

I've heard that the definition of a New Year's Resolution is something that goes in one year, and out the other.

And I saw a cartoon of a man talking to his dog: "Fido! You ate my list of New Year's Resolutions." He says, and then "Good dog!"

But for many people a new year is a time to make changes in their lives. To make New Year resolutions. Not everyone does, but lots of people do... and it's a common conversation point at this time of year.

People resolve to quit smoking or to exercise more, or to lose weight, or to mow the lawn every two weeks whether it needs it or not, or read the bible every day or read a novel a month, or finally get the craft project completed or the shed organised, or whatever.

People make resolutions – really promises to do particular things – in or throughout the New Year.

And all the things that people typically resolve to do are good: You don't hear people resolving to take up smoking or to give less to charity or spend less time with their children, do you?

But I think our observation, if not our experience, is that New Year's resolutions seldom stick. That the exercise program that someone started with great enthusiasm on January 1 is just a memory by the end of the month, of the bible reading plan to get through the whole bible over the year – well, those middle chapters of Genesis do drag on a bit, don't they?

Of course, there's no penalty if your resolution fails – and no prize if you manage to keep it, beyond whatever benefit the resolution itself brings, whether it be a healthier body, or a tidier shed, or better knowledge of something.

But if the resolutions that people make are for good things, which they choose for themselves and commit to themselves, we have to wonder: why do they fail so often?

It's a good question. If on January 1 I say "I'm going to do half an hour of exercise a day", and a few days later decide that I can't be bothered, well, what's changed?

Nothing.

Except of course, that keeping resolutions requires commitment, requires effort and requires sacrifice – if I'm going to spend half an hour exercising, then that's half an hour I can't be doing something else.

It's easy to make commitments and make promises, but not so easy to keep them, because they require effort, and they require sacrifice – and they require that we remember them too, because life – the world – is so distracting. And sometimes so tempting: I'll just skip my run today, or I'll just have another slice of cake, or the lawn will last 'till next weekend. And so on.

And so it is too, with whatever commitments we might make to God. They require effort, they require sacrifice, they require us to remember them, and they require us to resist temptation – whether that temptation is in the form of laziness or perhaps selfishness or maybe even greed.

We might have good intentions, and we try to do our best: but we often fail. We take the easy options, we let things go as 'one offs', we defer things until later. Our lives are just so busy and stress filled, often to the point of being overwhelmed – our experience of the last two years of Covid, is that it's been hard going even if we haven't had the virus. Our lives have been affected in so many ways, masks, QR codes, capacity limits, closed churches, closed business. So often, we feel helpless. Hopeless.

The people of Jeremiah's time, exiled or scattered, were distressed, they seemed to be in a hopeless situation: it was an incredibly hard

time for them. They knew that they were God's chosen people – but it really didn't seem it!

Today, we can have hard times too, we might not be physically exiled, but we can be lost in separations, distractions, changes and demands and disappointments. Church is no longer the centre of our society. Christian input is often sidelined from the major discussions and debates of our time – we may not be physically exiled, but sometimes, for practical purposes, we are.

But today's Old Testament reading from the book of Jeremiah reminds us that we have hope in such times.

The last couple of weeks have been for many people a stressful time. There are the stresses of family and social gatherings (or the stresses of not being able to have them due to Covid), the joys of Christmas shopping, the excitement of children, alcohol flowing, financial stress. The high point of Christmas day, then the slow days of leftovers and sport and shopping that carried us through to New Year's Eve. And then, not much. There's really nothing left until 'back to school' or 'return to work' – and finally Australia Day. Which really marks the start of another year... when everything gets back to normal. The bills come in. The regular cycles of our lives resume.

But even if you made it through the last couple of weeks without at least some time of sadness, disappointment, despair – are you really going to get through the year to come in the same way?

But Jeremiah tells us that it's almost party time! The party hasn't started yet, but the invitations are going out.

It seems odd, because Jeremiah is generally thought of as a prophet of doom and gloom. After all, delivering messages of doom and gloom was part and parcel of being a prophet. Even John the Baptist told the nation of Israel that they were a brood of vipers!

And to be fair to Jeremiah, he never wanted to be a prophet, but God called him regardless – and told Jeremiah it was Jeremiah’s job to tell the people of Israel and Judah about the calamities to come: the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the people.

In the Book of Jeremiah, God expresses his distress with his people because they have wandered away from the covenant relationship that had existed since in the time of Moses. You know, when God said “I will be your God, and you will be my people”? This is a relationship that God had called his people into, out of God’s love.

And in return, the people were to live in relationship with God and with each other. Through keeping God’s commandments. Not because keeping those commandments would earn them God’s favour, but keeping those commandments because they had already received God’s favour. Don’t forget that God first rescued the people from Egypt, then gave them the Ten Commandments.

