

Scripture Readings for Dec 30th 2018

Luke 2:41–52

⁴¹ Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Colossians 3:12-17 (NIV)

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Sermon: New Year's Resolutions?

We have journeyed together for a month during Advent, and after all that waiting and build-up, Christmas has come and gone all too quickly. We are now tempted by the commercialism of the Boxing Day sales before getting ready for another round of festivities to celebrate the closing of one year and the arrival of the new. Amongst all that activity, some find time to pause and reflect about the events of 2018 and, in light of that, make resolutions they plan to keep in the year ahead. Making a New Year's resolution is no bad thing in itself. It means that we want to instigate positive changes for ourselves and toward others. For example, it is not the turkey that's stuffed, it is us - and so we might resolve to lose some weight, do more exercise, and drink less coffee! We may also resolve to change our attitudes; for example, we promise to be more thoughtful, to listen more, to be less grumpy, and so on. Good though such resolutions can be, the older we get, the more we realise how difficult it is to affect meaningful change. Because real change involves discipline and not merely whimsical feelings, and discipline is hard work. Of course, as Christians we are aware of the link between the words "discipline" and "disciple," and that connection is made in Paul's exhortation to the Colossian church in our New Testament reading for today.¹ I'm sure that those who organised the Lectionary recognised this passage was appropriate as one looks back over the past and faces forward to the future.

The context of our text has parallels with that of baptism,² whose format in those days involved taking off of one's clothes before going into the water to be immersed and coming out and being a robed in fresh garments. Amongst other things, this symbolised the "putting off" of the old life, with its thoughts and habits, and "putting on" a new life that was centred on Jesus Christ and being steadily transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. This "putting off" of vices and "putting on" of virtues is, therefore, an obvious clothing metaphor.³ An analogous baptism metaphor is "dying" to yourself and being "raised" to new life in Christ. Listen to what Paul says at the beginning of chapter 3. "For you *died* and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. Since, then, you have been *raised* with Christ, set your hearts on things above - not on earthly things."⁴ Both of these metaphors speak of what God *has graciously done for us* in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In one sense, this is an accomplished fact - that is who we *now* are - we have a new identity, we are a new creation. That is why our reading this morning begins with the following words: "Therefore, *as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved.*"⁵ This beginning is vital because it reminds us of our identity with God, an identity that was originally designated for the Jewish race as the chosen people but now – thanks be to God (!) - extends to include all non-Jews.⁶ Moreover, because of what baptism signifies, God *now* see us as *holy* and hence we can draw close to a *holy* God as his beloved children. Never doubt that, because that is the foundation from which, with

¹ With good (but not conclusive) reasons, some scholars today question Paul's authorship of Colossians - perhaps favouring instead Timothy (see Col:1:1; but even that is conjecture). For the sake of simplicity here, I am assuming the author is Paul.

² See also Gal 3:26-29.

³ See also Col 3:9b-10a: "Since you have *taken off* your old self with its practices and have *put on* the new self. . ."

⁴ Col 3:1-3 – modified.

⁵ Col 3:12a.

⁶ See also Deut 7:6-8. Col 3:11 concludes – for "Christ is all, and is *in* all," i.e., no ethnic, cultural, or social distinctions.

the Holy Spirit's continual help,⁷ we can live out the day-to-day challenges that arise within a Christian community. While that solid basis and status before God is essential, we are *still* – as Paul puts it – in the process of “*being renewed* in knowledge according to the image of our Creator.”⁸ Discipleship is the on-going transformation, of being made more like Christ. Or, put another way, our peace with God is to be translated to peace with each other. Consequently, this time of year is a good time to take stock and humbly and honestly consider how 2018 has been in terms of our spiritual and character development. Moreover, we can *resolve* again to continue our partnership with the Holy Spirit in 2019 and look forward to further maturation of the fruit of the Spirit⁹ that is being developed within us for the benefit of those around us. That is the best form of New Year's resolution, because we can be assured that God will complete the new work that he has begun within us, just as – so Luke tells us – “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”¹⁰

