

Christmas 1
27/12/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Colossians 3:12-17

Psalm 148

Luke 2:41-52

Thanksgiving – A New Year’s resolution

And so we come almost to the end of another year!!

Of course, the passage from one year to the next is largely artificial, but we’re sufficiently formed by our culture’s counting of time to see something significant indicated in the fact that the planet has circled the sun one more time. Part of what is signified by that progress is the felt need to reflect on the year which has gone by, and that which is to come. The year which is past has been filled with joys and happiness, and frustration and sadness. The year which comes will bring opportunities and challenges known, and unknown: things about which we’re greatly anxious and things we eagerly anticipate. Nothing which has happened, and much of what awaits us, can’t be changed. All we can really do is determine how we’ll deal with those memories, and face the forthcoming opportunities and challenges.

It is in the meeting our recent past with various possible futures that the time-honoured tradition of “New Year’s Resolutions” comes into its own. We resolve at this point in time to be different in the coming year (or, much more rarely, to remain the same). We all know how it works, and we know how many New Year’s resolutions have come crashing down by the end of January: more exercise, less chocolate, more generous, earlier nights, less clutter, more time with the kids, less alcohol, taking a trip, keeping a diary, learning a language, paying off the credit card... The intention is the very best, and the motivation might even be reasonably high, but for many of us neither the intention nor the motivation create enough momentum to carry us more than a month or two. In all of this there is the desire to become *different* from what we have been. And it is this at which we so often fail.

In our reading from Colossians this morning, an imperative towards being different is also heard: clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...

This is not the kind of thing you write to a group of people who’ve already got it down pat. Here Paul writes to a group of people on the way and in need of encouragement and exhortation to live in peace together: clothe yourselves with love ... And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. But these are not resolutions, in the sense that those to whom Paul writes are sitting around wondering how they might improve themselves and their ability to cope with the challenges of the coming year. They are rather directions or imperatives which come from outside those who hear them.

And this “outsideness” reflects the reason the changes in behaviour are called for. Whereas our own resolutions reflect what has not yet happened but we would like to see happen, Paul calls for a change on account of what *has* happened and which requires a response. We promise ourselves that we’ll drink less or exercise more because we see a feast of the one and a famine of the other to be bad news for our well-being. We

promise ourselves that we'll take a couple of short courses in the coming year because it will expand our horizons by introducing us to new people or ideas.

But Paul calls for change out of a different motivation. We are to forgive, for example, *because this is how God has dealt with us*. What operates here is not that desire for self-improvement which drives us in our resolutions but a response to an improvement in us God has already made in his forgiveness. The starting point is not what we desire to become but what God has made of us.

Paul, then, calls us not to be *good*, but to be *godly*. The two may sound similar, and perhaps even look similar when acted out, but goodness begins with us, whereas godliness *comes* to us.

And so three times we hear in our passage today: *be thankful*, sing to God *with gratitude*, *give[ing] thanks* to God the Father. This thanksgiving reflects what has been given, but is not just another task added to the task of living peaceably, as if being thankful were another thing we must resolve to do. Thanksgiving is, in fact, the meaning of our work towards peaceful relations. A spoken thanksgiving is just the counterpart to that enacted thanksgiving which is our effort to be godly – to be “as” God – towards those around us. The word of thanksgiving for love and forgiveness becomes our true word to God when we've been working on love and forgiveness towards those around us who need it.

Our reading this morning concludes with the exhortation to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus”. This is to see our lives not as what we might make of them, but as what God has made of them and will continue to make of them. Of course, we remain active agents, resolving to do this or that thing. But that action is to be in the light of the humanity which shines forth from the manger in Bethlehem, and which is offered to us: a humanity which dwells in the heart of God, the place where – by the will and work of God – it belongs.

So, as we look ahead to the year which is about to open up before us, let us pursue not only our own imagination as to what we might be like in it, but God's re-imagining of us in his forgiving and peace-making work in Jesus.

Let us, then, resolve to live in thanksgiving for the peace God has made between him and us, and live and work with each other in the hope that that peace will come to stand ever more richly between us, his human creatures, as God intends.

By the grace of God may this be so. Amen.
