

Sunday, 31 December 2018

First Sunday of Christmas

St Andrew's, Cobham.

Isaiah 61.10 – 62.3; Galations 4.4-7; Luke 2.15-21.

New Year's Resolution: Don't Be Good, Be Perfect

And so we come to the end of another year. Time to thank God for all the blessings we received in 2017, in whatever form they came (because sometimes they come in disguise); time to put the failures behind us and look ahead in hope.

Which brings us to that triumph of hope over experience – the New Year's resolution.

And believe it or not, our reading from Paul's letter to the Galations has everything to say about the perfect new year's resolution.

We'll come to Paul shortly, but first, we all know how tough new year's resolutions are to keep, and prayer can be a wonderful aid in staying strong. I found these New Year resolution prayers that you might be able to use:

- Dear God. This year I want a fat bank account and a thin body – please don't mix them up like you did last year.
- Dear God. It's been a pretty good start to the year. So far, I haven't eaten a chocolate, snapped at anyone or had a mean thought. But in a minute, I have to get out of bed, and I'm going to need your help.

Now, I'm guessing that many of us will be making new year's resolutions about health, finances, personal development, chocolate and so on.

But this is also an excellent time to make resolutions about our *spiritual* life.

So here's my suggested list of spiritual goals for the new year. I'd like you to remember them and as soon as you get home, write them down. Here they are:

#1 Read my Bible and pray every day.

#2 Volunteer in the community.

#3 Be kinder.

#4 Fight for social justice.

Now, the next step I want you to do is this: take that list, crumple it up and throw it in the dustbin.

Why? Because I want you to forget about doing good. Instead, here's my suggestion for a new year's spiritual resolution for 2018.

Don't be good. Be perfect.

In 2018, set yourself the spiritual goal of being perfect.

Does that sound impossible?

It does, doesn't it. Common sense tells us it is unachievable. But since when did common sense have anything to do with Christianity, which is all about uncommon sense?

Jesus himself commanded us to be perfect. *Be ye therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect*, is what he said [Matthew 5:48]. So it must be possible. The Lord would not give us a command that we could not keep.

But how on earth are we to achieve it?

Paul gives us the answer in his letter to the Galatians.

The first thing we have to remember is that being a Christian is not about doing good things in order to earn God's approval. The heart of Christianity is not the following of laws. This is the way of spiritual children. Instead, Paul says, we must become *spiritual adults* so that we can receive all the power and freedom that come with adulthood.

In other words, we must stop thinking so much about what we do, and start thinking about what we are.

The Bible teaches us that we are created by a loving God, fearfully and wonderfully made [Ps 139:14], just a little lower than the angels [Heb 2:7], and so precious that God Himself died for us [John 3.16].

But it also teaches us that there is something gone wrong with us, at the very centre of our being. We are sinful, blind and lost, trying to be good by following moral rules, in the way of spiritual children.

But Paul explains that trying to be good is just a baby step, and our potential is far, far greater than we could ever imagine.

Through the death of Christ on the cross, he says, we can be rescued from the life of broken people trying to be good by obeying the rules, and be changed into something very different.

We can be changed into children of God.

[Paul says 'sons of God' but of course he includes women in that. At the time he was writing it was only sons who could become heirs, so he couldn't make his point in any other way. But of course, he includes women in his thinking.]

For those who accept God's own Son as their saviour and redeemer, something wonderful happens. We become children of God. We receive the ability to call God '*Abba*, Father.'

Let's just pause for a second and think about how significant that is.

When we call God "Father", we are actually putting ourselves in the position of God's son or daughter [C.S. Lewis]. Just like Jesus is. So, when we pray to God as our Father, we are putting ourselves on a par with Jesus.

It seems a cheek, doesn't it? But God Himself *wants* us to do that, to put ourselves in the same position as His own Son.

He wants us to be transformed from what we currently are – spiritual children - into brothers and sisters of his own Son. He wants us to be little Christs.

In other words, He wants us not to be *good*, but to be *perfect*.

He wants us to grow into full spiritual adulthood and so receive our inheritance from our Father. An inheritance of a life full of God's power and peace, now and for all eternity.

So where does that leave us in terms of our spiritual new year's resolution?

OK, you know I said to throw away the list of good deeds?

Well, I want you to get it out of the dustbin again and smooth it out, because of course these things are important, and we must do them. But at the top of the list add this resolution:

#1 Settle into God's arms like a little child in their father's embrace.

That's the starting point: a position of total trust in God's love and His power, a place of complete safety, where all fear and worry and striving fall away. Everything else follows from that starting point. If you do that first thing, the other things on our list of resolutions will follow more and more naturally, so that in the end you won't even need to put them on a list: they will simply be part of who you are.

Because you won't be good. You will be perfect.

Amen.