

Jan 1st 2012 Luke 2 15-21 Isaiah 61 :10-62:3

Happy New Year! Did you see the New Year in? The fireworks across the globe – and in London? Here's a question : In the last 10 hours, have you broken your New Year's resolution? (If indeed you made one?). Maybe, as some people do, you made the resolution never to make a resolution again. Today, on January 1st, we superstitiously and yet truthfully look backwards and we look forwards, reflecting upon our own lives. We look back to the past that has made us what we are, and we look to our future where our hopes lie. The word 'January' is derived from Janus the two-headed Roman god who looks both forwards and backwards. It is said by 'old wives tales' that our actions today dictate the pattern for the rest of the year: we are to avoid breaking things, we must wear smart clothes, we mustn't leave any money at home , and so on. In Scottish households they will have first footed at midnight which means someone places a piece of coal in your fireplace with the words, ' Lang may your lumb reek' which means ' Long may your chimney smoke,' in the hope that there will always be prosperity in that house. All such secular traditions and practices are there for us cheerfully to denote the passing of another year with a small element of seriousness, as people try to make improvements in their own lives. Every year on January the 1st, years counted from the birth of Jesus, we mark time passing as the clock ticks away.

We may smile at such secular practices and may merrily join in with making resolutions or promises for the New Year, but for us, a week after Christmas, at the start of our calendar year, as we remember the new era ushered in by the birth of Jesus, we are reminded today of his Jewish identity and of another promise – a covenant between humanity and God which is recalled in the

circumcision of Jesus. The two parts to this sermon are: covenant, and covenant! Although intertwined in many ways I have separated them into – old covenant and new covenant and then new covenant for us today.

Firstly then the old covenant. At the time of Jesus, Jewish boys were circumcised and named on the eighth day after birth. Looking back, Jewish tradition held that God had made a solemn covenant with Abraham promising that Abraham would have a son of his own, that his offspring would become countless like the stars, and that they would live in the promised land. God also promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. Remember that Abraham had to trust God with all his heart since he and his wife Sarah were elderly and childless. In response to God's many offers, Abraham obeys. The external sign of this two-way promise or covenant to God was circumcision. The covenant in a wedding service is similarly, symbolised by the wedding ring. Both parties makes promises to care for, look after and love each other and the token symbol of the promise is a ring placed on the fourth finger marking 'God's unending love'. There is no such ring in God's covenant with Abraham, but the physical symbol of circumcision. Circumcision was, and still is, taken very seriously by Jews: for any male to remain uncircumcised, would be a sign of rebellion against God's covenant. When Antiochus Epiphanes the fourth, persecuted the Jews in the second century BC, he realized how important circumcision was to the Jewish identity and so he cruelly forbade it. Luther speaks of the world being told loudly and clearly that it was from a circumcised nation, not the uncircumcised, that the Saviour, Jesus, the Jew, was born. God comes to us through the particularity of Jewishness.

Circumcision emphasises that the Saviour is God in human form as a Jewish baby. What, after all, could be more explicitly physical and with particular identity than the birth of a baby followed by circumcision with all the blood that both entail. The descendants of Abraham were to be a blessing and here is the greatest descendant and blessing – Jesus: the baby who is now passively keeping the covenant of circumcision through his parents on this eighth day. Looking backwards, circumcision stands for Jesus' Jewish identity; looking forwards the destiny of this child is to be a self-offering death which will be a blessing to all nations. The time now is arriving for the covenant promises to become reality.

That reality is none other than God's saving love. In Matthew's Gospel, the angel that had announced Jesus' conception to Mary explains that the name Jesus means 'saviour'. To live out the meaning of His name, Jesus will fulfil the law, introduce a new commandment and suffer and die for us to show God's love. Jesus will follow the good example of his parents as they keep the covenant as specified in Genesis chapter 17 where it says that on the 8th day a boy will be circumcised. Mary and Joseph are obedient too, to God's law. Luke mentions 5 times in the space of 12 verses the word 'law' in regard to Mary and Joseph's behaviour as parents. Jesus clearly has devout parents who will love and nurture him under God's law. We must never underestimate the role of parents in providing an environment for children to grow up knowing God's love and God's law. Though we all recognise that it is not easy and children can often misunderstand words – you may have heard of the 12 year old who wrote about the early explorer, Francis Drake in his Geography exam paper. He stated 'Francis Drake circumcised the world'. Regardless of mistakes, it is often

parental love, modelled upon God's love that introduces a child to the love of God.

So firstly the old covenant and secondly, the new covenant. The clock continues ticking as the world waits expectantly for the saviour and the new covenant. Luke's Gospel stresses the urgency of time passing: he introduces the birth of Jesus with 'the time came for her...' and now the circumcision too is introduced with 'the time came' and later the purification will be introduced with 'When the time came for their purification..' Time is moving on and it moves on swiftly as the very young Jesus becomes an adult.

In his short life, Jesus spoke, taught, healed and prayed to help people understand the sovereign love of God. At circumcision, Jesus shed his first drops of blood as a sign of the covenant; then at his death he shed his blood for us. Just before the crucifixion, at the last supper, he says, according to Luke's Gospel, 'The cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' . Here is a new covenant – a new promise. Jesus' parents obeyed the old covenant that God had made with Abraham when Jesus was circumcised; now in adulthood, Jesus is completing the old covenant with the new covenant. This is a promise of open love and forgiveness to all humanity, not just one section of society: according to Luke, all are welcome to worship God including shepherds, women, samaritans, the sick, the poor and even all who are uncircumcised. As the clock ticks, the whole world is drawing closer to the one God through Jesus' death. A death that helps us to make sense of and encourages us to act in a world of stabbings in January sales, deep grief at the death of a loved one and a world torn apart by broken relationships. We are drawing closer to God. Looking forwards from the

circumcision of Jesus, we can now see that all our hopes are completed through that other eighth day, which is the day of resurrection, the first day of the week.

After the old covenant and the new covenant let us turn finally to the new covenant for us today. The new covenant today is marked by our baptism where we (or godparents on our behalf) promise to love and obey God. A marking or symbol that we too, take seriously as our lives tick away. In our baptism, many of us, were passively brought, perhaps by our parents, into the new covenant. In baptism we became passive recipients of the new covenant. We participate in the death of Jesus and all its benefits. We look forward to living a risen life in which we can love God truly with all our heart, our soul and our mind within the new covenant: that new covenant referred to in Jeremiah, when God says, 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts ; and I will be their God and they shall be my people'.

The clock is still ticking as we join in the secular celebrations and raise a glass to welcome in the new year, but as Christians we have no need to look back regretfully to the previous year. The new covenant through Jesus' death assures us that we are loved for who we are and our past is forgiven so that we can celebrate both our present and our future in hope. God is calling out to us through the physicality of Jesus' birth, through the symbols of the old and the new covenant, through the reality of the bread and the wine to be the person we are called to be in the present and to be God's servant in the future. The person who brings some of the light of Christ into the darkest corners of this world, the person who promises, yes, even in 2012, to help usher in God's kingdom here on earth. Amen

