

Resolutions for a New Year

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of December 1999.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Resolutions for a New Year and is from Hebrews chapter 10 verses 19 to 25.

O God, we thank you for your word and pray that you may write it on our hearts that we may do it and live lives for your glory. Amen. One of the people I began studying at Theological College at Ridley with, who is also training to be ordained, is no longer neither a minister nor a Christian.

About three or four years ago he left his job and family for that matter and left the Christian faith, gave it up altogether. Another person or couple really that I was studying with at Ridley in the 80s, trained to be youth workers.

They worked into state as youth workers for three or four years and then after that period of time gave up the Christian faith. In the three and a half years I've been here at Holy Trinity, there are a number of people who've been confirmed.

[1 : 3 7] At least a couple of those I know of have really given up the Christian faith. There are people I've met here or through the parish here who over the years have given up being Christian.

Although at some point maybe were on the vestry, even a secretary of vestry, were involved in various ways. I'm sure this church is no different from any other.

I'm sure all of us know people who at one stage in their life were clearly Christians, believing and trusting and acting in such faith. But now no longer do so.

It raises the question for us. What about us? In a year's time, in five years' time, in ten years' time, will we still be Christians?

What will make us different? And what are we going to do to ensure that we don't go the same sort of way and discover whether consciously or unconsciously in some time to come, we are no longer Christian people?

[2 : 5 1] The letter to the Hebrews was written to precisely address that issue. It is written to people who are in danger of giving up the Christian faith, whether consciously through a decision or whether through just subconsciously drifting away from Christian things.

And scattered throughout the letter are various warnings to the readers not to give up and drift away. We must pay greater attention to what we've heard so that we do not drift away from it, the writer says in chapter 2.

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God, he says in chapter 3. While the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it, he says in chapter 4, and so on and so on throughout the letter.

The reading for us today from chapter 10, verse 19, reaches a high point of those sorts of exhortations. You may like to have it open in front of you.

Page 976 in the Bibles in front of you. Many of the threads of the letter come together at this point of exhortation. The key ideas are ones that have been explained earlier in the letter.

- [4 : 17] Brings to a head what's preceded in the first ten chapters. In short, what we have in this paragraph, chapter 10, verses 19 to 25, is that we're told that Christian people have two things and in response we are to do three things.

We have two things, we're to do three things. But the emphasis here is on doing the three things. That is basically the structure of the paragraph is having this and this, let us do this, this and this.

And the two things that we have, which are in effect presupposed in the paragraph, are what has been argued for in the verses and chapters leading up to this.

So what is it firstly that we have, according to this paragraph? The paragraph begins in verse 19, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary.

Confidence to enter the sanctuary, or the most holy place in some translations. In the Old Testament, the most holy place was the heart of the Jewish temple.

- [5 : 35] It was the very place where the Israelites believed that God's presence dwelt in a special way. And there were various places in the temple that different people could go to, but the most holy place was the very special, central place of the Old Testament temple.

A curtain would mark its entrance, three walls on the other three parts of it, and therein was the Ark of the Covenant where they believed that God, in a special way, was enthroned, and His presence was.

Entry to that most holy place was severely restricted. It was restricted in time. You could only go in there one day a year, and that was the day of atonement.

And this presence of God was restricted to just that particular place, that little chamber. It wasn't anywhere and everywhere. And entry to it was restricted to just one person on that one day, the high priest.

Only he could enter there on that one day a year. And when he entered there, his activity was restricted. There was only really one thing that he had and was allowed to do.

- [7 : 05] It was to sprinkle the blood of the atonement sacrifice in that most holy place. And the condition that was placed on the high priest to enter on that one day a year was that he himself ought to be cleansed and had to have made the atonement sacrifice.

Now imagine the privilege if you were the high priest. You alone, of all Israelites, were allowed into that place. And yet also the terror because going behind the curtain was to enter into God's very presence.

Privilege and terror held together. And indeed it seems that the high priests would enter there in fear. We understand that in later Jewish years the high priest would have a rope tied to his leg.

Other priests would stand outside the curtain. And if the high priest seemed to be taking too long they would tug on the rope to check that he was still okay and not overawed by God's presence.

And if there was no response they would drag him out because they were terrified themselves to go in and get him. John the Baptist's father was a priest and people were worried at one point that he was, in Luke chapter 1, that he was staying too long in the sanctuary.

