

Luke 2

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[0 : 00] I don't know how much you're into making New Year's resolutions, whether you've made one or whether you're about to. It's January the 5th, you're five days late, but you can still make one if you've got time.

There's the old favourites, aren't there, for New Year's resolutions? Get fit, eat less, watch less TV or more TV if you'd like to, and so on. I don't know whether over the Christmas period there's been something more serious on your mind.

As you look forward to 2014. Over these coming months, over the next 12 months, I would love to stop being so moody, maybe.

I'd love to break one of those destructive habits of mine. I'd love to be more confident in my prayers over 2014. I don't know, you don't have to make a New Year's resolution.

The start of the year is an opportunity, though, if you've had a touch of a pause over Christmas, just to think, what might I aim for in 2014? What would I love to see God do in my life?

[1 : 07] What could happen for me this year, for me to be able to sit down in 12 months' time and look back and say, that was not a wasted year? I'll put it another way.

What might God have you, us, together, aim for over the next 12 months? Through December, up to today, we've been in Luke chapters 1 and 2.

It's the infancy story we've been looking at. The lead up to and the birth of Jesus and his first steps. And in today's passage, Jesus is probably about six weeks old. So, a couple of weeks younger than Ted Diver over there.

Probably significantly smaller, because not so well fed. Eight pounds or so, maybe, of little tiny baby, the Lord Jesus Christ. And Joseph and Mary take him up to Jerusalem and the temple.

And at the heart of this moment in the temple is their meeting with a man called Simeon. And Luke wants us to know, in Luke chapter 2, that Simeon is a man to listen to and a man to copy.

[2 : 08] You meet him in verse 25. There was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. That is super positive. If you met this man, his purity and his kindness and his focus on serving God would take your breath away.

Verse 25. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was on him. That is super positive. Simeon is blessed by God. The Spirit is on him.

He's a righteous, devout, good, model man. In a moment, Simeon will meet Jesus Christ and take him in his arms and speak. I hope this won't be a distraction.

On the tables, there's a few of these around. There's a painting by Rembrandt. Very rarely will you get fine art at St. John's Orchard Park. So enjoy the moment. I love it.

It's a beautiful painting which captures something of the wonder of this moment. If you get a chance, have a look at it. Simeon is going to hold the baby Jesus here and open his mouth and speak.

[3 : 16] And here in Luke's Gospel, it's as if Luke is saying to us, listen to what this super positive, godly man says. See what he loves. See what he feels.

And then maybe allow your 2014 to be shaped by what he sees and says and does. Let's dive in together to the text.

I've just got two things I want to say this morning about Jesus from the lips of Simeon. Two points. First point, by the way, is a lot longer and point two is a brief comment just to warn you.

So don't get worried. First point. Jesus Christ is the baby who consoles. The baby who consoles. In verse 25, Luke says of Simeon, Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel.

Simeon, why are you here hanging around the temple, wasting your life away? Why don't you get on with things? I'm waiting to be consoled. Or comforted.

[4 : 24] Same word. I don't know what springs to mind when you hear the word consolation. We don't use it so much. It may sound a bit weak and soppy to you. Imagine a blubbing child and a parent with a damp tissue.

There, there, dear. Have your comfort blanket to make you feel a bit better. Or a consolation prize, which never feels that great if you win one. You've lost, but here's a box of chockeys to make you feel a bit better.

Here, mention of consolation doesn't mean that Simeon wants a cuddle and a there-there. Consolation or comfort is something much bigger than that.

And consolation is all about the breathtaking promises of God for his world being fulfilled. Let me explain what I mean.

Just come with me into a three, four-minute lay-by. And let me just talk to you a sec. Over 500 years before this moment, the moment of Simeon, God's people Israel were at rock bottom in their life.

[5 : 35] They'd been designed by God in the Exodus to be a glorious nation. To love God and to live with him as the centre of their lives. And to follow his laws and to be a shining example to the world of what it looks like to live hand-in-hand with your creator.

A kind of nation which the whole world would look at and say, we want to be like them too. But Israel abandoned their God. They refused to love him.

They trod on his laws. And the nation's life turned ugly. And God was ridiculed, as you read through the Old Testament. Until eventually the Lord said, enough's enough. I will not have you mock me like this.

And through the local superpower of Babylon, 587 BC, God brought destruction. And the city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. And the people of Babylon were marched off as captives into exile in Babylon.

The poetry of that time back then is just desperate. It's on your handout. This is from Lamentations in the Old Testament. This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears.

[6 : 45] No one is near to comfort me. No one to restore my spirit. My children are destitute because the enemy has prevailed. Lament.

Again, see Lord how distressed I am. I'm in torment within and in my heart I'm disturbed for I have been most rebellious. People have heard my groaning but there is no one to comfort me.

People of Israel are in exile and sick of their sins and they're alone. And it almost feels the worst thing that there is no one to comfort them.

And whether you're a Christian or not, you can feel like that secretly today. Not just that life is bad, but almost the worst thing, that you're alone in your suffering, no comfort.

