

## Holy and beloved

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
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The Sunday after Christmas—30 December 2012

*1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2.41-52*

So, my friends, the New Year is just around the corner and very soon Christmas will be another distant memory. This week perhaps some of us will be considering the New Year, wondering what 2013 will bring, wondering what we may do differently or better. Maybe we are wondering how we can stop doing some things. As I read this week's passages, I was caught by the descriptions of two young men, both of whom were contemplating their future—Samuel, the Old Testament religious leader, and Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph. Samuel grows “in stature and favor with God and with the people.” Jesus increases, “in wisdom and in stature and in divine and human favour.”

At this time, many of us resolve to be different, to be better, to grow in the right way and direction. We experience a glimpse of God's presence and for a moment, we dream of peace on earth, as we rejoice in acts of giving. This is good news indeed, but sadly the joy fades and we go back to business as usual. Before long it is February, the relaxed holiday atmosphere is long gone and our new year resolutions quietly forgotten.

Personally I find this very perplexing! We celebrate the incarnation of the Son of God at Christmas. Alleluia! Jesus is born! The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. Amen! We wish family and friends, co-workers and neighbours all good things and we embrace the sense of goodwill and joy. But within a few short weeks the pressures of work, family, life in general are upon us and we can struggle to cope and hold it all together let alone keep those resolutions and foster that good will. Our moment of stature becomes a distant memory. I would like to suggest that we take today's passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians as a guide for us as we contemplate the coming year. This passage can help us put our plans into perspective and perhaps save us from some pitfalls ahead.

The letter to the Colossians contains some very famous passages and verses. It has that fantastic hymn to Christ where Paul writes that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. &hellip; A wonderful hymn for Christmas, it has that revolutionary verse about the new creation that comes with life in Christ Jesus. Here there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and all! Onwards the revolution I say! It also has those controversial verses about wives being subject to their husbands and husbands loving their wives. In fact our passage is sandwiched in between that verse about radical equality and the one about marital relations.

The whole letter is characterized by the idea that the present, the here and now, can be transformed by faith, the faith of Christ and our faith. There is no waiting for the future fulfillment of God's plans. We can be part of this happening right now. Given that Paul probably wrote the letter while in prison this is quite an idea. On the cusp of a New Year, I find this very encouraging.

So what does our passage say? Well the first thing that you need to notice is that you are holy and beloved. Holy and beloved. You know just as you are. Just because. Just because you share in the life of the resurrected Christ, pure grace, you are holy and beloved. Your very being is holy and beloved. You are the beloved of God and the beloved of this community. There is nothing you can ever do from this moment onwards that will make you any more beloved than you already are—completely, divinely, unconditionally. You don't have to work any harder or pray any harder. Imagine what 2013 would be like if we could let that sink in?! In fact let me

give you a moment for you to ponder just how beloved you are&hellip;.

Beloved, since we are holy and loved by God, Paul encourages us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Perhaps because we are so beloved we can let go of striving and anxiety and spend our time being lovers of others, and even ourselves. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience are all ways we can be lovers. I heard someone share yesterday that compassion was when we are able to feel the vulnerability of another human being. When we have the ability to walk in their shoes and know their humanness, their need and their pain. Kindness is the capacity for gentleness and understanding and the ability to give to someone what they truly need. Quiet when they need to talk. Rest when they tired, understanding when they fail, to name just a couple of examples.

Humility, the queen of virtues, is basically to know our own humanness, our own needs and weaknesses. We may be holy and beloved but we are certainly not perfect and all-powerful! When we talk about humility as a spiritual principle, we're talking about developing an honest, accurate and objective view of our importance in the universe. And you know we are not that important! Consequently humility, an objective view of ourselves, can release us from the bonds of either a high or a low self-esteem. We simply are&hellip; Beloved creatures sustained by the breath and Spirit of God, the *ruach* of God, and that is enough.

Humility is related to the next item of spiritual clothing Paul encourages us to put on&hellip;.meekness. Unfortunately, the Greek word for meek is apparently the most untranslatable word in the New Testament. What it doesn't mean is being a weakling. It turns out that only two people in Scripture are described as 'meek': Moses and Jesus. So meekness has little to do with timidity. If meekness isn't weakness, what is it? The word has an association with domesticated animals, specifically beasts of burden. At first look, this idea doesn't thrill me; I don't particularly aspire to be ox-like. But when I think about it, an ox at the plow is not weak but extraordinarily strong. The key, though, is that his power is harnessed and directed. It is power that is contained and directed wisely when others are behaving badly. It is power that is given up for the sake of the other. It is power that is shared so that all may thrive and flourish. And all this talk of beasts of burden reminds me of Jesus assurance that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

The final piece of spiritual apparel is patience. If ever there was a virtue we need when dealing with the detail of our lives it is patience. Hands up who gets fidgety in supermarket queues? Who starts tapping their feet when you know you could do a task so much quicker and efficiently than someone else? Who gets frustrated with government forms, telephone operators, technology breakdowns and slow drivers? However, patience can be enhanced by all the previous virtues Paul has listed. When we have compassion, practice kindness, have humility and meekness then surely patience is possible&hellip;perhaps that is why it is listed last.