- [8 : 30] Now it's against that sort of background that these words are so extraordinary. The writer is saying here, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary, not fear or terror, but confidence and confidence that is not presumption, is not arrogance, it's boldness to go into a dangerous place.

But the confidence derives not from the person who is entering, but we see in that verse 19, confidence by the blood of Jesus.

But the other thing that is so striking about what the writer to the Hebrews is saying here is this. In the Old Testament, the most holy place was just a model or a symbol of the presence of God.

In one sense, it's not really the real thing. The real thing's heaven. It's a model of heaven. The writer to the Hebrews is not talking about the symbolic presence of God in the Old Testament temple.

He's talking about the real thing. Whereas the Old Testament priests were terrified to enter the symbolic presence of God, the writer here is saying we have confidence to enter the real presence of God.

[9 : 59] You see, where we can enter is even further than the high priest. And we don't need the same sort of fear that he had. Rather, confidence because of what Jesus has done.

That's a stunning contrast. All the fear and restriction of the old done away with. Now, to enter with confidence and freedom.

And there are no restrictions here. There's no restriction of time. It's not just one day a year that you can enter this now sanctuary of God's presence. But any time.

No longer is it a restriction of place to one little chamber in the Jerusalem temple. It applies anywhere where God's people are. No longer is it a restriction of just one person who can enter in.

It is for all Christians to enter in. And no longer is there just one activity that needs to be performed in that presence. That is the sprinkling of the atonement sacrifice blood.

[11 : 09] For now, this invitation to enter in applies to the whole of the Christian life. The condition is still similar to the Old Testament condition.

The priest could only enter cleansed by the blood of the atonement sacrifice. Something that he had made. The condition is still similar for Christian people.

be cleansed by sacrificial blood. But the difference is striking. Because it's Jesus' sacrifice and not a sacrifice that we make.

It's made for us. It's done. It's passed. Ironically, Jesus' death is what opens up the access to this life.

That's how it's described in verse 20. This entrance by the blood of Jesus is by the new and living way. His death is actually a living way because he rose, of course, through the curtain.

[12 : 17] That is, through his flesh. The very point when Jesus died on the cross on that first Good Friday, as we heard in the second reading today, the curtain in the temple was torn into from top to bottom, that is, by God, symbolising what is said here in this letter.

We have confidence now to enter the most holy place by means of the blood or death of Jesus. The entrance into God's very presence, you see, is not some mystical experience.

It's not an ascetic experience where we have to just give up all the pleasures of this life somehow to draw closer to God. It doesn't come about through a charismatic experience of being slain by God's spirit and finding ourselves in God's presence in a special way.

It doesn't come about nor through an intellectual experience that somehow we have to get our minds around great theological truths. This is not for the spiritually alert nor for the spiritually educated.

the way into the presence of God is personal through Jesus Christ and it is open for all who place their faith and trust in him.

[13 : 41] All of us have the right to enter with confidence into God's very presence through Jesus. feelings. It's independent of our feelings.

The times when we feel far from God, be assured that we're not because of what Jesus' death has done for us. That's the first thing that we have.

We have confidence to enter the most holy place, the sanctuary. The second thing that we have is told us in verse 21. and since we have a great priest over the house of God.

In the first we have Jesus' death is the key. We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by his blood or death. In the second we have, it is Jesus' ongoing work in heaven that is the key.

It's all the same Jesus. The two things that we have, confidence to enter, that comes through his death, a past event, already done. The second we have is because he's a great priest in heaven where he is still now alive as our great high priest.

[14 : 58] The writer to the Hebrews has already explained and elaborated on this in earlier chapters. He's summarising here what he's already said. But the point about being a great priest is to come as an ideal mediator between two parties.

God and humanity. And Jesus is the great priest, the ideal great priest because he is fully God and fully human.

And so he can sit in the middle so to speak, ideally bringing the two parties together. One of the reasons why there's been such a struggle for peace in Northern Ireland for so many years is because of the lack of an ideal mediator.

The Irish people don't trust the British to mediate. The Northern Irish don't trust the Irish or American Irish to mediate. So finding somebody who's going to adequately mediate between Northern Ireland and Ireland or Britain and Ireland or Protestant or Catholic or whatever labels we want to give is a difficult issue.

