

The Manse  
Tarbert  
2nd January 2020

Dear Friends

Bliadhna Math Ùr dhuibh Uile,  
A happy New Year to you all.

I take this opportunity to write my customary New Year letter which goes out on the first Sunday of the New year. I simply want to wish you all God's richest blessings for the year that lies ahead of us. I hope and pray that everyone had a happy and blessed Christmas time and that it might be in faith and confidence in God that we look forward to a new decade beginning in 2020. This year I am happy to be writing in similar terms to the congregation of Manish Scarista of which I am Interim Moderator during their period of vacancy.

Although New Year is now past, we are still very much in the grip of winter. It is the darkest, coldest and bleakest time of the year. No wonder then that many of us look forward with anticipation to longer days and the approach of spring. If we struggle with the cold and long hours of darkness here in Harris then spare a thought for the poor people of the town of Utqiagvik (formerly known as the city of Barrow) in Alaska. Utqiagvik lies on the North coast of Alaska. It is over two hours flight from Anchorage, Alaska's biggest city, and is actually situated inside the Arctic circle. Due to its location this small town of less than 5000 people saw the sun set on 18th November 2019 and will not see the sun rise over the horizon again until 23rd January 2020. Over two months of perpetual darkness makes even winter days in Harris seem bearable in comparison. The turn of the year often brings a renewed sense of optimism as the days get longer and indeed, since Christmas, there is even now a discernible difference in the length of the day. One of the best known promises given by God through the prophet Isaiah, is found in the familiar words of Isaiah 9:2 "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone*".

We often make reference to this great passage regarding the promise of the coming Christ at Christmas time but it is, I believe, a passage

and a promise that is appropriate all year. As the people of Utqiagvik living in the Polar night of Alaska look forward with anticipation to the return of the sun over the horizon, so the people of God looked forward to the fulfilment of Isaiah's promise in Jesus our Saviour.

The New Year is a time for us all to start again with God and with each other, and embrace the truly God given opportunities that he will give us in 2020. Speaking personally I believe it is an opportunity that must not be squandered. Despite the challenges this may bring, the good news is that God is always there to help!

Scott Hubbard editor at *Desiring God* expresses it so well "As we sit on the edge of a new year, we are hemmed in by the faithfulness of God. Behind us are his wondrous deeds. Before us are his merciful plans. Both of them are marvellous and more than can be told. With such a God behind us and before us, we need not allow the past to swallow us, nor the future to worry us. The past and the future belong to him — and most importantly, so do we." These are truly wise and encouraging words. We do not know what lies ahead of us in this coming year yet, in faith, we can trust in the God who holds the future in His hand. I know that for many reading these words the past year may have brought bereavement, sadness, disappointment or pain. Yet none of these things diminish God's love for us and my prayer is that, in this coming year, God may give to each of His struggling children precious tokens of His love.

The year ahead may be challenging for us personally and as a Congregation and Community in any number of different ways, but we must never leave God out of the picture. The dark times should not beguile us into thinking that God is indifferent or uncaring towards His children. In every circumstance our God is able to keep us and enable us to prevail. At this time may we all know throughout this year the truth of the words of Jesus Christ

*"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."* (John 8:12)

In this New Year may we all walk in the Light of God's love and Grace.

With every good wish for the New Year, and the blessings of Christ to you all,

Ian Murdo Macdonald