

A New Start

... in the Eucharistic Service

A sermon given on the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, 10th September 2023 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 18:15-20

Personally, I have always found early September much more of a real New Year than January the first, which always seems to get slightly tagged on in a sort of afterthought after Christmas. And maybe it's because I was born in September, but I think more it's because of the pattern of my life throughout my ministry: for no less than 36 years, believe it or not, I was a school governor in various schools around the country so of course the academic year became ingrained into my whole way of thinking. And whilst we have major festivals in the church during the Christmas and Easter holidays, there's a real sense in which we stop pause in the summer and start again with all our activities in September - I mean in Beverley Minster even God gives up in August and stops serving breakfast.

So it's about a 'new start'. Now, of course, all these dates, whether it's September or the 1st January, they're all artificial and they may not fit in with where we perhaps happen to be in life. And of course we can't make totally fresh new starts in life - we carry the legacy of our pasts, whether for good or ill. Nevertheless, 'new starts' are a part of not just Christian thinking and Christian living but also part of human life in general. We think in terms of making a 'new start', of doing things afresh.

And I want this morning to suggest to you that one way - and there are so many ways which we can think about the Eucharist - but one way of thinking about this service is that it is a vehicle, a kit if you like, for making 'new starts' wherever we may be in life. Just think for a moment of the structure of this service: we start by acknowledging our utter dependence on God and how he knows us in our entirety - 'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known'; we then go on to confess our sins. And if we are to make a new start, there has to be, in however we understand it, some clearing of the clutter and the obstacles which, as it were, impede us from the past. And so we have that opportunity to bring before God all that is unsatisfactory, all that is broken in our lives, and ask for his forgiveness. And that, as it were, clears the decks for a new life, a new start. And then a very large part of the service, we have readings, we have a sermon in which, as it were, we are guided as to what a new start might look like, a way of measuring our own lives against the standards that God gives and against the teaching of Christ. Having done that, we then reaffirm our faith in the words of the creed. And as we move on through

the service, we come to the central act, the act of communion. And again there are so many ways of understanding this, so much depth to it - but one way of thinking of it is that it's food for the onward journey; it is the nourishment that we need for the next stage in our lives - and it may be that the next stage is some kind of new start. And then at the very end of the service, we ask God to send us out in the power of the Spirit to live and work to his praise and glory - we are praying that God will enable us to take from this service all that we need to go out and live our Christian lives more fully with a freshness each time.

Now often people will talk of making a new start in life, but they'll put all sorts of conditions upon that new start, some of them more realistic than others. Some will say, 'Well, I will make a new start if only I could get a new job, I could make a new start in life. If only I could get a new relationship or repair the one that I've already got, I could make a new start in life.' Or it may just be something slightly lesser, it may be, 'Well, what I could do with is a really good holiday, set me up to make a new start.' Or it may be if I move house somewhere else that I would be happier in, then I can make a new start. And then, of course, sadly, there are people who think what's the point? I'm too old, I'm too set in my ways. I couldn't possibly make a new start.

Well, the answer is that by the power of the Holy Spirit, all of us can.

And it doesn't need to be with something huge. It might be a move house, it might be a change of relationship, it might be a new job, it might be those big things, but it doesn't have to be. And very often it can be something quite small. And the extraordinary thing is that this Eucharist, seen as a vehicle for a new start in our lives, is something that is available to us all the time. If you come today, you could come again on Thursday, or you might go to another church. There are traditions within the church where people would go to a Eucharist almost every day as a way of renewing their faith and their devotion and their commitment. It's available all the time. It's available everywhere: you'll always find a church somewhere you can pop in to a service, a Eucharistic service - it doesn't have to be of your own denomination - it can be another denomination - and avail yourself of this divinely given toolkit, this divinely given vehicle for a new start. So your age or your circumstances, how much money you have in the bank does not matter. That offer of a way of making a new start is always there.

And one final thing is that new starts aren't rare events in human life. If you read the great spiritual writers of the past, indeed of our own day, they will say that we need constantly to be making new starts as part of our human nature. We slip and slide away slightly, and then we make a new start and a refreshment. If you read the Old Testament, like Ezekiel,

Jeremiah the great prophet, it is full of God saying to people, you have slid away from what I want of you, but I will always offer you a new start.

So wherever you are in your life's journey, however much you may feel that a new start is something you want at this moment or may want in the future, always remember the availability of this Eucharistic service as God's way of saying, 'This is the way you can deal with the past, shape the future, and go out and make a new start.'