

THE COUNTDOWN TO THE MILLENNIUM HAS BEGUN!

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Only just over 150 days before the next Millennium. The question is: how should we celebrate the Millennium? We need to say loud and clear to the world that the Millennium marks the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus.

Secular versions of the Millennium are everywhere. For example, the County of Essex state that the Essex Millennium Festival theme has three aspects: a celebration of our young people; the improvement of our local environment; assisting people in the developing world to improve their lives.

All these aims are laudable, but they have nothing to do with Jesus, and therefore in turn they have nothing to do with the Millennium.

1. Message 2000

What is the message we have to proclaim? According to Churches Together In England, it is above all about a 'New Start':

"A New Start' sums up what Jubilee is all about. We want to help create: A new start for the world's poor, where we can join with others across the globe to make a difference to those in need. A new start at Home, where we can join with others to help create a just and caring society, and to celebrate with our children, our families and friends. A new start with God, where we can rediscover our Christian. faith and live it out in radical new ways for the next Millennium."

Personally, I would wish to re-order these priorities. Interestingly in some of the latest CTE material, 'A new start with God' becomes the first priority. Certainly, the Millennium offers a great opportunity for individual Christians and the churches to share their faith, and point to Jesus who offers a new start to all.

2. Jesus 2000

Many Christian groups and parachurch organisations are jumping on the millennium bandwagon. For example, Agape (part of Campus Crusade) are promoting the Jesus Video Project as 'a

millennium initiative'. Under the title of *Seeing and telling the story of the Man behind the Millennium*, they are encouraging churches to offer the Jesus Video (based on Luke's Gospel) to householders in their community.

Another closely related initiative is *There is Hope*, a glossy booklet, which contains the CEV version of Luke's Gospel, and is produced by Yorkshire churches in co-operation with Agape & the Deo Gloria Trust, again for distribution in the community. Confusingly, the same booklet is also marketed by Agape & the Deo Gloria Trust under the title *Why 2000?*

4. Y2000

The Christian Publicity Organisation has adopted the theme of *Y2000* and has produced preaching themes, a five week small group series, seeker service outlines, and material for children's holiday clubs and youth groups - as well as posters, videos, stickers and Y pins all featuring the Y logo, which in itself is (apparently?) an early Christian symbol for the Trinity. The Y2000 material aims to point to the uniqueness of Jesus. According to the blurb 'it creates questions, interest and conversation - rather than confrontation'. Such conversation will, it is hoped, centre on five themes: Y He came; Y the cross; Y the centre; Y the choice; Y the change

As an aside CPO is also promoting a six panel Millennium Exhibition for churches to use. The displays will explain: Why the Millennium is a Christian milestone; the positive impact on our world - past and present; Christian beliefs today; 2000 years of Christian history; Who Jesus Christ is. In the words of the CPO blurb, 'It will attract people in your community to your church, encourage schools to bring children to visit your church, and provide a natural opportunity for your Millennium outreach'.

Anticipating 2000 - Ideas and Resources

Those with Internet access will find the most helpful starting point to be the web site of the Millennium Office of Churches Together In England. As is customary, this web site leads to many other millennium web sites.

Resources books on the millennium are becoming legion. Inevitably some of the best of the earlier material (e.g. Michael Rees' Grove Booklet, *Celebrating the Millennium In The Local*

Church, or the CPAS Workbook, *Making The Most Of The Millennium*) is becoming dated.

Fanfare for a New Generation, based at the offices of the Oasis Trust is producing useful material. It is offering, for instance, a free resource pack entitled *Making Sunday Best*. More recently as part of the Fanfare project Steve Chalke together with Ann Radford has written a book entitled *New Era, New Church?* (HarperCollins, London 1999)

The Bible Society is publishing two books of worship resources under the title *Watching and Waiting*. Book One has material from Mothering Sunday 1999 to November 1999; Book Two covers Advent 1999, the Millennium Christmas & New Year Period and all the rest of the year 2000 through to Epiphany 2001.

Fount/HarperCollins have just published *Worship 2000: Resources To Celebrate The New Millennium* by Peter Atkins However, this book comes from New Zealand and does not fit easily into the British scene. For example, it encourages churches in the southern hemisphere to mark the beginning of the millennium with an open-air celebration on the Feast of the Epiphany (Thursday 6 January), and suggests that Christians in the northern hemisphere might mark the millennium on the Feast of the Ascension (Thursday 1st June).

5. Anticipating 2000 - 1999 A Year of Preparation

Millennium preparations have been in the melting pot for several years. Many churches have already begun to think of how they might celebrate the 2000th birthday of Jesus. I suspect, however, that a great number of churches have yet to begin making plans.

