

The Problem with New Year's Resolutions

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas, Year C, 2 January 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Jeremiah 31: 7-14; Psalm 147: 12-20; Ephesians 1: 3-14; John 1: 1-18

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Well, we're now in the zone of the new year's resolution. What are we to be like in this new year of 2022, what are we going to take up, and what to give up? What calls for less? Perhaps food, perhaps alcohol, perhaps online shopping, perhaps time spent on social media. And what calls for more? Perhaps exercise, or study; perhaps more reading, more work on the garden—or more work on relationships. All these new year's resolutions draw us toward a richer version of our lives. But often something goes wrong. We self-sabotage. We're pulled back by the weight of habit, by laziness and indifference, by settling for the comfort of familiarity, by the poverty of our imaginations. Some of us give up making new year's resolutions because we know ourselves too well.

Friends, today in our readings we're given a good picture of what life with God is like and meant to be like, and it's an attractive picture. Yet it's very quickly lost sight of and we risk falling back into an attitude that isn't right—that isn't good for ourselves, or for our world. And this is also named for us this morning, in our Gospel.

The message of our readings today is all about God's loving outreach toward us, God's acceptance of us, the God of creation in love with a people, with Israel and then the Church, who become the focus of God's love affair with creation. And with that message in Jeremiah and in our Psalm today, we have perhaps the clearest statement of Christianity's good news in our Ephesians reading this morning. We would do well to revisit it during the week and ponder its implications. It speaks of God reaching out for us, embracing us, lifting us up into God's life, and then sending us back to the world with a new sense of purpose in life thanks to Jesus Christ, so that my vocation and yours can now be about living to the praise of his glory—a simple, overarching alignment for our lives, yet claiming every aspect of our imagination and our action. What does it mean to live for the praise of Christ's glory? It certainly means being servants of love and agents of grace, being thankful, open-hearted, large-souled, and able to make a difference—settled, self-assured, though anything but arrogant, with

Jesus as our touchstone, who we regularly seek out in prayer, in word and sacrament.

But like a new year's resolution this vision of ourselves made richer and fuller in the love of God faces an uphill battle against the worse angels of our nature. The prologue to John's Gospel, which we heard this morning, explains what's going on here. In reality, human beings have very conflicted opinions about God. We may say we believe in a God of love and we hear all that language of love and welcome in our liturgies of Baptism and Eucharist, and in our Sunday readings. But instead we're used to feeling threatened, we're regularly made to feel inadequate, and we feel in need of the boost that comes so reliably with thinking and talking ill about others. We resent the limitedness of our created natures, so we come to resent our creator. And in psychologically deeply rooted ways we associate God with the impositions and unwelcome expectations and humiliations that life regularly delivers.

The story of Adam and Eve exiled from the garden for their uppityness shows us this dynamic. Adam and Eve resent the constraints of their human condition, which they see as God oppressing them, so they push back and they eat the forbidden fruit, and then they have to face the consequences of exile to a harsh life—East of Eden, in a phrase that

John Steinbeck made his own. So, here's the pattern: a demanding God, who we take for a rival, who as a result we experience not as welcoming but as rejecting and punishing.

Instead, friends, in John's Gospel we're given a picture of the world beginning again. At the Gospel's end, as we hear at Easter, the risen Christ appears in a Garden and Mary Magdalene, the new Eve, is sent out not in disgrace but on a new mission into God's future. Now, today, at the start of John's Gospel, we have a new account of creation recalling the version in Genesis. And there's another expulsion, too. But look! Here it's not human beings who are expelled by God for their sins. Instead, *it's God who we expel*, it's the Word who comes to his own and finds no welcome.

Friends, today's Gospel is intended as a reworking of the Genesis story, in keeping with the good news of God's grace and welcome that we can too readily lose sight of. It's not God who curses and expels human beings, as a threat to God's sovereignty perhaps—as Milton's Satan famously declared in *Paradise Lost*, "I'd rather reign in hell than serve in heaven". Instead, people act as if God is their enemy, just as we read in John's prologue this morning. I wonder how much of today's widespread unbelief is rooted in such resentment of God.

And yet for all humanity's resistance the Word still becomes flesh at Christmas, and a counter-story begins to make its way in history—a counter-story called Church, with a dramatic reordering of human priorities called Eucharist. And, friends, it's good news, not bad. It offers us a new sense of possibilities, of agency, of welcome change. As long as we remember to keep pushing back against the seductive, widespread alternatives, which keep trying to steal this good news—to make us reimagine God as a threat and an intrusion, who we can't afford to welcome, or submit to. Perhaps this could be a new year's resolution, and one that will stick.

The Lord be with you ...