

The Good Old Days

What I particularly enjoy in the local paper, the Press, are the old photographs of York that are published there on a regular basis. They date mostly from the late 19th century to the 1980s, and so sometimes cover the early years of my living in the city. They are a very useful reflection of social history and it is fascinating to see what has changed and what has not.

It is very easy to be nostalgic about the past. It is tempting to look back to a time when life was easier and less complicated, when some of the problems of modern life did not seem to exist.

If we are not careful we can easily look at the past with rose-tinted spectacles which can often mask the grim realities of the past. For those old pictures of York often reflect the poverty and extremely bad housing and conditions of some parts of the city. For instance many lacked the basic facilities such as running water and proper toilets and bathrooms that we take for granted today. Life may have been good for the well off, but not for the poor.

We have much to be thankful for in the twenty-first century. That does not mean we are without problems, though – far from it. There is much we can learn from the past. Families appear to have been closer-knit than is always the case nowadays. Neighbourhoods seem to have been more real communities than we can find today. There was perhaps more respect. Churches could be left open all the time, for example.

It is good to know about the past and try to understand it. At the same time we should avoid becoming too sentimental or nostalgic about the past. There is also always a danger of trying to live in the past, which ultimately is not helpful.

For we face enough difficulties in modern life for our focus to be on the present. There is enough that needs addressing now – not least the many cries of need for peace and reconciliation.

However, for Christians there are other perspectives that are not to be forgotten. Our reading from the book of Revelation (21.1-5) reminds us that we are to look not just back to the past, or even only to the present, but also in hope to the future. Past, present and future all belong together in God's scheme of things.

That is true of our faith: formed as it is by God's saving work in the past, and lived out in the present, and at the same time with an eye on the future. That is true too of our calling to share and spread out something of God's love, and to work with God's help as much as we can for peace and reconciliation in his world.

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