

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

New World

Rev. Catherine Buchan
Sunday 1st January 2012

Luke 2:25-38

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

There are times in life when we do like to insist on new beginnings, and today, supremely, is one of these times. We look back on the year that is behind us, and whether it has been a good year or a bad one, whether the memories are joyful or painful, we say "Well, that's over now, I wonder what the new year will bring?" Some people love the new year, and others don't. Some may even dread it. Some stay up till midnight to welcome it in with fireworks and torches, and others, like me, like to sleep it in - though the fireworks make that difficult! You can say, and you are right, up to a point, that it is just another day, that choosing to count a new year from January first is an arbitrary human decision.

But God has set the earth in such an orbit around the sun that we do complete something every 365 and a quarter days. If we are to acknowledge that at all, if we are to use the days for counting with, then years must begin and end sometime. Until 1600 in Scotland we started the new year on March 25th (it was kept at that date until 1751 in England and Wales). Sikhs celebrate on March 14th, for most Hindus the new year is in the spring, the Assyrian new year is April 1st; but the Jewish New year, Rosh Hashana is in the autumn and the Muslim New year changes by 11 days every one of our years. However we do all count in years, and like it or not, that means that we must step from one to another at regular intervals.

And yet it is just a day. It may be a day when we like to think of new beginnings - my Granny would never let a piece of knitting, sewing or embroidery go unfinished over the new year: all had to be done by the year end, so that sometimes she sat bored with empty hands for a few days at the end of December, unwilling to start anything new. For many people it is the day when they will try to do something to make themselves better in some way: physically or morally. But it is just a day. It cannot change things in itself. The joy that we knew over Christmas does not die with the new year, nor does any sorrow or anxiety which has stalked us through the weeks at the end of the year. We know that. We wish it could be otherwise. We sometimes speak as though it is otherwise, but we know that the date in itself does not make a change.

And a change is what so often we crave. But it is not the date that changes situations or people: it is God. It is God in Christ. "If anyone is in Christ" wrote St. Paul, "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God..." (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christmas - we are still celebrating Christmas - is the ultimate new beginning. When God sent his Son to come and live with us as one of us a new world was born, one which is still growing, and which will one day be the only world there is. And when a new world is born, a new way of living goes with it.

We know this from life. It is true when a couple has their first baby. Friends warn them that life will never be the same again, but no one can explain in an understandable way just how the joy and responsibility of parenting changes everything; how everywhere they go they will see things with new eyes. Parents, or about-to-be parents travel to the great cities of the world and although they see the architecture and statues and so on, they also note that here there is a play park, or that there is nowhere safe for children to run around. Things have changed and they will never see

things the same way again.

It is the same when people who have lived in a small and badly equipped home move into better quarters: no more must they, for instance, go outside to gather water, no longer do piles of washing have to mount up on living room armchairs. Or when people move from one country to another: a new language may have to be mastered, new laws learned to live by. The old ways are no longer appropriate.

Paul's point in his letter was that the old ways are no longer appropriate, but his readers are still trying to live by them. They have rules and expected norms. They are still doing what they can to keep from offending God while doing what they can to live to please themselves. It's the two masters problem which has been at the heart of so many religious systems: how to get round God and still have a good time. But that is the old way. Now there is a new way, and it only will work if we give ourselves over to it entirely.

Last Sunday we celebrated Christmas Day. That was when we welcomed to the world the one who made the old ways no longer appropriate. It was the ultimate in new years, new aeons, new worlds. When God sent his Son to be with us, he was calling an end to the previous millennia of history, millennia which had seen humanity seeking after God, catching glimpses of him, falling and failing to live as he had intended for them. Just like so many New Year's resolutions, it just wasn't working. People still wanted their own way. The world muddled along, sometimes in near-peace, sometimes in near panic, but never in the way which God had planned when he made us. So he sent Jesus. He was the one who came to change everything and everyone, while remaining himself essentially unchanging. I mean, Jesus the baby changed and grew, obviously, but his essential self, as God's Son, as the righteous Saviour, as the one who came to offer us God's love, stayed the same always. That is what the writer to the Hebrews means when he says that "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever." (Hebrews 13:8)

This newness which began with Christmas is something which is always to be welcomed. It is the newness of the New Testament - the new agreement which God was making with us. Simeon and Anna recognised that and welcomed it, even though they were well on in years and might be thought to be set in their ways. We often think that older people dislike change, and some do, of course. If you have always done something in one way it is not easy to try a new way after many years. But it can be liberating. I will never forget a woman of 85 with whom I lodged for a few weeks one summer in Oregon. One day I came home from the church where I was working to find a note on the table: "Gone off with Walt (her neighbour) in his truck. Back in a few days. I may never get another chance to see what it is like to be a trucker!"

The welcome Simeon and Anna gave to the sight of the new infant Messiah is a challenge to all conservative people, of whatever age. The church sometimes seems to be full of conservatism (small C) who want the church itself to be the one place in a changing world which remains always the same. But it is *Jesus* who is the same yesterday, today and forever, not the church. He alone is our security amid the constant newness of life. Jesus, not the church. Indeed the reformed churches took and take as their watchword "*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*" which translates as "A church reformed, always being reformed". This is not to argue for change for change's sake, but to make the point that although Christ makes us new, he has constantly to be working on us, polishing us up to perfection, individually and as a church. Paul makes the point that our newness comes from Christ's work of reconciliation, bringing us close to God, and giving us a similar ministry of bringing others close to God as well. The fulfilment of that ministry will mean that we are *semper reformanda* - always being reformed - indeed. The message of reconciliation is the same, but in each generation there has to be new ways to show its relevance. Jesus alone can be the same, yesterday, today and forever, because he is already perfection.

We who are new but not yet perfect need constant renewing. At this time of year, our insistence on newness, our New Year resolutions, our hopes and wishes expressed all point to our knowing that we need to be made new. We do, the church does, the nations do, the world does. And Jesus came to do this work, to be, as Simeon said "A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel."

As we go into a new year, make resolutions if you like. But a resolution is something which relies on your own strength of character for its success. I'm not saying it won't succeed: it may well, but it is something you do on your own. What we do with Christ, what we allow him to do in us is deeper and more lasting. This new year is the time to make a new start in allowing him to renew you. It may be that he will want to clean you up in the same areas that you want to make resolutions about. But it may well be that he will want to show you other parts of your life, things you have learned to live with or to remember not to look at too closely, which he wants to bring to the light of his healing love. If we are in Christ, then everything becomes new: the painful memories, the guilt we try to forget, the broken relationships, the things we are most proud of: all gain new perspective and a different importance in the light of Christ's healing, reconciling love.

And as this is true for ourselves, let us pray for it to be more obviously true in the world: praying for justice and freedom for the people of Syria, for peace in Afghanistan and Iraq, asking that the humility of love would be of prime importance in all who make decisions which affect others - and in one way or another that is most of us!

We are people of the new way, the new kingdom, servants, ambassadors of the new king. It may be over two thousand years since that kingdom was inaugurated, but still it is new and being renewed. Still its newness catches people by surprise as we its citizens seek to live in its new ways: not by laws and rules, by doing the least and hoping for the best. We seek to live our whole lives in reconciliation: the reconciliation with God which Christ's coming brought us, and in reconciliation with others, bringing them into the love and forgiveness which we have already received.

Amen