

A Celebration for a New Year

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The Jewish New Year is in September, which may seem odd to Christians. Except that little begins in January - because it already started in September.

Autumn is an obvious time of fresh beginnings. Children, with bulging, new satchels head back to school - reluctant and resentful at the loss of their summer freedom. Hordes of invading students once again impede my shopping progress around our local supermarket as they stop to share their long, lazy vacation stories. I'm tempted to resent this intrusion into my busy world - but I won't. Their arrival heralds such opportunity for the church.

But how do we mark the passing of summer and the start of winter and a new academic year? Traditionally, the church has little to offer except harvest and in our non arable culture that can seem an irrelevance.

The book of Deuteronomy describes three autumn festivals: a New Year with time for a personal stocktake and review, when the ram's horn called the people to repentance; the Day of Atonement a week later - a fast, and a chance to receive God's forgiveness, and make resolutions to live more justly and lovingly; and Tabernacles a further week later, a harvest festival that looks back at God's past faithfulness in our fragile lives (represented by the tents or tabernacles that people live in for the week), his present provision and future, Messianic hope. Together, the three could provide the spiritual basis for any Christian New Year celebration - a time of thanksgiving for the past year, and commitment, individually and corporately, to new vision and mission for the coming year.

Home Groups

Home groups are a good place to start. Peter and I run one for 16-25 year olds, suspended, other than for barbecues and social events, for the three months of exams and vacations. Telling the stories of God "to your children and children's children" has always been a challenge. Our own children have left home, and moved 250 miles away. I joked to Peter that we'd have to borrow some, little expecting to find ourselves with a dozen young adults. I thought they'd think us too old. Amazingly, they don't. Young people need surrogate parents. Or perhaps it's the home-made tray bakes they come for, or the bowls of nibbles I put on the table that they dig into as we study the Bible together - nuts and crisps, chocolates and raisins, and the surprise favourite - strawberries and grapes. It was a bit stiff at first - but ice breakers, experiments in different kind of prayer, sharing joys and heartaches, poetry readings, clips from CDs and DVDs, spiritual exercises, and the constant supply of food have knit us together. The Hebrew Scriptures also tell us to welcome the stranger - I invited two Polish teenagers I heard about, who barely speak a word of English and miss their friends there. They read to us and pray in Polish. This year I'm going to ask them to bring us some Polish delicacies.

Extended Family Night.

On Friday or Saturday evenings we've taken to inviting our godchildren, or favourite small children and parent(s) for a "Sabbath" meal, lighting candles to welcome God's presence, thanking him for rest with scripture readings, and sharing bread and wine. It's a wonderful chance to use the spiritual ritual of "review".

Invite guests to lay down the stresses of the week.

Each person lights a candle and recalls particular blessings of the past week. How many come to mind?

Tell any special stories of God's goodness. What might you all learn from them?

Share any readings that have struck you and seem appropriate

Finally, offer God the week ahead with its individual and specific needs and events

Have a small (possibly edible) present for each child

There is a basic liturgy for a weekly family night you can adapt to suit your needs in *The Heavenly Party, Monarch*.

A New Year celebration for families and home groups

This could be tried round the mealtable the weekend before the children go back to school, or in the first home group of the new season.

Write down, then share:

What things were things were difficult last year. What did you learn from them?

What were the highlights of the year? They can be turned into a sentence of worship or thanksgiving. Or form a choice of song or psalm.

Tell the stories of your year, accompanied by photographs or symbols, or tell a story with a new year message.

Which scriptures made a difference to your life and outlook in the past year, and how?

Light candles and share your new year aspirations, hopes, and dreams. What might you do to achieve them? This might involve writing your personal or group vision or mission statement.

Some practical ideas:

Intersperse the spiritual part of the occasion with food or nibbles. You could do the above between courses! What food might be symbolic of the occasion for you? The Jews dip pieces of apple into honey and share them round, wishing each other a sweet and happy new year.

After the meal encourage the children to build a "tent" under a table or in a corner of the house, decorate it with twigs and greenery, then sleep in it for a night with friends - to remind them of how much we need to depend on God for shelter, food and warmth in the coming year, and that many don't have that luxury.

Agree to support a charity or pray for a country for a year as a group.

Produce an empty box, as a "scrap box" for the year and invite people to fill it over the next months with anything that has had symbolic significance for them, or answers to prayer. It can be emptied at your next new year celebration.

Open a new photograph album - encourage people to bring photos that accompany the stories they want to tell.

Miss breakfast as a fast and time of repentance, then have a joyous, celebration harvest lunch, using vegetables and fruit in season - leeks, mushrooms, aubergines and late courgettes and tomatoes, plums, apples and blackberries.

Ice Breakers

Each person introduces themselves and share one thing they love and one they can't stand. Arrange yourselves in alphabetical order of first name, or by birthday (months or years).

A New Year Story - The Hole In The Boat

This story explains how a commitment to small, loving gestures can really make a difference.

A man bought a small rowing boat as a present for his family so that they could have fun with it on the nearby lake. He employed a painter to paint it a bright, new red. As he was painting the boat, the painter noticed that the paint was seeping through the bottom, realized there was a leak, and mended it. When the painting was finished, he collected his money and went home.

The following day the owner of the boat arrived at the painter's house and gave him a large cheque. The painter was really surprised. "I can't accept this. You've already paid me," he said.

"But this isn't for the paint job," the man said. "It's for mending the leak."

"Oh that was nothing," the painter replied, "It was so small I couldn't possibly charge you for that."

"You don't understand," said the man. "Let me tell you what happened. When I asked you to paint the boat I forgot to mention the leak. The moment the boat was dry, my children were so excited they went fishing. When I found they'd gone out in the boat, I suddenly remembered that it had a leak and was beside myself, certain they'd be drowned. Then I saw them coming back safe and sound. Can you imagine how I felt, the sheer relief? I took a look at the boat and saw that you had repaired the leak. It may have been a small thing to you - but you actually saved the lives of my children. And the truth is I haven't enough money to repay you for your kindness."

Useful Resources

Wild Spirit of the Living God - Prayer Poems for the Journey, by Russ Parker, Eagle, £7.99
There are lovely prayers here for every season.

Telling the Bible: Over 100 Stories to Read out Loud by Bob Hartman- Monarch Books, 2007

A Recipe - Apple and Plum Flapjack Crumble

300gms margarine
200gms dark brown sugar
200gms wholemeal SR flour
300gms oats
1 tsp ginger or cinnamon

Cream the margarine and sugar and then add the flour, oats and spice. Press half into a 32cms by 22cms by 3cms tin. Spread with stewed apples and plums. Add 50gms oats to the remaining mixture. Lightly crumble with a fork, and spread the crumble on top. Press well down into the tin and bake for 15-20 mins on gas mark 4, 180 degrees or 150 degrees for a fan oven, until golden. Serve slices hot with custard, or cold in squares.

No time to stew fruit? Simply leave out ginger and cinnamon, and spread toffee sauce over the base, and sprinkle with chocolate chunks, before covering with crumble.

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