

Grace upon Grace ...

... a guarantee of a New Start

A reflection given on the Second Sunday of Christmas, 2nd January 2022, by the Curate the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in Beverley Minster

John 1:10-18

So it's that time of year again when many of us are making New Year's resolutions. But given that we we're already on day two of the New Year, it's perhaps also that time of year when many of those newly formed resolutions are already starting to be broken- that tricky second day of a new diet or a new exercise regime or a commitment to a dry January. Now, of course there's nothing particularly special about New Year, and when you stop to think about it, you might wonder, 'Why do we put ourselves through this business of resolution making at this time of year', especially when many would comment that January is perhaps one of the most depressing months to get through. So why not make resolutions in February or March, or why not in August instead?

Or perhaps it's because we all love the idea of being given a fresh start, and the turn of the year is just the excuse that we need. It's what we latch on to to give us that fresh start. We can say to ourselves and others that was the '2021 version of me' - I'd like to introduce you to the new, improved '2022 version of me.' We can put whatever habit, bad practice or lack of action into a container clearly marked 'old', and then we can start again with a container marked 'new' , a fresh start - a fresh start right up until that moment where something goes wrong again. Now, if we're talking about an exercise or diet regime that goes somehow off the rails, that is, of course, a bit of a disappointment. But it could be something more serious. The question is, though, do we dust ourselves down and try again? Are we kind to ourselves, or does our internal monologue instead simply say, 'You've blown it! Ha! Talk about a new you in 2022 looks just the same as the 2021 view of you from where I'm standing.' There's something quite tragic about that train of thought, though: it's one that whispers in your ear that you can never escape your past self; it's one that whispers in your ear and tells you there's never really such a thing as a fresh start; and importantly, it's a train of thought that lacks a key concept that we hear about in today's gospel reading.

In just those four verses from John 1, we hear four mentions of a particular word, and interestingly, it's then never used in the entirety of the rest of John's Gospel. The word in question, and the idea is 'Grace': in verse 14, it says, *'And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of Grace and truth'*; in verse 16, it says, *'From his fullness, we have all received Grace upon Grace'*; in verse 17, *'The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'*

Now it's that mention of Grace in verse 16 that I particularly wanted to focus upon today, mentioned not just once, but twice: 'Grace upon Grace' - Grace piled on top of Grace; Grace flowing after Grace like a waterfall, water flowing after water. And if we look at where this Grace flows from, it flows from the fullness of Christ, we are told. Now another meaning of the word used in the Greek for that word 'fullness', which I like, is 'copiousness.' The Grace flows from the copious source of Jesus flowing from Him to us, not just once, but flow after flow, wave after wave of Grace. And these are words that speak powerfully against those whispering voices that tell you there's no such thing as a new start. Instead, they tell us there is always Grace. There is always chance for a new start.

Now this can sometimes be easier said than believed and truly taken into our hearts. Perhaps that's why after these four mentions of Grace, there's no other mention of it in the rest of the Gospel. John, by recalling Jesus's actions, attitudes, and behaviour, instead shows us what Grace looks like (he doesn't just talk about it) to give our stubborn hearts a chance to see and accept the possibility of those promises of a new start. But it can still be really hard to describe what that new start can feel like.

Now recently, Wendy decided to buy a new laptop as her old laptop was running really slow and she couldn't get it to do the things that she needed it to. And the place that she was buying it from online offered her some money, a kind of 'scrap value' to recycle the old laptop. But I asked her to let me buy her old laptop off her rather than sending it off for the same amount. It sounded like a bargain to me. And I like a challenge and enjoy tinkering with computers, and I really wanted to see if I could get it working properly. I wasn't sure if I could; it was a little bit of a gamble. But I wanted to give it a go. And I did - it took a while, but I managed to get it back into action (in fact, it's the laptop that is powering our words for the online audience this morning). When Wendy saw me with that laptop the following week, she asked how it was that I was able to get the laptop up and running again so well? And I answered

that the key difference is that I was able to wipe that laptop completely from the ground up. I had no commitment to that laptop at all. The old laptop had become burdened down by old files; old programmes; memories of programmes that were once installed and then deleted; indexes of historical files, once present. And try as she or I might to have made it work better while holding on to all of those old files, it was never going to work. They were just slowing it down and holding it back. What it needed was a completely fresh start.

And that's perhaps also what can happen for each one of us. When you're carrying around the baggage of your own histories, of past failure, disappointments and regrets, it can be really hard to make progress, to truly receive the gift that's being spoken of today in our Gospel passage. We have to accept the gift of God's Grace from the one who makes all things right and makes us righteous. But importantly, let go of the old that we are holding onto or the thoughts that are holding us back - there is really genuinely a new-for-old policy that we could choose to avail ourselves of.

So *Grace upon Grace*, remembered in the Eucharist that we will share again this morning, means that your relationship with God can be as clean and spotless this day and every day in 2022 as the first day you ever decided to start following Christ - a commitment to each and every one of us that, unlike a New Year's resolution, will never be broken.

Reading Texts

John 1:10-18

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own,* and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."')

¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Y No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.