

“New beginnings”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Church, Canberra - 3 January 2010

Jeremiah 31:7-14, John 1:1-18

There are lots of fascinating stories connected with the development of our calendar. In 46BC Julius Caesar established what became known as the Julian calendar. It set the number of months as 12 and the number of days for each month, and the provision of a leap year every four years to keep the calendar in sync with seasons of the year. Then in 1582 AD Pope Gregory XIII proclaimed a revision of the Julian calendar to fine-tune the provisions of leap years, as by then the calendar had become 11 days out of sync with the seasons and it was causing all sorts of problems - chiefly, from the church's point of view, in relation to calculating the date of Easter each year.

[Incidentally, this explains why some churches celebrate Easter and Christmas on a different date to most, for churches such as the Russian Orthodox still follow the old Julian calendar for liturgical dates, asserting that no universal council of the church has ever been held to overturn the decisions of the Council of Nicea in 325AD, a Council which decided that Christians should follow the Julian calendar.]

One interesting issue that took a lot of debating time in both church and world was what date should mark the beginning of the year. At various times in the Roman empire, new year commenced on 1 January, 1 March, 1 May or 1 September. In the Middle Ages several European countries decided the new year should commence on 25 December, marking the birth of Christ, or at Easter, or even on 25 March, the date of the Annunciation or Mary's conception of Jesus. For centuries Britain, for instance, followed the 25 March new year's day, and decided only in 1752 to go along with the rest of Europe and count new year's day as 1 January, 170 years later than continental Europe which had largely followed Pope Gregory's decision. For the British this meant the oddity of 1751 having not the normal 365 days, but only 282 days. Lots of strange stories with the development of our calendar.

Today is the first Sunday of a new year. Appropriately, the Bible readings followed through most of the world today are about new beginnings. In the prophet Jeremiah there's lots of doom and destruction, punishment and woe. Jeremiah lived in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BC, a time when Babylon was asserting its power in the Middle East. The Jewish nation centred in Jerusalem was forced to pay tribute, and when it refused the Babylonian army would descend upon them and carry away into exile hundreds of Jewish leaders to be slaves back in Babylon. In today's passage Jeremiah states the hope that the day will come when these exiles will return, a new day will dawn, there will be dancing in the streets and young and old will rejoice together. Of course the part I like best is the promise "I will give the priests their fill of fatness" - rich food! - and I must admit that at least every Christmas Day that promise comes true for me. Jeremiah prophesied that new beginnings would come.

In John's gospel there are no Christmas stories, nothing about Bethlehem or shepherds or wise men. Instead, John commences his gospel with a magnificent theological summary statement about the coming of the Word of God to earth. There is no greater reference to new beginnings than this, except perhaps for the creation stories in Genesis.

John sees the coming of Jesus from the perspective of eternity. In the beginning God created everything through his Word - he spoke and it came into being. The Word of God thus brings life and light, always. In Jesus this Word becomes a human being who lived among us, who shows us what God is really like and who gifts to us God's truth, God's grace, God's life. John's Christmas is "the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth".

Friends, we are a blessed people. For we live in AD, in the year of our Lord, in the era when because of Jesus we can know what God is truly like - a God of unfailing compassion and forgiveness and grace - a God who offers new beginnings to each and every human being, a God who was known only partially to BC people like Jeremiah but who is now known fully to us in AD.

There is no better time than new year to recommit to receiving God's love for you, personally, and to respond with your love for God and with your love and compassion and service towards all whom God loves. God offers us, encourages us, welcomes us, to make new beginnings in our lives.

On my laptop computer, I use as my screensaver a brief text from the Scriptures - so every time I come back to my computer these words are floating around on the screen reminding me of something about the good news of Jesus. For 2009 I had the words from John's prologue "grace upon grace". I'm not sure I want to change that for 2010, for grace upon grace is a fabulous summary of what God offers to us in Jesus - although I am considering using another phrase from John 1 "full of grace and truth".

Happy new year, one and all. May it be for you a year when you receive, either for the first time in your life or once more and once more, grace upon grace, through knowing the love of God through the gift of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

To the glory of God, Amen.