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As we go steadily on through life, it is natural for us to look behind at what has been, perhaps especially so when we enter a New Year. In Britain in 2014 there was much reflection on the outbreak of the Great War one hundred years ago, and 2015 is 800 years since the signing of Magna Carta and 200 years since the Battle of Waterloo. Such looking back can be healthy - it reminds us of past sacrifices by those who have gone before us, from which today we still reap so many benefits.

Scripturally we see the Lord also insisting that His people look back, regularly and methodically, as a reminder of who they are, how they have got to be where they are at, and above all, of the faithfulness and graciousness of Almighty God.

So for example, in Leviticus Chapter 23 we read of three great Feasts to be observed each year for the people of Israel. Passover reminded them of the wonderful Exodus wrought by God, in bringing them out of slavery in Egypt into the land He had promised their forefathers. Pentecost was all about their recognising God's faithful provision of food year by year. The Feast of Tabernacles kept in their minds that they had been a pilgrim people in the wilderness, and in a very real sense, they were still to be just that - a people who were holy and set apart, a people who were passing through.

By such Feasts God's people, within their tribes and families and across the generations, were kept aware both of their own identity, and of the identity of the Lord God who had made a covenant with them. These were regular, corporate, reverent, and highly visual reminders of "who was who" and "what was what".

There is no surprise that with the coming of the Messiah, the Christian Church continued these rhythms, albeit adapted to focus now on Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The old Feasts are now recognised, through Christian eyes, as "types" - God-given pointers to something better and greater that was to come - the "anti-types". So Passover is now fulfilled in the Lord's Supper; Pentecost is still about thankfulness for God's provision, but now emphasises His provision of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, Tabernacles no longer has a definite place in the Christian calendar, though its underlying truth is as valid as ever; perhaps the closest annual reminder we have is that the Christ was born in a cowshed and was placed in a manger - not much permanence or glory there then! - as He began His own "tabernacling" in our midst.

The Lord does not just expect our looking back, necessary though that is, but a looking ahead as well. The people of Israel were often reminded of the promises of old that were yet to come to pass. Three of these stood out: first to be given, yet the last to be fulfilled, was the promise of the "seed of the woman" (Genesis 3.15) who would crush the serpent's head - a pre-Abramic promise which thus applies to all of humanity rather than to the Jews alone; second and third were the twin promises to Abram (Genesis 12.2 and 13.15) that God would make of him "a great nation" and would give the land to his seed forever. Each of these promises was fulfilled by the Lord in the fulness of time.

The Christian Church likewise is bidden to look ahead, to the as-yet unfulfilled promises made by the Lord, with grateful certainty that these promises will truly come to pass. Thus we anticipate the ending of "the times of the gentiles" - with many pointers that this is now occurring; the rapture of the Church; the seven-year "great tribulation"; the return of Christ in glory; the one-thousand-year reign of Christ on this earth; Satan's final outburst, followed by the last judgement, and the establishment of the new Jerusalem in all its victory and glory. Quite a prospect!

So we can move into this new year with a stout Christian confidence, soundly based on the promises now behind us, and on the promises that still lie ahead. For - thanks be to God - in Christ the best is yet to be!

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