Preparations could include asking people of all ages to express their thoughts and feelings about the Millennium and to turn them into prayers. These prayers could be reproduced in the church magazine - perhaps in an autumn 1999 issue.

Another possibility is in the autumn of 1999 to invite church members to contribute their own personal thoughts on two themes: (a) the 20th century - things I am glad to leave behind; and (b) the 21st century - things I would like to see happen. These thoughts could be woven into a special service - possibly coming to an expression on Sunday 7th November (the Sunday following All

Saints Day) or Sunday 26th December (the last Sunday of the year).

Here in Chelmsford, Churches Together have decided to use the autumn of 1999 to explore the ethical challenges of the new millennium. On four autumn Wednesday evenings we are hoping that those churches which normally have a mid-week Bible study or run home groups will be willing to cancel their activities, in order to join together for a central event when outside speakers will help us think through some of the ethical challenges which will face us, not least in the world of medicine.

6. Happy Birthday Jesus - Christmas 1999

At what stage do the millennium celebrations begin? I wonder whether festivities will actually begin with Christmas 1999. Christmas Day, which in 1999 will be on a Saturday, will be toward the beginning of what will be for most people a ten, if not an eleven, day holiday. Many people will finish work on Christmas Eve, if not on December 23rd. Monday 27th & Tuesday 28th are official Bank Holidays - so too are Friday 31st and Monday 3rd.

Will our Christmas celebrations in 1999 have a special quality about them? For example, will our Carol Services have a millennium emphasis? This should help our ministers as they seek a fresh approach to the nativity.

Will Christmas 1999 be a suitable occasion to give to every child in our churches (and in our schools) a 2000th birthday present? E.g. CPO are producing high quality presentation boxed mugs, with the Logo *Jesus 2000*, and underneath the words 'Its His Millennium'. They are also producing Jesus-2000 spoons, key rings and T shirts!

Will Christmas 1999 be a good time to run a children's holiday club based around the theme of the millennium? Parents will no doubt be glad to have their children occupied!

7. Welcome 2000 - New Year's Eve Celebration

Churches Together in England are hoping that churches will mark the 'Millennium Moment' with a countrywide lighting of candles, a moment of silence, and the chance to make a Millennium Resolution. "It will be the biggest collective act Britain has ever seen, and a powerful reminder that there is more to the Millennium than just having a party".

In Chelmsford we are proposing to mark the millennium by engaging in a town-wide distribution of the evangelistic tape, *Time... to make a difference*. On this 'cringe-free' cassette Cliff Richard, Fiona Castle, Jonathan Edwards and Steve Chalke talk about the Christian faith in relation to ambition, success, and suffering.

Candles aside, I am deeply concerned by the fact that the Millennium Resolution fails to speak clearly of Jesus: It reads: Let there be respect for the earth, peace for its people, love in our lives, delight in the good, forgiveness for past wrongs, and from now on a new start.

It's no good saying that the Resolution has a scriptural basis - the fact is that as far as the outsider is concerned, it does not speak of Jesus. We are told that "the Resolution has been carefully composed so that it can be used with integrity by Christians, but also by members of other faiths and by people with no faith. The Resolution is a gift from the Christian people of the land to their communities, and a true gift does not impose conditions on those who receive it. So we are simply saying that this is a time of deep significance for Christian believers, and that we hope that others are willing to join in a moment of shared reflection".

However, many churches that wish to use set form of words to mark the new millennium might prefer to adopt the 'Millennium Child' prayer from the March for Jesus: "At the start of a new millennium, we welcome you Jesus. You came to us as a child 2000 years ago. Your example of love and sacrifice for others has shone ever since bringing hope to the world. Help us to see you, the millennium child, in the face of the new millennium's children. Help us to follow your example of love and sacrifice for others; so that each of them has a new start; so that each millennium child has shelter, care, love and hope."

Another usable prayer, written by Natalie Webb, the 9 year old winner of a BBC Radio Leicester millennium prayer competition, reads: "As we venture into the third millennium, scared about the future, yet excited and curious, we call on you Lord, our helper in the past, our Saviour in the present, to be our guide in the future. We know we have many problems to sort out on our planet: wars, pollution, cruelty, hunger and injustice. Help us Lord to make wise and compassionate decisions, so that we have a fair and happy

world, as you wished to have. We ask that in your mercy, you will forgive us our sins and help us with a fresh start.”

Interestingly, both of these prayers end with a reference to a 'new' or 'fresh start'. The new start is surely above all a new start with Jesus.