Perhaps you have noticed that all these qualities are about how we end up treating other people. Paul is not interested in us 'achieving our personal best', becoming the 'best we can be', losing weight, getting fit, eating properly or anything else to do with personal enhancement. Paul may be interested in those things but only if they translate into us becoming better lovers of others, more complete members of the community. And so Paul turns to how we are in community.

As I look ahead to 2013 I feel a little overwhelmed with everything we have on our plate: a growing church, a major building project, a new cross-cultural ministry program, plus all the other programs, services and events. It is all very exciting and wonderful and I wouldn't be any where else for quids—except maybe on the beach with David. But I get to do that too!

All this activity means that some of us may get impatient, tired, frustrated. Mistakes will be made. I will just say that again: mistakes will be made. The church will fail you again. We will

fail each other. Of course, this happens every year: failure along with great blessings and joy.

So beloved, I think we are going to need to put into practice very faithfully Paul's next piece of advice, "*Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*" This is the heart of Christian ministry, the ministry that you and I are called to do and to share. In 2 Corinthians, Paul calls us ministers of reconciliation and we get to practice this ministry with each other in this place. I know it is hard at times. Hard to know how to love and forgive when we are hurt and confused. Hard to admit fault and ask for forgiveness. It is hard to be humble and direct our power appropriately. Yet if we want to thrive and grow as a Christian community, this is central. If we want to be true to the example of Jesus Christ, this is not an optional extra. If you find it hard to forgive or ask for forgiveness, can I suggest you pray for the person and ask for God's guidance. Get close to God and God's grace and Spirit will flow from you.

Next Paul speaks of love and peace. Love in Paul's church-world binds everything together in perfect harmony. The peace of Christ needs to be the ruler of our hearts. Your, my, heart ruled by the peace of Christ. Again this is about reconciliation. About being one body, one people. The practice of love is apparently as beautiful as the resonances of harmony and music, perfect harmony in fact. Peace is to be the guiding principle that determines all our actions and thoughts. If we can hold love and peace together, love for God, other and self, and peace as the thing we follow and strive for then truly we can be so united, so at one, that we will shine with great brightness as the Body of Christ in this place and all things will be possible. And if we clothe ourselves with love and make Christ's peace central, we will also find our family lives blessed and fruitful.

Paul also encourages us to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. That phrase, "the word of Christ", is the only time it appears in the Bible. It refers to the teaching of Jesus and the revelation of Jesus in scripture. All this knowing we are beloved and holy, practicing the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing one another, love holding things together and the peace of Christ being central doesn't just happen. We need to be taught and instructed in the way of Jesus Christ. It is his example that can show us the way. It is his words that encourage and enlighten. It is his Spirit that empowers. Without the example of Christ we will probably be floundering and going to our default positions and habits. We find the example of Christ in scripture. And so this year perhaps we can spend some more time reading the gospels and pondering on their meaning for us, letting their words flow through us, showing us the way. Read a sector of Luke's gospel everyday, read it again and again.

Finally, Paul tells his readers to be grateful. In songs, hymns, prayers, in everything give thanks. Remember he is writing this from prison. I am sure his year didn't turn out quite as he expected. None of our years ever do, do they? Yet Paul says be grateful, give thanks to God in everything. Gratitude is the great reality changer. In fact I would go so far as to say that if you find what I have said too difficult or overwhelming then just start with gratitude. You know God doesn't need our gratitude. Remember you are holy and beloved, just as you are. God cannot love you anymore than he or she already does. However, we need to be grateful because it makes our life more abundant and rich. It changes the whole way we see the world. It dissolves resentment, it cuts fear off at the knees, it makes each human being precious. It changes the colour of the world and brings peace. It will help healing more than anything else. Perhaps you could start the new year with a gratitude list!

I hope and pray your 2013 is blessed. I pray the word of Christ will dwell in you richly. I pray you will be clothed in love and that the peace of Christ will guide your steps. God is with us. Amen.