

ICON OF THE MONTH

The god Janus, whom the Romans worshipped as the deity of doorways, was an expression of the ancient sense that there is something mysterious about a threshold. One simple step makes all the difference between being *in* and being *out*.

It seems that the turn of the year fills us with a similar sense of moment. Objectively, there is no perceptible difference between the day before and the day that follows midnight on the 31st December – yet even by the 1st of that month we are beginning to feel as if we are living through the dying of something, and that pressure of time running out grows until the chimes of Big Ben announce a whole new diaryful of days, unspoilt and full of promise.

If this is true of the turn of a year, how much more so of the turn of a millennium! And, since the last great milestone of 1984 came and went, the approach of the year 2000 has fed a sense that the end of something – and the dawn of something else – is nigh.

Of course, such turning points and watersheds are entirely arbitrary, and mostly illusory. Just as we will wake up on the 16th February bemused to find that a new year has dawned in China, so the large part of humankind that counts the centuries since the creation of the world, or Muhammad's emigration to Medina or whatever – or just has more basic things to worry about – will wonder what is supposed to have changed.

Whatever genuine excitement we are feeling – hype aside – perhaps has

more to do with another ancient fascination, with the magic of numbers. Witness the fact that we are set to celebrate the start of the third millennium early, only 1,999 years after AD1. But hey, who cares? What gets our juices going is the fact that at the end of next December all *four* digits will change and the new date will be as round as round can be!

Meanwhile, the churches are opportunistically fastening onto the impending festivities as an excuse for a more assertive evangelism. 'Let's not

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forget whose 2,000th birthday we are celebrating!' is the (miscalculated) cry.

But the claim that the dateline is a tribute to Jesus and the durability of his ideas is as spurious as the notion that every Thursday we honour Thor. In fact, our chronology is an accident of history, imposed on Europe by one empire, and on the world by several others – not least, at present, by the 'invisible' empire of the United States. And little of that history or that hegemony is a credit to Jesus, or has much to do with the values he taught.

Indeed, the irony is that while both church and media are fixated on this mystical date, the real story of the human race is taking shape elsewhere. Arguably, its present chapter began on the first day of the Somme – and maybe the next one will open on the day that seven English law lords rule that no head of state is forever immune from prosecution for crimes against humanity.

However, there is one respect in which destiny does indeed haunt the beginning of next year, for then we face the threat of the Millennium Bug. If the apocalyptically inclined were convinced that the end is nigh by the advent of the atomic bomb (or the miniskirt or whatever), how much more persuasive that the computer was invented just in time for the world to become hooked on it and crash!

Oddly, the Bug resolves the old tension between the tidy-minded symbolists who think that the Second Coming is bound to take place in a year divisible by 1,000 and those who point out Jesus' own prediction that he will return when no one is expecting it.

After all, it seems likely that in the wee small hours of New Year's Day 2000 the world and her husband will be distracted by defrosting fridges and airliners falling out of the sky. No doubt there will be quite a few thieves in the night taking advantage.

All the more reason, perhaps, to recall the one, incontrovertible date which truly marks the beginning of the future: today. **Huw Spanner**