And in recent years we're grateful for work of some Americans and Canadians to bring about some mediation. It's the same in the Middle East between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

[16 : 19] Who can mediate? Who can stand between identifying entirely with one party and entirely with another? Well for us and God it is Jesus.

That's the writer's argument in earlier chapters. fully God and fully human. So he knows us, he understands us, he sympathises with us, he understands temptations to sin.

We have an ideal mediator in Jesus Christ or the great priest over the house of God as he's described in verse 21. They're the two things we have.

They are ours if we're Christians is what the writer is saying here. confidence to enter the most holy place or the sanctuary and a great priest over the house of God.

And yet sometimes we live as Christian people as though these are too good to be true. people. It's rather sadly ironic I guess that Christian history is dotted with attempts to put these two things to one side.

[17 : 34] Limiting somehow the greatness of what we actually have. It's like being given a Christmas present but not using it to its full. people. Or it's like being given a great super duper computer and me only being able to type a basic letter on it and all the other functions are just beyond me and I don't enjoy its benefits.

Well many, too many Christians live like that. We have these two great things but we sort of put them to one side or stand back from them in some way.

Let me give some examples from church history I guess. Too often the church has pushed up some ordained clergy or priesthood to stand in the way.

Somehow to mediate between lay people and God or Jesus. Or in some avenues of church tradition have put up some saints or Mary to do that sort of job.

That's a denial of what's being spoken about here. All Christians without exception have equal and ready access and ought to have the same confidence to enter into God's sanctuary and the priest is Jesus.

[19 : 00] He's the mediator. We don't need anybody else and when we try to find somebody else whether an ordained clergyman or a saint or Mary or somebody else then actually we're denying what we've been given in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes the architecture of church buildings denies what we've been given. So in some church buildings a screen or curtain will be put up as though somehow there's a specially holy bit of the church that normal people can't get to.

Well that's again a denial of what's going on here because we have confidence all of us without exception as Christian people to enter into the most holy place. There's no place that should be reserved for priests or ordained clergy or any other special subgroup of Christian.

Another way that sometimes people deny what we have is through their lack of praying. We go to some great prayer to pray for us.

Whether a clergyman or whether some other lay person or the prayer circle. We feel incompetent to pray ourselves to God. And that is a denial of what's being spoken about here.

[20 : 19] Because if as we all do have equal access right into God's presence and the same great priest over the house of God, then the prayers of each or any one of us will be equally penetrative to the heart of God.

Sometimes we deny what's being spoken about here by thinking in terms of coming into God's presence only when we're in a special building or with other Christian people.

But there's no such restriction placed here on that. And the other way which we're so tempted to deny what is being spoken about here is to think that somehow we have contributed to the access.

We don't. It is Jesus' death that is the means of access to God, not anything that we do at all. So let me exhort you, don't offend God by denying these privileges that we've been given by him.

Don't offend him. They're ours for our benefit, for our use, for our spiritual building up. Enjoy them to the full.

[21 : 39] Well, the dangers of putting aside these two great we have is seen in the fact that we now get three exhortations. Since we have these two things, let us do this, this and this.

let us firstly, in verse 22, approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The way is open. The entry is free by the blood of Jesus. So enter. There's no point standing on the outside, outside of God's presence if Jesus has opened up the way for you.

Enter is the first exhortation. Don't hold back. Approach with a true heart, a sincere heart, being wholehearted, not being in two minds about where you stand with God.

Enter with full assurance assurance, because the entry is done by Jesus' death, not by what we do. So we can have full and total assurance that this is the way to God through Jesus, because Jesus has done it for us.

[22 : 59] Enter with hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, not just the body sprinkled with the blood of the atonement sacrifice in Old Testament times, but with hearts sprinkled clean by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, something that's a past tense, already done through Jesus' death for us.

And with bodies washed, he says, with pure water. There I think again referring to Jesus' death, maybe symbolically referring to our baptism, where we're baptised into Jesus' death to cleanse us.

Again it's a past tense, something that's already done. If we're to sum up all of those things, how do we draw near? By exercising faith in Jesus' death.

That's what all those things are about. Trusting in Jesus' death. And that's when we're near to God. Not through some special spiritual experience or in a church building.

The time when we are near to God is when we exercise faith in Jesus' death. when we have confidence that Jesus' death has done away with our sins and so we stand right with God wherever we are, whatever we're doing.

