

## New Year's Resolution

So, here we are in 2025... and what's changed? So far, 2025 is a lot like 2024 was.

I do note that some things have changed - the tolls on our motorways increased, the cost of passports went up, and I guess there's a few other charges that will have incremented quietly in the background. And of course, the calendar will have changed.

And although not a lot changes come the New Year, for many people it is a time to set out to make changes in their lives. To make New Year's resolutions.

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 volunteer to help a charity on a regular basis, or read the bible every day or read a novel a month, or finally get the quilt completed or the shed organised, or whatever.

People make resolutions – really promises to do particular things in or throughout the New Year. And they do it every year – some people even make the same resolutions over and over again.

And all the things that people typically resolve to do are good. I mean, 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, and 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 later chapters of Genesis do drag on a bit, don't they?

If the resolutions that people make are for good things, which they choose and commit to themselves, why would they fail?

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, what do you think has 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. Whether it's to ourselves or each other, it's easy to make promises. But it's harder 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.

People sometimes ask why we confess our sins every week because we don't sin very much – we do pretty well with not committing murder or adultery, and not stealing, and so on. But if you think about it, it's pretty easy not to do that; but how about not coveting, how about remembering the Sabbath, or how about loving the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul or even loving

your neighbour as yourself? It doesn't take much effort to not commit murder, but it requires a lot of effort – and resolve and sacrifice – to love your neighbour as yourself.

Our experience is that people are not all that good on following through on resolutions, on commitments. We might have good intentions, we might 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. We roll our eyes at the New Year's resolution of others, and we acknowledge that sometimes promises and commitments won't be honoured.

It's our experience of people. It's our experience of being human. If someone always followed through on their commitments and always kept their promises, it would be an amazing thing, wouldn't it?

The last couple of weeks have been for many people stressful and emotional. There are family and social gatherings, the joys of Christmas shopping, the excitement of children, alcohol flowing, financial stress, commitments to travel long distances. The high point of Christmas day, then the slow days of leftovers and sport and shopping that carry 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 the celebration – or not – of Australia Day. Which marks the real start of another year... everything gets back to normal. The bills come in. The regular cycles of our lives resume. The fun and excitement of Christmas and New Year become memories. The new year's resolutions fade away.

If you made it through the last couple of weeks without at least some time of sadness, disappointment, despair, and if you managed to keep your resolution for the first few days of 2025, are you really going to get through the year to come in the same way?

But today's Old Testament reading from Jeremiah gives us hope in such times.

And that is a bit odd, because, as I've mentioned before, Jeremiah has a gloomy reputation. He's often referred to as "the weeping prophet" which is based on his wish to have a "fountain of tears" with which he might weep for the slain of his own people (9:1). He not simply prophesying gloom for the people, but he cares for them – deeply.

Jeremiah is generally thought of as a prophet of doom and gloom, and in the Book of Jeremiah, God expresses his frustration and disgust 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 in which God had called his people into, out of his love, and which required only their love in return.

And the people were to show that love through living 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.

Of course, Jesus would later bring those commandments it back to two principles: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." And, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

At one level, pretty easy. At another, at times, very difficult to live out. They 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 we have difficulty with 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 to commit to keeping them, while resisting distraction and temptation.

Hopefully, we do our best, but we don't – and won't – always get it right.

The people of Jeremiah's time certainly didn't get it right, Jeremiah warned them they were going astray, but despite Jeremiah's warning, the people didn't change their ways.

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. But they didn't listen to Jeremiah, they didn't heed his warning.

So, by Chapter 31, today's reading, God's warnings to the people had been realised: Babylon had invaded, the Temple was destroyed, and the survivors taken into exile. And God's message delivered by Jeremiah has changed dramatically from one of punishment and retribution to one of reunion and reconciliation and hope.

And in today's reading, 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, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

"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."

Awesome.

There had been consequences for the people in turning away from God, and rejecting God's 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, Jeremiah shares the good news of God's grace. And more than 500 hundred years before the time of Jesus, Jeremiah is giving us 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 because they built grand temples and monuments or because they earned it in any way. God's grace which we know in our lives and have been reminded of in the Christmas stories is freely given.

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 of 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. 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, 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 at the beginning of December, but for practical purposes, we are now in 2025, a new year. We can look back on 2024 with mixed emotions: we experienced great sadness during the year, and there have been continuing anxieties about the future, but we also experienced God's love and generosity.

Looking forward we can make plans and resolutions. And we need to remember that those plans and resolutions will need commitment, need effort and need sacrifice – and there will be distractions. So in whatever our 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.

Going forward, whatever New Year's resolution you might have made or not made, let's all make or remake our resolution to turn to God in faith. However we might stumble, however we might be distracted, if we find we cannot put in the effort, or cannot make a sacrifice, let us put our 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