Because *God* has taken the initiative and has chosen you and me to be set apart for himself, so it is that, as God's new community, we are to intentionally¹¹ put on those qualities that reveal what it means to be truly human, as we image the traits of our Creator himself. The new virtues we are to “put on” are *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience*, and the overall context is that these practical virtues are needed to live as a harmonious Christian community.¹² That list, at first glance, is counter to what some politicians claim we need for a better society, namely, more education, to be tough on crime and stronger on national defence. And there is no mention here of things like: efficiency, innovation, diligence or work-ethic, not that these are unimportant. But – as you can see - those character virtues are not for the faint-hearted, and Paul continues: “Bear with each other and *forgive one* another. If any of you has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you.”¹³

Let's unpack this briefly this morning. The list begins with compassion and kindness. In Paul's day, there was little regard for those with disabilities, or concern for the wellbeing of widows and slaves, or – for that matter - the suffering of animals. To have compassion and display kindness is, therefore, to provide *dignity* to others because we recognise our common *identity* as fellow creatures of our Creator. Next is “humility” and, like the word “meek,” it is a word that many associate with weakness and submission, and therefore see as contemptible.¹⁴ But consider instead that humility, and its associated quality of gentleness, arises from a *proper* sense of self-worth, or self-love, because we are God's chosen and dearly beloved. Out of that healthy sense of value and identity, there can arise a willingness to wave our rights, rather than be concerned with personal gain in our relationships with others. Added to that

⁷ Traditionally, the Spirit is referred to as the “*Sanctifier*,” as Jesus is the “*Redeemer*” and God the Father is the “*Creator*.”

⁸ Col 3:10.

⁹ Gal 5:22-23.

¹⁰ Luke 2:52.

¹¹ “set our minds” – Col 3:2.

¹² Moreover, they reflect God's very nature! That is what being a part of the kingdom – or reign – of God entails.

¹³ Col 3:13. See also Matt 6:12, Luke 11:4.

¹⁴ See also Phil 2:3. “Humility” was a dirty word in the Greco-Roman world too, and some – therefore - regard it as a virtue created by Christianity.

list is the virtue of patience, the ability *not* become frustrated and enraged, and so we are able to make allowances for others' shortcomings and tolerate their exasperating behaviour. These virtues are needed because Paul recognises the messiness of churches, especially socially- and ethnically-diverse communities. These qualities are not merely intended for a few "holy" church-members – but *for everybody*,¹⁵ because we *all* have weaknesses and faults and need grace and forgiveness. Even so, Paul recognises that this transformation process takes time [and space] and, on the journey, there will inevitably be complaints and grievances. Conflict *will* happen; it is a question of *when*, not *if*. And often it is an underlying fear that makes the conflict so explosive. The traditional responses to conflict are "fight" or "flight"; Christ creates a third option, namely, an opportunity to deepen *relationships*. Forgiveness within the family of the faith may be the best training ground for the work of reconciliation in the wider world. Consequently, dealing with conflict should be seen as part of our *spiritual* formation, and not simply a nuisance to be managed or resolved with the least amount of energy and time.

Let me quickly add, forgiveness is neither simple, nor easy, and it certainly does not mean to "forgive and forget" – not in the way that this sentiment is commonly used as a cover for simply absorbing hurt in the face of injustice. For some who are victims within harmful relationships, this could result in the perpetuation of abuse and violence and the further diminishing of one's sense of self-worth. Sometimes those relationships have to be ended. Even so, our ability to forgive others is reflective of our lived experience of being forgiven people.¹⁶ Knowing ourselves be loved by God and forgiven by Christ provides the proper sense of self-worth and is the source of generosity necessary to forgive others. Forgiveness has as its goal the healing of one's emotional wellbeing from an offence and follows from the recognition that God's ultimately desires reconciliation and harmony – *that* is the goal of this healing. But let us not fool ourselves, forgiveness is neither cheap or superficial.¹⁷ But, as we already know, God has modelled that for us in Jesus Christ, who calls us to follow in his footsteps, strengthened by the Spirit of Holiness.