Jesus would later bring it back to two principles: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” And, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

I often reflect that at one level, pretty easy. At another, it’s very difficult to live out. But these things really shouldn’t be difficult, should they? They are not bad or harmful to us in any way, and yet, we have difficulty in keeping them. Just like New Year’s resolutions.

Because just like New Year’s resolutions, keeping them requires effort, and sometimes sacrifice, and mostly they require us to remember them, and to commit to keeping them, and to resist distractions and temptations.

Hopefully, we do our best. And with the working of the Holy Spirit within us, we should be getting better and better and keeping God’s commandments as we grow in the knowledge and love of God.

But we don’t always get it right – and we won’t always get it right.

The people of Jeremiah's time certainly weren't getting it right: Way back in Chapter 7, Jeremiah told them plainly: *"The Lord told me to stand by the gate of the temple and to tell the people who were going in that the Lord All-Powerful, the God of Israel, had said: Pay attention, people of Judah! Change your ways and start living right, then I will let you keep on living in your own country. Don't fool yourselves! [...] Be fair and honest with each other. Stop taking advantage of foreigners, orphans, and widows. Don't kill innocent people. And stop worshiping other gods."* (7:1-6)

But the people didn't change their ways. In fact, they continued to hedge their bets by worshipping Baal, the traditional god of the Caananites who was the god of crops, livestock and fertility. So they worshiped God at the Temple in Jerusalem, but also made sacrifices to Baal. It was hardly them 'trusting God' was it?

And God wasn't asking anything of the people that wasn't good: Be fair, be honest, don't take advantage of the weak, don't kill innocent people.

And yet, and yet, they didn't respond.

And so, throughout the book of Jeremiah, we see God's frustration growing, and in Chapter 15, Jeremiah sets out the consequences of the people turning against God *"My people, you abandoned me and walked away. I am tired of showing mercy; that's why I'll destroy you by scattering you like straw blown by the wind. I will punish you with sorrow and death, because you refuse to change your ways. There will be more widows in Judah than grains of sand on a beach."* (15:6-7)

By Chapter 31, today's reading, God's warnings to the people had become reality. Babylon had invaded, the Temple was destroyed, and the survivors taken into exile. But now, God's message delivered by Jeremiah had changed dramatically from one of punishment and retribution in the earlier chapters, to one of reunion and reconciliation and hope.

In fact, chapters 30 through 33 of the book of Jeremiah have come to be called “The Book of Comfort,” or “The Little Book of Consolation.”

And we see that turnaround from the messages of doom and gloom to messages of hope and elation. Listen to some of the words:

“Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations...I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble... He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd...They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD... They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more... Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well... I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.”

There had been consequences for Israel in turning away from God, and rejecting his commands. Quite terrible consequences. The Temple – the centre of their religious and cultural life, the symbol of God dwelling with his people – was destroyed. The people, the nation of Israel, was removed from their land – their promised land.

Quite terrible consequences.

But here in Chapter 31 Jeremiah shares the good news of God’s grace. And hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, Jeremiah was sharing a glimpse into the Kingdom of God which Jesus came to bring.

And God’s grace doesn’t come because the people demanded it, or built grand temples and monuments or that they’d earned it in any way. God’s grace, which we have been reminded of in the Christmas stories was freely given – and is freely given today.

We can claim all the promises of God. In Jesus, God’s grace is given once and for all. All we need to do is respond to that grace, and to respond in gracious obedience to that wonderful gift from God.

Unlike our new year's resolutions, God's resolutions – God's promises – don't fail. I said earlier that resolutions require effort and sacrifice and commitment even in the face of distraction, and as we read the scriptures, we see that God has made the effort – sending his Son to earth – and God has made the sacrifice – the great sacrifice of Jesus dying on the cross. God made the commitment, and God followed through on the commitment. God doesn't get distracted. And all we need to do in response is to turn to him in faith, and be graciously obedient to his calling.

So here we are at the start of a new year. Yes, the liturgical year started back on the 28th of November, but for practical purposes, we are now in 2022, a new year.

Looking forward, we can make plans and resolutions, as individuals and as a congregation. But we need to remember that whatever those plans and resolutions are, they will need commitment, and need effort, and need sacrifice – and we need to remember too that there will be distractions. So, in whatever those plans may be, we need to trust God. Whose commitment, effort and sacrifice have been made for us – once and for all – complete in Jesus Christ.

As we enter 2022, whatever New Year's resolution you might have made or not made, let's all make or remake our resolution put our trust in God. In whatever ways we might stumble, how ever we might be distracted, if we find we cannot put in the effort, or cannot make a sacrifice, let us always trust in Jesus, who has made the effort and been the sacrifice. For all of us, and for each one of us.

Our resolutions may fail, but God is always faithful.

Amen.