Partway through the three minute lay-by. It's at the bottom, that rock-bottom moment, when a fresh word of promise springs up from God. Isaiah chapter 40 starts off, it's on your sheet.

[7 : 57] Same word. Comfort. Comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service is completed, that her sin has been paid for.

When you're alone and suffering in your sins, there is no more precious word you can hear than something like that. Isaiah 40, 1 and 2, a word of compassion and consolation to his people.

It's over, you're forgiven, you can come home. And attached to these words in Isaiah are enormous promises. The Lord is going to bring Israel home and make them secure.

The Lord's servant, that's Jesus, will appear and be pierced for their transgressions. He'll forgive them and be for them forever. And those promises, not just for Israel, God promises to his servant Jesus in Isaiah 49, I will make you a light to the Gentiles, that my salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.

We've just gone through most of the Bible then. That is God's promise in the Bible to Israel, but his promise to the whole world and offered to us today.

[9 : 17] I will comfort you. I will come and there is for you forgiveness and refuge and rest with me.

Life as it's meant to be lived, hand in hand with your creator. End of lay-by. Years beforehand, hundreds of years, this world-changing promise of comfort and consolation.

Now come out of the lay by now, and with all of that in mind, those 500 years, 600, 700 years behind you, now see Simeon. Luke chapter 2, verse 25, over 500 years later, and what's he doing? He's waiting for the consolation of Israel. Almost 500 years of aching, longing.

And now the story tumbles out, verse 26. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he'd seen the Lord's Messiah servant.

[10:22] Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation. It's an amazing moment. You know they're building the shops over by the, next to the Premier Inn, just over here, completion date, 10th of September. The one thing I love about that, apart from the fact that there's a shop, is there's a massive banner outside as you walk past the Premier Inn, which the contractors have put up. You may have walked past it, I don't know if you've ever noticed it. And it says in large letters, promise, delivered. What we need to do is get our own 10 by 12 foot banner of this painting, or these verses in Luke, and hang it right next to their banner.

Six weeks worth of Jewish baby, he's gone, the size of Ted Diver, cradled in his arms, and Simeon says, promise, delivered.

[11:44] Here and now, old man Simeon is holding in his arms salvation. In this little human being, all God's promise is being fulfilled.

Comfort for the world. This morning's sermon is pretty simple really. I just want us to see that in the Christmas baby, Jesus Christ, God is offering us his long-promised consolation.

Forgiveness, a welcome back to the God who made us, safety and refuge and rest. Let me just ask you this morning, on a personal note, is that something that you are after?

My guess is that some of us, at the start of a new year, may be all too painfully aware of needing comfort from God. Could be at the start of your year, you're sick of your sins and your shame, and you're desperate to be restored to your God.

Could be you've had a lonely and a frustrated Christmas time. It's not what it was meant to be, and you long to know the friendship of God more deeply. It could be your dog tired of the pressures of life, battling on by yourself, and you yearn to feel rest.

[13:12] If that is you, you need to know that there is tender comfort for you as you set your heart on Jesus Christ.

Do you need to know this again? He is the one who will blot out your sins and bind you up and save you. He is the one who will stick with you like a brother through thick and thin.

He is the one who will meet you in your tiredness, and as you rest on him, he will renew your strength. All of God's compassion to you through Jesus Christ.

My guess is, on the other hand, some of us might be feeling quite chipper and strong at the start of January, whether we count ourselves Christians or not.

It could be for you that work and life feels okay, and talk of comfort from Jesus doesn't actually quite feel what you need right at the moment. So isn't it true that pretty much all of us, most of the time, spend our days looking for some kind of consolation or comfort to help us cope with life, don't we?

[14:25] Even if we say we feel strong at the start of the year, we're waiting for the consolation of the next holiday, or the next relationship, or the next job.

Even if you say you feel chipper and strong, you find refuge and you run for comfort to the shops, or the bottle, or the fridge, or the internet to make you feel better.

We like that? Or we get addicted to sport, or to work, or to computer games. Something you can lose yourself in as a sort of anaesthetic to help dull the ache.

Augustine, Christian teacher of the 4th and 5th century, once said, our hearts are restless. That is, whatever we make of Jesus this morning, there is in all of us a sense that life is not what it should be.

We need consolation. And the point is, through this passage, the comfort we want, however we feel today, is the comfort that comes through Jesus Christ.

[15:39] A life lived hand in hand with your creator, who says to you, I forgive you and I love you, you are mine. What Augustine actually said, or prayed to God, was this, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

I think, when I read that, and I look at this picture, I think that's what you see in the face of Simeon, as he gazes on Jesus Christ.

You hear the, you hear the kind of sigh of relief in his voice. Finally, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.

The Lord Jesus Christ, I guess many of us know it, but many of us need to know it again, is the baby who consoles, and comforts, and gives us the refuge we need.

Secondly, more briefly, come to a second thing that Simeon says. Jesus Christ, the baby who consoles, secondly, Jesus, the baby who divides.

[16:58] That's verses 34 and 35. After Simeon's praised God, in verse 33, quote, the child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him, and then, still cradling Jesus in his arms, comes some darker words.

Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary, his mother, this child is destined to cause the falling, and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

It's a prediction, at the start of the Gospels, of what is to come for Jesus. And it's uncomfortable. As Jesus grows up to teach, and work miracles, and call people to account, and offer comfort, some in Israel will fall, and some will rise, and Jesus will be spoken against.

He will divide opinion. Now, when you read through Luke's Gospel, if you did, the account of Jesus' life, that is what happens. Some people fall at his feet, and worship him, and others mock him, and scorn him, and seek his death.

And, that is exactly what happens today, when people are exposed to the claims of Jesus. If I can put it like this, that is what will happen to us, if we stick around at church, and engage with what Jesus says, over this coming year.

[18:36] We will not stay neutral. Either you rise, over the coming year. You want to pursue Jesus more. You're drawn to him more deeply.

You sit at his feet, and learn from him. You bow down to him, and accept the comfort he offers, more and more. Or, you may fall. His words become uncomfortable.

Something happens in your life, and you listen to what Jesus says, and you don't like it. You may end up holding Jesus more and more, at arm's length, till you push him away, as you set up your own defences.

Why would that happen? Why would he be so divisive? Why would we either rise, with him, or fall? Simeon says, Jesus will be a sign, that will be spoken against, second half of verse 35, so that the thoughts, of many hearts, will be revealed.

At the same time, as offering us, wonderful forgiveness, and consolation, Jesus lays bare, the thoughts of our hearts. And how we respond to him, exposes us.

[19:55] Before God. There was a brilliant story, in the local paper, a few years ago, about, I love this, about the, the arthritic, great grandmother, from Sawston, called Peggy Harden.

She had arthritis, she was an old lady, and she was dubbed, the Hoodie Gran. Peggy Harden, shuffled slowly, into the Grand Arcade, in the centre of town, to do some Christmas shopping, with her, with her hood, over her, only to be immediately, approached by a burly, security guard, who demanded, she removed her hood, because the Grand Arcade, had a no hoodies policy.

It caused a bit of a stink, Penny Harden said, she couldn't walk very well, let alone, steal something from a shop, and run off, with her hoodie up. But the Grand Arcade said, no, hoods are banned, security reasons.

And there's a wonderful picture, of her in the paper, looking very, very angry, as though she might steal something. The problem with a hoodie, in my opinion, is that you hide your face, that's what you do.

You hide your face, under your hood, so you can get away, with things. No one's got their hood up, this morning. You did, just as we were speaking. What's the point?

[21:19] When you encounter Jesus Christ, you cannot pull your hood up, and hide your face. Can't pull your hood, over your heart.

You will be exposed. And plainly and clearly, through the Gospels and today, he'll offer you, unconditional forgiveness, for your sins.

He'll demand your total allegiance. He'll uncover your deepest thoughts. He'll insist, that in him, and only in him, will you find safety and refuge. And he will say to you, it's all or nothing.

And either, you'll end up, throwing aside, every other support, and running to him, for the life you were made for. Or, you will turn and run away, and push Jesus, to the edges of your life.

Or just secretly, your defences will come up, because you're unwilling to cope, with being exposed, and drawn to him. The baby, the baby, who divides.

[22:27] Two words this morning, from Simeon. He's a righteous, and devout man. He's full of the Holy Spirit. God is speaking through him. A word of praise, Jesus Christ, is the baby, who consoles.

A word of warning, he's the baby, who divides. You don't have to, but how about, a New Year's resolution?

This year, not something minor, get fit, eat less, watch less TV. How about something really big, for your 2014, to set your gaze on? Resolved, to be like, Simeon.

Whose life, is complete, as he sees, and savours, Jesus Christ. But this year, I might be like, this old, righteous, devout man.

Could you aim for that, pray for that, every week, for the next six months? That I stop searching, for comfort elsewhere. I stop hiding, bits of my life, from Jesus.

[23 : 39] If I need to, I stop having Jesus, as an interesting add-on, to my week. Instead, my whole life, and my every waking moment, turned towards him.

For my family, for us, as a church family, everything else, in second place, this year. What I want, more than anything else, is to gaze, on Jesus Christ, and to see him, more clearly, and know him, more deeply, and allow him, to expose me, and change me, and, that I would find, glorious relief, and peace, and comfort, in following him.

Be brilliant, wouldn't it? To be more like that, in 2014, with the help, of my Lord and Father. Let me lead us, in a prayer.

Almighty God, we, we praise, and thank you, this morning, for the Lord, Jesus Christ, the one who brings, comfort, and forgiveness, and consolation.

for myself, forgive my own, half-heartedness, in following him. For us together, would you, grant us, a sense, of the glory, of Jesus, that over this, coming year, everything, and everyone, would come into, second place, and first place, for us, would be gazing on, listening to, and following, this wonderful, Saviour.

[25 : 30] Save us, please, from hardening, our hearts against him, and moving away, as we're exposed. Instead, draw us closer, to this, son of yours, we pray.

For we ask, in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.