But to return to the millennium eve. Our New Year's Eve celebrations in Chelmsford town centre will climax with an event (11.30 p.m. - midnight), organised by all the churches of the town, at which John Perry, the Anglican Bishop of Chelmsford, will give a short address. There will be special music and some spectacular fire-works. The Borough Council has led us to believe that anywhere between 10,000 to 25,000 people will be present. We think parents will come out with their children, and so we are organising in the Cathedral grounds a special 'safe area' for young families. The Borough is proving remarkably co-operative and the local police are giving their services free.

Almost certainly a number of churches will be doing their own thing in the early evening. Some churches may well hold their own special services at 9pm to say goodbye to the old, and to anticipate welcoming the new - 'Put your hand in the hand of God' may well be a good theme ["I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown'. And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way'" - Minnie Haskins]. Other churches may well adopt the party theme and organise their own millennium eve socials prior to observing the 'Millennium Moment'.

8. Worship 2000 - Millennium Sunday

On Sunday 2nd January 2000, Millennium Sunday, local churches are being challenged to double the number of people who attend their church! Plans for this Sunday are being left to the individual churches. However, it is suggested by Fanfare that over the next few months churches get ready for Millennium Sunday by adopting the so-called Millennium charter:

“We will make you welcome; We will be family friendly; We will make sure you can hear clearly; We will be practical and relevant; We will help you to explore answers to your deepest questions; We will offer you time to stop and think in a busy life; We will help you make sense of the Bible and who Jesus is; We will make sure

your visit will be helpful but challenging; We will help you discover for yourself God's love, acceptance and forgiveness; We will offer you the chance to make a new start”

My observations are two-fold. First, I wonder how feasible it is to expect people to turn up in droves to church on this Sunday. Many may still be suffering from a New Year hangover. Nonetheless, let's be optimistic! Secondly, if the charter is to be adopted, it will require a good deal of preparation prior to 2000!

9. Mission 2000

The year 2000 offers special opportunities for mission. One suggestion has been that in this year churches engage in a church-to-church faith-sharing mission. "Each church receives, perhaps , a four day mission visit over a long weekend and at the same time sends a team to a similar occasion in another church" (Michael Rees).

10. Generation 2000

The new millennium above all belongs to our children and young people. Our millennium celebrations therefore may well include a series of youth events. However, it is important to remember that today's young people want more than entertainment. They want to have a sense of belonging. Belonging means "including them, trusting them, giving them responsibility, empowering them" (Steve Chalke). This in turn will mean that churches may want to review the way in which they give a voice to their children and young people.

11. Easter 2000 - 23rd April

By chance Easter 2000 happens to fall on St George's Day, the national day of England. One suggestion is that this could therefore become a day of prayer for the nation. I can't help feeling that a day of proclamation to the nation would be more suitable! Those churches with uniformed organisations who normally 'parade' on the first Sunday of the month might consider holding an extra 'parade' on this Sunday - it might bring out more parents.

12. Jubilee 2000 - May

In the Book of Leviticus the 'Year of Jubilee' comes round every 50 years - it is the year of freedom - when debts are cancelled and property is restored (see Lev 25.8ff) Over the last couple of years

the Jubilee Petition ('A debt-free start for a billion people') has been promoted by such organisations as Christian Aid, CAFOD, Tear Fund etc. Presumably this call to allow the poor of the world a 'new start' will come to a climax in Christian Aid Week, May 2000.

13. Jesus Day 2000 - Saturday 10th June

On this Saturday a world-wide March for Jesus will be taking place. Significantly, the organisers, realising that local marches could clash with local efforts to celebrate Pentecost the following day, are organising events only in five major UK cities - London, Edinburgh, Belfast, Cardiff and Liverpool.

14. Pentecost 2000 - Sunday 11th June

CTE are encouraging churches to make a special effort to hold town-wide united services on Pentecost Sunday. Here in Chelmsford we are planning a 30-minute celebration in the High Street on Sunday 11th June at 11 a.m., with churches making their way together, very much as they do for our Good Friday Act of Witness. The celebration will major on praise and will include a short 'address'. We hope that most churches will be willing to do away with their normal patterns of Sunday worship and instead join in this town-wide united celebration. On Good Friday we normally have around 1000 Christians present in the town. We are hoping that on Pentecost Sunday we might have 10,000 Christians flocking into the centre of town!

Conclusion

Hopefully I have said enough to get your creative juices running. Clearly, the world is going to celebrate the Millennium - what's more, it's going to celebrate it in style. As churches we need to ensure that we are ready to capture the Millennium spirit and turn people's attention to Christ.

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