

The New Year

Ephesian 3:1-12

Happy New Year. Welcome to a new year and a new decade. This is the time of the year when we can rest and recreate. Sit down with our significant other, and write down our hopes for the year and what we'd like to have in our lives in more abundance. It's also a time to be resolved – New Year's Resolutions are a feature with lots of people this time of year.

It's also a time to reflect on the year past.

I'd like to start by having a look at where we are now. I'm stating the obvious in saying we at St Paul's had a rocky year: we had challenges, blessings and two-steps-forward-one-step-back events; *and* we are readying to move from here — we'll be moving our worship place to Riversdale Road in 11 weeks.

So we have a lot before us, as we stand just over the threshold of a new year.

Who here has made a New Year's resolution? For me I have things I want for 2020. Many of the usual things — lose weight, get a job, be a better friend, brother, uncle, partner, Council member.

I've found resolutions can be really specific, or they can be wandering generalities — in other words, having no hope of being fulfilled. Resolutions can also be either about more, or less — we want more of some things (for me, that's time) and less of others (for me, that's speeding fines). For the resolutions that we are really serious about, we'll write the goals, wants and wishes down on paper.

If we are *really* serious, we'll put plans and timetables in place to achieve the goals we want. Join the gym — find one, set a target and go. Get the tax return in — find my receipts and get it done. Paint the bedroom — pick a colour, find the brushes and drop sheet.

OK, and what about us and our significant relationships? How are they going to improve over the next 12 months — you know, the really important ones: spouse/partner, children, parents, siblings, friends?

You hit the reset button and resolve to see the parents more, play with the children as a priority, set up date nights with your spouse.

What resources are you going to draw on to get these relationships working better? I'm including relationships here at St Paul's as well. You know, including any relationships that have been strained over the past 12 months.

The great commandment that points to how we all tackle this of course is from the revealed Advent God: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself".

We've all heard that verse... hundreds of times – heard sermons preached on the meaning and application of what it says into our lives. Look at the emphasis. Love God wholeheartedly — literally with your whole heart – a big ask, I agree.

You may say, "I don't know how to love God with my whole heart, I get angry with him, feel estranged from him, he's too big."

Here's the good news, friends — he brought himself down to life-size in the baby Jesus. His birth was foretold, He fulfilled the prophecies of old; and at His birth, He received gold symbolising kingship; incense, offered as a fragrance with prayers to God (Deity); and most strangely, myrrh, an embalming oil, foretelling His death.

His arrival was God hitting the cosmic RESET button. The new covenant, as prophesied, was now a reality. He became truly human, relatable — the son of Mary and Joseph, the village carpenter, as well as the Son of God.

Jesus was the reconciling sacrifice back to God the Father. Jesus was the great reconciler of the world, the bridge to back to the Father. His life was the example of how we are to be, one to another. Jesus doesn't judge us — the promise is "he who believes and is baptized will be saved". As Christians, our ransom is paid by the gift of Jesus. Bill paid — you are in the door, free and clear. Happy days!

Jesus beckons us to have a chat with Him, talk to him, have a read of what He said and did, ask Him questions. He wants us to know Him better, to understand Him more.

The ask is to be more of the person God created each of us to be — happy, loved brothers and sisters, expressing His love by what we do in the community of family, neighbourhood, and here at St Paul's. We are a saved people, repentant and forgiving. Now able to love and forgive, because of what God has first done for us.

If we do the work of looking inside and asking God to forgive us the multitude of stuff-ups we do or permit to happen — what Luther called daily contrition and repentance — we will be kinder to the reflection in the bathroom mirror, as well as reflecting more of God to those around us.

Repentance and forgiveness given to us, a redeemed people, must be shared and given to those around us.

It does require some work to claim forgiveness — we are to repent. Repent: that is, be aware that we've not done things as we ought, nor behaved well, and ask for and receive forgiveness. Then we are to repeat that process one to another — tough, huh? This was also a historical problem. St Paul had problems with his congregants arguing and fighting about which teacher to follow in the congregation. Factions and quarrels abounded.

At Ephesus, Paul encouraged the church there to "Be kind to one another, tender hearted [which is the opposite of *hard* hearted], forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you."
Ephesians 4:32

This is a new way of dealing with conflict — the New Covenant way. Not eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

The call is to behave as redeemed people caring for each other. Not holding onto grudges or ill feeling, but being free to worship and fellowship as reconciled, saved sinners.

God wants us to be whole. To experience his love made manifest in Jesus. To be drawn to him and one to another.

So as we launch ourselves into the New Year and new decade of 2020, let's sit awhile with God; it doesn't matter whether it's before or after you've done your New Years resolution lists. But take time soon, and be refreshed by reading the Word, gathering as believers and praying, and seeking to follow Paul's encouragement... "Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you."

I know I have work to do this week before coming to the Lord's Table again. I'll be picking up the phone and arranging to meet with some people whom I need to talk to and be reconciled with, if we can arrange a time.

I thank God I made it through 2019, as did we all. My challenge is to re-organise the New Year's resolutions list to prioritise God, and be faithful to Him in all areas of my life. So friends, fill in your own words to complete the phrase, "I resolve, with God's guidance and leading, to..."

Amen.