[24 : 21] The closest we can be to God is when we trust in the blood of Jesus to forgive us. It's not limited to particular activities or particular places or particular times, but when we exercise faith in the blood of Jesus.

So then, draw near, approach. That's the first exhortation. The second one in the next verse, 23, hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering for the he who has promised is faithful.

It is my hope that Australia will defeat India in this test match which we hope will start in 24 minutes time. But I'm not certain that that will happen even though we've got Brett Lee who's going to bowl everybody out before lunch and even though we've got the most invincible team we've had for about three weeks or something like that and the papers are all saying that we're going to win easily.

It's not certain. We can hope, but it's not certain and Melbourne's weather may yet have a lot to say. But Christian hope is certain.

Christian hope is absolutely certain. For what God promises he does. He who promises is faithful, the writer said in this verse 23.

[25 : 53] So therefore we've got no need to waver, no need to doubt, no need to lack confidence to enter, no need to hold back, no need not to pray, no need to try and find another mediator.

God has promised that this is the way to access to him for all Christians through Jesus' death and what he promises he is faithful to deliver.

so don't waver, don't hold back, be confident. The third exhortation comes in verses 24 and 25.

Again, it begins with let us and let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

looks nice, but this is tough. The idea of provoking one another to love and good deeds is very strong, to spur one another on, to incite, to prod.

[27 : 12] It's the idea of trying to get a donkey to do what you want it to do. So you've got a stick or a rod and you hit it or you push it or you prod it to get it to move up the hill.

A few weeks ago I climbed Mount Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula and there was a Bedouin chap with his donkey going down the hill as I was going up the hill.

I think I was making better progress than the donkey. It was slow and stubborn and every step the donkey took with its load on its back, this chap was hitting it with its stick and trying to push it and prod it to go on.

That's the picture behind this language in verse 24. Provoke one another, prod one another, stir one another up, incite one another. And this is hard to do because we're so used to being laid back and not taking responsibility if for our own lives, certainly not for other people's lives.

But this is saying to us that all Christians are called to exercise initiative in Christian fellowship. It's not just about crisis management when some fellow Christian rings us up and says, look, I'm in a bit of a trouble here, can I come around and unburden myself?

[28 : 33] But rather for us to take the initiative and to look and to see and to discern and to pray for who needs to be prodded and provoked into Christian love and good works and building up in faith.

Certainly as a Christian minister, this doesn't just apply to me, it is easy to just be involved in a sort of reactive crisis management of ministry where I deal with the problems that come to me, not only in my ministry but in all of our lives.

We are to be proactive in looking out for people who need to be prodded and taking the initiative to do it. not as a way of rebuking or condemning people of course, but provoking one another to love and good deeds and building each other up with encouragement.

This is tough because it means that we have to take responsibility. But there's no limitations here. The writer is not now saying, now for you who are ordained clergy or you who are pastoral carers, this is the whole readership, this is all the church that's being addressed in this point.

So for each and every one of you, you are being addressed here. It is your responsibility as a Christian person to provoke and encourage each other, every other Christian, up to love and good works.

[30 : 00] That will mean that we have to get outside our individualism, get outside our safety barriers, get outside our wanting to just look after ourselves and not really want to take responsibility for anybody else.

It will mean that we have to get beyond being selfish and we'll have to get beyond our fear of interfering in people's lives. As Christians, we are called to be responsible for each other.

That will involve intervention, interference in some ways. It will involve us taking the initiative. It will mean that we keep on meeting together, verse 25 says.

Some people in the writer's congregation have stopped going to church, it seems. He's calling them not to neglect meeting together and being persistent and thorough in that.

The reason why these three exhortations are here is because it is easy to give up being Christian. All of us can think of people who at some point earlier in their life were clearly Christians but now are not.

[31 : 17] Some give it up through a conscious decision. Some give it up through a petty argument. Many give it up because they just drift and eventually realise how far they've drifted and are either too embarrassed or ashamed or just too reluctant to go back to God and his people.

We need to take efforts to make sure that we do not drift and that others do not either. In a year's time when we face yet another new century or millennium, where will you be with God?

Will you have drifted? Or will you have kept these three, let us do these, as New Year's resolutions? Let us approach with a true heart.

Let us hold fast to the confession. And let us consider how to provoke one another and keep on meeting together. Let us pray.

May the God of peace who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever.

[32 : 56] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Music parted by