Paul goes on to say, "Over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."¹⁸ This is reminiscent of 1 Cor 13:13, where love is said to be the greatest of the virtues. Most of the evils of church history have been due to the absence of love, which is meant to be the binding agent in all relationships, the superglue of church unity. If sin was the power of the old-age of the flesh, then love is the power of the new age of the Spirit. When love functions effectively, it leads us to be truly human.

Paul continues: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace."¹⁹ The metaphor changes from virtuous external clothing to the internal peace of Christ

¹⁵ Because we *all* claim Jesus Christ is *our* Lord ("master," in this context) and that his Lordship has claim on every part of our lives. Even so, this obedience is not burdensome duty, but the uniting source of life that enables us to overflow with thankfulness and gratitude. In other words, there should be no discontinuity between our worship and everyday life.

¹⁶ Col 3:13b. Consequently, those who have been severely damaged by life experiences are likely to struggle in this regard.

¹⁷ And what is required for sustaining a community is more than one single act of forgiveness!

¹⁸ Col 3:14. For Paul the overarching virtue is *love*; for the Stoics it would be *self-control*.

¹⁹ Col 3:15

ruling in our inner being - our thoughts and wills. God has graciously taken the initiative, but our intentionality still has an important role to play for, as disciples, we *choose* to follow the master. While obviously very relevant to us as individuals, Paul's message was originally for a congregation because it speaks of functioning harmoniously as a unit - as members of *one* body.²⁰ If our Christ is our master, his peace within us removes the need for manipulation of others, or fear²¹ about others' opinions, and enables reconciliation to continue to be the hallmark of the body of Christ and its vision and actions. This is never easy; it requires *communal* intentionality and prayer! But all this is also what the world wants and needs. Listen to the CEO of the secular Danish Think-Tank, *The Happiness Research Institute*,²² which studies the causes and effects of happiness and promotes their findings to improve the quality of life of people across the world. He writes: "These are *not* the days when we can afford to reach for fear, mistrust and cynicism. That will never bring us towards a happier place. What will bring us forward is a spirit of trust and cooperation and the realisation that we are each other's keepers. What will bring us forward is being freed of fear and showing kindness to strangers."²³ These qualities of trust, cooperation and kindness all sound like this person has discovered Paul's hymn sheet!

Paul concludes: "Be thankful; sing to God with gratitude in your hearts.²⁴ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."²⁵ This gratitude is not guilt-induced, but flows genuinely from the heart and is, here, directed toward God. So as the year ends, I invite you to look back and identify what God has done in your life²⁶ over the last 12 months and give thanks not just for "things" but for *growth in character*. Remember your baptism and continue to deliberately "put off" old vices and, in the year ahead, "put on" virtues that are the fruit of the Spirit – signs that God is *still* at work within you. Remember your identity as a beloved child of God, and be thankful. Let us live that out together with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and love. That is the best kind of New Year's resolution. And whatever we face in 2019, let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. Amen.

²⁰ See also Col 1:18; 1 Cor 12:12-13:13; Rom 12. Clearly, this message is for the Christ's Church as a whole. Moreover, the peace of Christ is to be contrasted to the peace imposed by Rome (*pax romana*), one maintained by force. Ironically (?), this peace was brought about through Christ becoming the victim of Roman crucifixion!

²¹ See also 1 John 4:18 – "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear . . ."

²² <https://www.happinessresearchinstitute.com/>

²³ Meik Wiking, *The Little Book of Lykke*, (Penguin, 2017) p284. He continues: "What will bring us forward is redesigning our cities to ensure health and happiness and removing the price-tag on quality of life. . . . We need more dreamers and doers. We need more creators of kindness, heroes of happiness and champions of change." Ibid, 284-5.

²⁴ Examples of what is thought to be early (instructional) songs/worship material are: Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15 – 20.

²⁵ Col 3:15b-17.

²⁶ As the old song puts it: "Count your many blessings; name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."