

Sermon Christmas 2 The Light of Grace
John 1:1-18 Julian Templeton

I have a confession to make: I've stopped making New Year resolutions! After making and failing to keep resolutions in previous years, I've decided that New Year's Eve is not the best time to make life-changing resolutions. I have in the past fallen for the attractive idea of 'out with the old and in with the new' and been full of good intentions about the things I was going to do differently. Part of the problem is that many of my New Year resolutions began to have an all-too-familiar ring about them. I realised that I was making the very same resolution I had made—and failed to keep—in previous years. Perhaps you know the feeling?

Human resolve and willpower can help us to achieve many things, but there are other things that seem to be very difficult to change. That may be because we are unrealistic about the change we want to make; or it may be because the energy required to make the change is not greater than the inertia that keeps things the same. To overcome inertia and resistance to change we need be very realistic about how much we really want to change and what practical steps we will take to ensure we achieve it. It also helps, in my experience, to have someone else close to you to support you in the change you are seeking to make and to whom you make yourself accountable.

The Church is in the business of enabling people to change because the Church believes in Jesus who gives people access to a different quality of life: the life of God's *grace*. The Gospel according to John claims that a new quality of life—life that is more than merely existing—may be found by trusting in Jesus.

Life was in him, and that life was the light of humankind. John 1:4

The Greek word in 1:4 that we translate 'life' is *zōē*. This life comes from the Word (*logos*), who was with God from the beginning and who shares an identity of being with God. *Zōē* is the life God has, the life that the Word also has and that the Word gives. This life is described as the light (*phōs*) of humankind. Such light-life is much more than mere existence; it is life *reconciled with God*. It is life lived in relationship with God. It is life awakened to faith in God and to the love of God. It is life sustained by the *grace* of God. This light-life that is found in the Word is the light of God's truth. The description of life as light leads to the first of John's contrasts:

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not understood or extinguished it. (1:5)

The deliberate contrasting of the light of life with the existence of darkness indicates that while there is a way of living illuminated by the Word, there is also a way of living that does not understand or welcome the Word and is therefore in darkness. This is an existence separated from God, the source of true life. The biblical writers call the state separated from God: 'sin'. Sin is not merely a matter of an occasional lapse or fault on our part; sin describes the entire order and system in which life is all about "me" and my attempt to manipulate and control others for my own purposes. When I think that life revolves around me, and my needs, then I've got to try to get you to do what I want. This life of grasping, manipulating, and controlling is a life of darkness. It closes down options, frustrates potential and narrows opportunities. The poor and the weak are its most common victims, but all are affected by

the inequality and injustice such darkness brings. Indeed, surveys have revealed that in the most unequal societies it is not only the poorest people that have a poor quality of life, as we would expect, but also the richest people, who are often living in a state of anxiety about how they will keep and protect what they've got.

The good news of the gospel that John proclaims is the light that Jesus brings shines in the darkness, and although the darkness does not understand the light, neither has the darkness extinguished the light. This light of grace and truth that comes to us in Jesus cannot be manipulated or controlled. Jesus, first of all, must be received and trusted.

To those who received him, who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God. (1:12)

When we receive God's gift to us in Jesus and place our trust in him, we become children of God our heavenly Father by a new birth "from above" (*anōthen* 3:3). This new birth is much more far-reaching and radical than any New Year resolution. It requires the denial of self, taking up one's cross and following Jesus. It requires, in Paul's language, 'dying to self'.

This far-reaching and radical change of life is possible only because the Word, Jesus Christ, has "made his home among us" (1:14). Because the Word, Jesus Christ, has made his home among us there is a corresponding community in which he is believed and welcomed, and that community is the Church. I shared earlier that when I have been able to make changes it has been because I have had someone close to me supporting me and to which I have made myself accountable. That person is my wife, Laura. In a similar way, the Church is a community in which we can support one another and to which

we make ourselves accountable. The Church is the community in which God's grace in Jesus becomes 'incarnate' in those who, because of the grace God has shown them, are gracious to one another. In the Church we become instruments of grace to one another by offering practical support, bearing one another's burdens, and taking an interest in one another.

The Word that has made his home among us is "full of grace and truth." The *fullness* of grace is the really good news here. All created things are limited and eventually run down, and that includes us. We have a biological life that has a natural cycle of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death. The author of the Fourth Gospel does not deny the biological existence we have by natural birth. What he claims is that we who are natural born can become "born of God" (1:13), and when we do so we gain access to a different quality of life: *zōē* life. Whereas biological life is necessarily limited; God's life that comes to us as grace through Jesus is *unlimited* in its fullness.

To emphasize this point, the author writes: "from his fullness we have each received grace upon grace." (1:16) The grace promised is superabundant: it will never run out because God gives it, and God is eternal and infinite. Grace is God's energy that flows in a different direction to natural inertia. It is what Paul refers to when he writes: "Although outwardly we are wasting away; inwardly we are being renewed day by day." (2 Corinthians 4:16) Grace has its effect when, despite ill health or frailty or misfortune, we find that God renews our faith and hope. Grace has its effect when, rather than becoming embittered or resentful by the hurt someone else has caused, we find a way to forgive and move on. The grace promised is deliberately coupled with *truth*. Truth requires that we become transparent and honest about those things that we

cannot change and those things over which we have no control.

Laura and I recently watched the film *Joy*. The film is based on the life of Joy Mangano. Joy is the divorced mother of two children, whose ex-husband lives in the basement of her house, whose mother lives a reclusive life dominated by television soap operas, whose half-sister frequently humiliates Joy, and whose father runs a not very successful garage and has just been made homeless by his latest partner. Joy loses her job with an airline and life seems very bleak. The only person in the house who supports and believes in Joy is her grandmother, who tells Joy that one day she will be a success. Joy invents a new mop that she invests a large amount of money in manufacturing. It is a story with highs and lows. Perhaps the lowest point is when, due to unpaid debts, Joy is forced to file for bankruptcy and looks certain to lose her house.

The soundtrack of the film includes Harold Darke's setting of the Christina Rossetti carol: 'In the bleak midwinter'. In the bleakest point in the story, Joy somehow finds the strength to reclaim her invention. I think that the belief that the grandmother had instilled in Joy enabled her to find the strength to change her circumstances. We might say that this belief was the grandmother's personal gift of grace. Jesus Christ is God's personal gift of grace. Each day we are faced with a choice: will we allow natural inertia or the 'conspiring of circumstances' to confine us and keep us unchanged; or will we ask God for his grace? In the light of grace our outward circumstances may not appear to be much altered; but—look closer—the light of grace begins inwardly to transform us, and then, behold, we see our circumstances in a new light because we are changed. Thanks be to God.