

Renewal of the Covenant

I wonder if you have made any New Year's resolutions this year?
Being the second of January, perhaps you have broken some already.

Now, I'm not sure how effective New Year's resolutions are. I believe that 80% of them are broken by February.

But the fact that so many of us make them points us to an important truth: that many of us recognise that in some way our lives can be improved.

And the passing of another year is the perfect opportunity to assess how things are going and to make a few adjustments.

This January we are running a stewardship campaign.

I hope you have been reading about it in the Trident and on the pew sheets.

The basic premise of the campaign is that all we are and all we have is a gift from God.

Therefore, we are not our own, and all that we possess is not our own either – they are God's.

We are not freeholders of our lives, but rather are tenants.

And so rather than being free to do with our lives as we will, we are responsible for ourselves, our time, our talents, our resources, to God.

Through our stewardship campaign, the hope is that we might consider how we care for the world around us, how we use our time and talents, and how we spend our resources, so that we might invest them wisely and responsibly for their true owner, God, rather than fritter them away on trivialities and our own fancies.

But, today, on this first Sunday of the new year, we are going right back to the beginning... to the very basics of our belief about life, the universe and everything!

Romans 12.1:

“Therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercies, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God”

St Paul has just spent the first eleven chapters of his letter to the Romans explaining what God has done for the Roman Christians.

“All people have sinned and fall short of God's glory” he says (3.23).

But now, God has given his Son as “a sacrifice of atonement” (3.25).

So that through faith in Christ we might be made righteous; put right with God (3.22).

So Paul can assure the Romans, that they “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5.1)

Access to God’s grace (5.2)

And that nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord (8.39).

Yes, says St Paul reaching a great crescendo in Romans 8.37, “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

So, says St Paul in Romans, 12.1, if God has really done all this for you, if he really has made you, preserved you, blessed you, saved you and given you an eternal hope,

then this is how you are to live... by offering your whole selves to God as a “living sacrifice...which is your spiritual worship”.

Now sacrifices, certainly those offered in the temples of Paul’s day, generally involved a death – the death of an animal.

But, says St Paul, your sacrifice to God, your worship of him, shouldn’t involve the death of an animal, but rather the living of your life.

That’s what’s appropriate as a response to God for all that he has done for you – giving him your whole self.

And it’s in doing this that you will please God.

How are we to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God we might ask?

Verse 2:

“Be not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good, acceptable and perfect.”

I am pleased to say that I have now kicked the habit, but in my younger days I was an avid watcher of the Australian soap, Neighbours.

After many years of watching Scot and Charlene, Henry and Bronwyn, I noticed that the Soap had changed. They had started to use God’s name as a swear word.

Now, I have never, to my knowledge used God’s name in that way – I wouldn’t want to dishonour God by doing so.

But Neighbours was not alone in the way blaspheming God’s name started to become commonplace, even before the watershed.

And then it happened! Something went wrong, and the words that slipped into my mind, were, “Oh God”.

There it was...through repeated exposure, the world had conformed me to its own pattern – of using God’s name as a swear word.

There is so much in the world around us that would lead us away from God, and to live and speak in a way that dishonours him.

A recent survey suggests that 70% of Christian men now view pornography. Whereas once upon a time most Christian men would not have risked being seen in a shop buying pornography, now it's there on your computer screen at the touch of a button.

Let's be honest, our society that was once built upon the Christian faith is becoming ever more ambivalent, even hostile to Christian faith and values.

And as living un-Christianly becomes more and more the norm, it becomes harder and harder for us not just to do the right thing, but even to know what we should be doing.

I'm not that old, but when I was young Sundays were different. There were no sporting fixtures and the only shop that was open was the newsagent. Now many Christians fit in church around kids football and going to Asda.

Is this an example of Christians becoming less fuddy-duddy, or of buckling to societal pressure?

How do we decide?

St Paul tells us that we have a choice – we can either conform to what the world is doing, or we can choose to be transformed... by the renewing of our minds.

There are, I think, two equal and opposite dangers in Christianity.

One is to think that it's all about keeping a set of rules – if I keep this rule and that rule I'll be a good Christian.

The other is to think that all I have to do is “be the person God made me to be.”

The first danger sees us become legalistic rule keepers. The second sees us become wishy washy everything's alright as long as it feels good libertines.

But both of these ways of thinking are mere parodies of a real Christian faith.

Christianity is about a relationship: a relationship with God our Father, through Jesus his Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so, rather than being slaves who simply keep rules, or libertines who do what “feels right” we seek after God the Father's heart and mind and seek to bring our lives into conformity with him.

Rules will help. Our feelings and desires will help.

But there is no substitute for the hard work of spending time with God – reading his word, praying, practicing spiritual disciplines – so that we might learn what God's will is, and by strength of effort and by the grace of God through his Holy Spirit at work in our lives, bringing our lives in line with his will.

Now, Paul goes on in his letter to the Romans, and in other of his letters, to flesh out what this might look like.

He talks about how discovering and living the mind of God will affect family relationship, work relationships and our role in the wider world.

In Romans 12.3-8, our reading for this morning, he talks about our work in and for the church, and in Romans 12.9-13 about our attitudes to others.

Please do read this passage at home and ask God how he might want you to apply it to your life.

But let me simply point out now, that to live Christianly means to live in relationship with others...and so you can't live Christianly on your own.

Whether it's through using your gifts, or your attitude to others, Christian living is corporate.

I sometimes think I could be the perfect Christian if I just lived on my own little desert island – away from everyone else.

If I'm on my own I won't get cross, or judgemental. I won't gossip or say something I really shouldn't.

I sometimes think I could be the perfect rector too if I didn't have to deal with parishioners!

But the point is, God is love.

And if we are seeking God's heart and living in harmony with him, then we are supremely Christian when we are loving him and loving others.

As we love our enemies, as we love those people who are difficult to love, as we put ourselves aside for the good of others, then we are following our Lord and our Saviour.

So, where does that leave us at the start of this new year?

Firstly, let's take time to be thankful. Our God is a great God. He has done so much for us. His promises are so wonderful and sure. He gives us such hope for the future.

On your weekly notice sheet is the General Thanksgiving from the Book of Common Prayer. You might like to use it over the coming days to thank God for your "creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life; but above all for [God's] inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace and for the hope of glory".

Secondly, out of gratitude and out of love for God, let's renew our commitment to God;

Repenting of our mistakes and failures,
Committing to seeking his heart and mind,
Offering him our lives as a living sacrifice.

In just a moment we are going to sing a beautiful hymn, “Father, who on man dost shower”. We’ll sing it as a prayer, thanking God for all his gifts and asking his help to use each rightly.

Then we’ll renew our covenant, our relationship, with God; using the words of Charles’ Wesley’s new year covenant service. In it we can repent of our failures and commit ourselves afresh to God.

We will then move into our time of Communion – where we are invited by Christ to his table; where we might be fed and strengthened for the days ahead.

If, after receiving Communion, you wish, you are welcome to go straight to the side chapel, where you can kneel at the altar and I will anoint you with oil. The anointing might be as a sign of your repentance and God’s forgiveness, as a sign of your seeking after God’s heart and mind, or as a sign of your committing yourself to him once again.

Also, in the side chapel, the healing team will be on hand to pray for anyone who has any special requests.