

ADDRESS

30 December 2018

1st Sunday after Christmas

[1 Samuel 2. 18—20, 26 Psalm 148 Colossians 3.12-17 Luke 2.41-52	The child Samuel Praise the Lord! New life in Christ The boy Jesus in the Temple
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Lord God, may we learn from the examples of the boy Jesus, by discerning your will for us, and being willing to obey. AMEN

Only two days until the end of another year. It's time to make our New Year resolutions. For many people, this is nothing more than a nonsense. By 2nd January, they are back to their old bad habits. The cartoon in *Connections* is a reminder of their weakness, of our weakness.

We often make jokes about our New Year's resolutions and our inability to keep them, and there are always new jokes around. *What is the spider's New Year's resolution? To spend less time on the web.*

But the end of each year does give us the opportunity to look back and thank God for what we have achieved, and to look forward to another good year, whatever the doctors tell us. So does each anniversary of our birth day. After a certain age, we may simply thank God we are still here.

When I was growing up, in a little old Methodist chapel north of the harbour, we had a Covenant Service every New Year's Eve, when we renewed our baptismal vows. The service ended a minute before midnight. A minute later, the bell was rung and we hugged each other and wished each another happy and blessed new year.

Many churches still offer a similar opportunity to look back and to look forward. The service generally includes much of the liturgy of John Wesley's original Covenant Service. The core message of this service is also in *Connections*:

*Christ has many services to be done.
Some are more easy and honourable,
others are more difficult and disgraceful.
Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests,
others are contrary to both.
In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.
But then there are other works where we cannot please Christ
except by denying ourselves.*

When we set ourselves apart from the majority by committing ourselves to reject the empty display and the false values of the world, and to follow Christ, we are making an open-ended commitment, which we do well to review at least once a year.

Some churches keep this first Sunday after Christmas as Holy Family Sunday. So today's Gospel reading is the only canonical story from Jesus' childhood. Our translation has Jesus telling his parents, *Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?* There is a more accurate rendering of the Greek in other translations: *Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?* And so must we. Jesus is our model and our guide, as well as our enabler.

The Father's business is about living for others rather than living for ourselves – becoming other-centred rather than self-centred. As Wesley reminds us, that's not always easy and our new year stocktake may tell us how well we are living up to our baptismal promises.

There's a two-fold problem with many of our New Year resolutions – firstly, they are too trivial, like giving up cigarettes or chocolate or going on a new diet, or walking the dog more often; and secondly, we may kid ourselves that we have the willpower to keep them. We need to think big, and to accept that we need the strength of the risen Christ if we are to model our lives on him.

When Paul wrote to the church in the little town of Colossae, in Asia Minor, about what it meant to become a Christian, he gave them some serious life goals, and assured them that they could do all these things in the strength of the risen Christ. Our Epistle reading today is part of this teaching.

The three-part teaching begins on page 834 of our pew Bibles, p. 834. Paul's argument is simple and direct ... in summary: if we have died with Christ - ch. 2, v.20 -- we need to put to death the vices of the unredeemed life – which he lists in ch 3, verses 5-11. These are the verses just before today's reading. But this is not enough. If we have been raised with Christ -- ch 3, v. 1 -- we need also to cultivate the virtues of the redeemed life, which he lists in verses 12-17.

If we have died with Christ, we will put to death the vices of the unredeemed life. It's an ugly list—*impurity, passion, evil desire, greed (which is idolatry) . . .anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, telling lies . . .* these must all be put to death with Christ. When we each look back on 2018, honestly look back, we may well see times when we have sinned in one or more of these ways, and turn to God for forgiveness.

Then, Paul says, if we have been raised with Christ, we will adopt and cultivate the virtues of the redeemed life – they are listed in today's reading, starting at verse 12: *compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, gratitude and joyfulness.*

When we think of our relationships with other people, and with God, what score could we honestly give ourselves on each of these virtues? There's a score card in *Connections*. Perhaps we should take it home and ask someone else to tally the score, someone who knows us well. We are all prone to thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. (Rom.12.3)

You'll notice how Paul's list of virtues to aspire to is structured – *Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony*. The six virtues before 'love' are expressions of love: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and forgiveness. The three virtues listed after the word 'love' are the fruits of love -- if you like, the rewards of love , rewards which we share with the people around us: peace, gratitude and joyfulness.

If we want a truly happy New Year, these are the ten virtues we must learn to cultivate. The life and teaching of Jesus must become the model of all that we say and do. Not just for one day, or one year, but every day of our lives. As Paul says, *Do everything in the name of the Lord, giving thanks to God the Father*. That's a tall order, but, Jesus tells us, we can do it, if we live one day at a time. Only then does this un-natural behaviour become possible.

