleased.

The future for Joseph and Mary and Jesus had just become perilous, thanks to these well-meaning travellers, with their expensive gifts. But it was inevitable, as some sorrows and tragedies are. And Mary and Joseph had faith that God would be walking with them every step of the way.

We are celebrating Epiphany today because it falls before next Sunday, but it actually falls on January 6th, marking the end of the Christmas season. Between now and then, we still have a few days of Christmas left. In what remains of it, let's take some time to let the message of new beginnings, of trust and hope, and of God's presence with us seep into our souls and revive our faith.

God is with us. Hallelujah!