

May I speak in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

A Year ago, on New Year's Eve, I had the opportunity to visit Standen, which is a large country house, near East Grinstead, owned by the National Trust.

Built in the 1890's as the country residence for the well to do Beale Family, it was bequeathed to the National Trust, when the last surviving member of the family died in 1972.

James Beale was a successful Solicitor from the North of the Country, who was engaged to carry out all the legal work connected with the building of St Pancras Station in London. He and his wife Margaret were looking for somewhere to make their home outside London – Standon was for them the perfect spot – close to the capital, with its rich heritage of arts and crafts, but away from the hustle and bustle of working life.

It is certainly a fascinating place to visit, if you have not already been. The house is set in beautiful grounds – gardening was something that Margaret Beale took very seriously. Inside the house, you can see the influence of the arts and crafts movement – there are many wallpapers and other furnishings designed by William Morris.

I was especially pleased to visit at New Year, however, because the house was decorated in traditional Victorian style, and also contained displays telling the story of development of Christmas customs through the ages the ages.

Since earliest times, Mid-winter has been marked in some way. Long before Christianity came to this country, the longest and darkest days of December were kept as a festival of light, heralding a turning point and signalling the move towards lengthening days and the return of the sun.

The Romans, brought their own mix of cultures and customs that were connected to the Winter Solstice on 21st December. The ancient pagan Roman midwinter festivals called 'Saturnalia' and 'Dies Natalis Solis Invicti' took place in December around this date - so it was a time when people already celebrated.

The Roman Festival of *Saturnalia* took place between December 17th and 23rd and honoured the Roman god Saturn. *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* means 'birthday of the unconquered sun' and was held on December 25th (when the Romans thought the Winter Solstice took place) and was the 'birthday' of the Pagan Sun god Mithra. Early Christians might have given this festival a new meaning - to celebrate the birth of the Son of God 'the unconquered Son!' – Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness

The Jewish festival of Lights, *Hanukkah* starts on the 25th of Kislev (the month in the Jewish calendar that occurs at about the same time as December). Hanukkah celebrates when the Jewish people were able to re-dedicate and worship in their Temple, in Jerusalem, again following many years of not being allowed to practice their religion.

Jesus was a Jew, so this could be another reason that helped the early Church choose December the 25th for the date of Christmas! All fascinating background to our Christmas!

There were also displays talking about different ways in which people have celebrated Christmas – decorations, special foods, the sending of Christmas cards and the giving of gifts.

Whatever the origins of the celebration we call Christmas – one thing seems to unite the customs down the ages. They are a celebration and expression of the belief that from this point onwards things will be different. Winter is past, spring is coming. The world is passing from darkness to light. And supremely Christ *Mass* is the casting out of the darkness of fear and hatred through the radiance of God's light and love revealed in the birth of Jesus.

But it was as I walked in the gardens, that I found myself thinking about the Christian approach to New Year and some of the thoughts I would like to share with you.

New Year's Eve in 2015, was a beautiful crisp morning, following on from the wind and rain of the night before... Although we had not suffered the full effects of Storm Frank in the same ways as many other parts of the country – the contrast between the preceding night and the morning were quite marked. There was a real sense that dawn had brought a new, fresh beginning.

Every year, as we pass from the old year into the New Year – there is that same sense of the dawning of a new beginning. Whatever has proceeded, is passed, and the new Year lies ahead full of possibilities, opportunities and hope.

As I walked in the gardens, I came across an area which is being restored. Several years ago, research in the grounds revealed that an area which had for many years lain overgrown and neglected, had previously contained a beautiful Rose garden and pool. There was an easel nearby, containing an information board headed up “Bed of Roses” explaining what is happening. Margaret Beale, one of the original owners of the house had been especially fond of Roses and Irises, and had kept a diary setting out her planting scheme in this part of the gardens.

The plans revealed that in the months ahead, walls, trellises and beds would be set out to create a new garden reflecting something of the original design. It would be new, but, reflect important elements from the past. On the easel, an artist's impressions gave an idea of what the garden would look like as the work progressed.

How wonderful to have that sense of vision for the future!

I am looking forward to going back this year, and seeing how the plans have taken shape.

As we look ahead to the New Year, however much we might wish it, we know that our lives will not be all "A Bed of Roses."

Rather like the artist's impression we might already have a sense of vision, with certain things mapped out – things we would like to see happen – things that we know will happen – but alongside these, there are inevitably many unknowns.

Each of our lives will be a mixture of joys and sorrows. There will be success and failures. There will be challenges, there will be times of light and darkness.

Rather like that Rose Garden, there will be much that is new, but also, there will be much that reflects significant things from the past.

As we begin the journey into this New Year, may God give us a sense of vision – an artist's impression to help give shape and colour and meaning to all that will be part of our lives this year.

And may God also grant us the courage we need to let go of those things that would hinder or diminish the love and light that will lead to growth and deepening of our faith and trust in him.

May God also give us the wisdom we need to hold onto those things which are good from the past, which will enable us to grow and flourish in the weeks and months ahead.

Finally, may we enter this New Year with a real sense of hope. Whatever the challenges, whatever the successes and failures, whatever the joys and sorrows – God will be alongside to guide, support and encourage us – for he is Emmanuel, God with us.

Amen.