Do you remember the start of this year? It almost seems a planet away, a far-off place. There were bushfires here in Australia, protests in Hong Kong, the official withdrawal of the UK from the European Union and the commencement of President Trump’s impeachment trial. And that was just January. What a year that month seemed to be, with 11 months still to come!

Can you also remember the start of local COVID-19 restrictions, with the emptying of supermarket shelves as people hoarded toilet rolls? It has been a curious year.

But, remember, too, the ‘thank you’ billboards that sprang up here in Australia and around the world, stating “Thank you front line workers”, “Thank you first responders” and “Thank you healthcare heroes”. The billboards reflected one of this year’s key themes, which was “We are all in this together”. I even wrote about this idea back at the beginning of June for anglican focus.

It would have been great to see the billboards last longer. The billboards have gone, and other events locally and internationally have showed us just how much we are not all in this together. The Black Lives Matter movements in the United States and in Australia, along with the associated local #StopDeathsInCustody campaign, highlight the continued oppression and exclusion of people of colour.

And even with respect to COVID-19’s frontline heroes, we seem to have moved from “we are all in this together”. Around the world there was applause for health workers early on, as people would clap or bang pots and pans daily to say thank you. We were asked to “clap for our carers”. In the United
States, where COVID-19 is more out of control, someone cynically tweeted that all that applause was really just to demand an encore – that the healthcare workers had to do it all again as the second wave broke.

Many people suggested at the beginning of COVID-19 that this would be a wake-up call, but it looks (at least from here) that we are at risk of going back to the way we were. How will the world respond in 2021 with the mass production of a vaccine? Just who will get it first? When will vulnerable people in the developing world get vaccinated? As we draw to the close of this curious year, with the hope and anticipation of widespread COVID-19 vaccination in 2021, there is much opportunity for reflection.

My hope going into 2021 is that we continue to remember the ‘thank yous’ and the culture of gratitude we cultivated in the COVID-19 environment.

**Sunday Devotions • Monday 14 December 2020 • By The Rev'd Owen Strong**

**Sunday Devotion: 20 December 2020, Fourth Sunday of Advent**

We each have a contribution to make

**Main Readings:** 2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16; Psalm 89.1-4, 19-27 or ‘Song of Mary’ (APBA P.9 or 425); Romans 16.25-27; Luke 1.26-38

**Supplementary Readings:** Psalm 72.12-21; Hebrews 1.8-2.4; 2 Samuel 7.18-29; Psalm 89.26-38; Mark 12.35-37

“Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’” *(Luke 1.38)*

Having been encouraged, quite unexpectedly, to think about leading a parish youth group in the late 60s, I somewhat hesitantly attended a leadership training course. Feeling like a fish out of water, I found myself wandering the grounds of the training venue in a sea of uncertainty contemplating, “What on earth have I gotten myself into?” At that moment I was overcome by an overwhelming sense of peace and belonging.

We can but wonder what Mary experienced as she contemplated the enormity of being asked to bear Jesus. She was faced with casting aside all the normal pathways of a young Jewish woman in her time and would have anticipated and embraced a future that was full of uncertainty. It was beyond anything anyone had ever been, or is likely to be, asked. That Mary was able to agree with, “Let it be with me according to your word”, suggests to me that she had a profound sense of the presence of God and experienced the peace that comes with that.

Each of us has a contribution to make, perhaps not as dramatic as Mary's but significant none the less. This might be something for which we feel ill equipped or an area where few have ventured before – an area we are able or could be upskilled to handle.

If we are prepared to follow God's call as Mary did, it ought not surprise us to find that we are able to fulfil God's will and experience a sense of rightness in doing so, as it appears Mary did.