The third part of Paul's teaching is in the verses which follow our reading, from chapter 3, verse 18 to the first verse of chapter 4. Here Paul says how the virtues we need to clothe ourselves with would be expressed in family life.

When we read these verses, we realise how different family life is today from family life in the Greek-speaking urban communities of Paul's day. In his time, families consisted of a man, a woman, their children and their slaves, who did all the physical work. The man was the indisputable head of the household and women and children and slaves had no legal rights.

The leaders of the early church were concerned that Christian households did not draw critical attention by defying these cultural conventions. This would damage their Christian witness. Paul has this message four times in his letters -- there is similar teaching in the first Epistle of Peter, and in many of the letters and sermons of some of the church fathers.

So Paul urges believing wives to submit to their husbands, and children to their fathers, and slaves to their masters. Culturally, that was the norm. What is different in Paul's teaching was his call for these relationships to be transformed by love. Wives may not even have chosen their husbands -- their marriages may have been arranged, for family and financial reasons; but husbands and wives, and children and slaves, are called to relate to each other in love, submitting their wills to God's will, emulating God's love for them.

Without love, this call to submission can be misinterpreted as condoning family violence, even within the church. In our last parish, we had to deal with family violence in the home of one of the clergy, who had epilepsy. The wife was coming to church with bruises on her face and arms, but she always told us that she had had a fall, or walked into a door or whatever. She refused to make a complaint against her husband, so we could do nothing except make sure that she had proper medical attention and a phone number she could call when she needed help.

In recent years, the understanding of 'family' has changed almost beyond recognition, and continues to change, at least in our culture. We now have single-parent families and same-sex families, as well as the traditional families. Most marriage services have both partners making the same promises: brides no longer promise to obey, which I'm told many did with their fingers crossed. Family violence is acknowledged as a crime and church agencies offer support and counselling to all involved.

The majority opinion in this diocese supports the so-called complementary view of relations between the sexes, drawn from the New Testament epistles: that men and women are equal in status, as children of God, but have differing roles in his kingdom. Dr Mark Thompson of Moore College has an article on the diocesan website which explains the basis of this view and argues that, *This is not an authoritarian reading but a submissive one*. It is submitting to Biblical teaching.

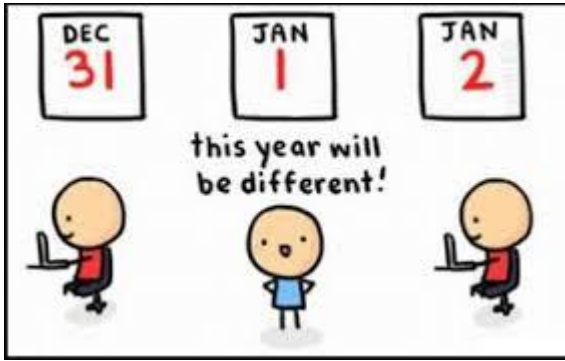
Today's complementarianism is extended beyond the nuclear family to the church, which Paul called the 'family of faith' or the 'household of faith' (Gal.6.10). In this family, all are of equal value, but they do not have the same roles. Paul wrote the famous passage, *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Gal.3.28), but he was not calling for the emancipation of the slaves, as later cultures did, or for a 50 per cent quota for women in every occupation, as some do today. For Paul, the equality of our relationship with God over-rides the inequalities in our relationships with each other.

Imagine a parish family in which all the members had renounced the vices which Paul condemns and displayed the virtues listed in today's reading. Church politics can be ugly, because personal ambitions may interact with differing theologies and traditions and opposing goals for the diocese or parish. Marty and I have come to see this congregation as our extended family, because its people are so welcoming and supportive. But a New Year stocktake might reveal how much more we need to clothe ourselves in the virtues in Paul's list. We can all do better next year.

In our centenary year, too, we need to do more than simply celebrate the past, recalling the so-called 'good old days', when the church was full every Sunday, we're told, and the Sunday School and the youth group overflowed. If we do no more than this, our church could become rather like the Western Wall, the Wailing Wall, in Jerusalem: a place of mourning rather than of celebration. To mark our centenary, we also need to look for new ways to serve our local community.

C S Lewis once wrote to a friend who was facing death, reminding her that, *There are better things ahead than any we leave behind*. That is a truth to keep in mind at all times, and especially during our centenary year. *There are better things ahead than any we leave behind.* #

New life in Christ (Colossians 2.20 - 4.1)



From John Wesley's Covenant Service (1780)

Christ has many services to be done.

Some are more easy and honourable,

others are more difficult and disgraceful.

Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests,

others are contrary to both.

In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.

But then there are other works where we cannot please Christ

except by denying ourselves.

How do I score? /10

Compassion	
Kindness	
Humility	
Meekness	
Patience	
Forgiveness	
Love	
Peace	
Gratitude	
Joyfulness	

/100