

Sunday 31st December 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **195** **“Christians awake, salute he happy morn”**
 169 **“Come, thou long-expected Jesus”**
 229 **“Mary and Joseph”**
 228 **“Hail to the Lord’s Anointed”**

READINGS: **Galatians 4:3-7**
 Luke 2:22-40

“JESUS - A SIGN TO REVEAL OUR INNER THOUGHTS”

So Christmas is past – in worldly terms even if not in church calendar terms and now we face a new year, 2018. As with each year there will be things that are predictable and things we never imagine could happen. Here we are on the brink of a New Year with all sorts of thoughts swirling in our minds and all manner of emotions in our hearts – optimism, fear, doubt or expectation.

Strange, isn't it that although the way we organise time, especially the turning of the year and the numbering of the years and that it is done for human convenience – yet the turning of the year exercises a powerful hold on our imaginations. There is no real difference – one day January 1st as we call it, is much like the previous one 31st December. It's just a calendar change yet we invest it with great significance. It is an important marker for us in our life's journey. It is a time for taking stock and that is why so many people use the opportunity to make New Year Resolutions.

After an indulgent Christmas Day and the days following we often make a plan to eat less, eat more healthily, to take more exercise, and to keep in touch with family and friends on a more regular basis. The turning of the year gives us pause to stop and think.. but just how long do our good intentions last? How resolved are our resolutions?

Membership of gyms soars in January but has usually shrunk back to the usual levels by March. We visit family and friends over Christmas and New Year but once we are back to work and into our old routines then we are usually back into all our old not-so-good ways.

For some people resolutions do carry then through to a better way of life but only when the heart and not just the head is really in it. To make change work and to carry it through needs commitment of heart and mind.

Our lesson for today from Luke has a sentence which struck me very forcibly when I was preparing. Simeon speaks of Jesus 'revealing our inner thoughts.' Simeon was the devout old man who had been serving in the Temple in Jerusalem for decades.

He had been looking forward to the coming of the promised Messiah, ‘the consolation of Israel; as the passage puts it.

When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple for the customary sacrifice for purification, Simeon saw in the child all that he had been waiting for. Simeon was so overwhelmed that he sang his praises to God – the Nunc Dimittis, a form of words which we still use in our worship liturgy today. Perhaps we are more familiar with it in the language of the Authorised Version of the Bible.

*“Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace
According to your word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people.”*

Simeon was content – he had seen in the child Jesus the longed-for Messiah – the consolation of Israel and now he was a happy man. Mary and Joseph were amazed – they did not really understand what Simeon was saying. They could appreciate his joy, they received his blessing but they were baffled by Simeon’s reaction and what it might mean for them. And then Simeon adds a different note, ‘this child, Jesus, is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.’ Then those poignant words to Mary, ‘and a sword will pierce your soul, too.’

Jesus – a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.

‘Our inner thoughts’ What do you understand by that term? What is the difference between ‘our inner thoughts’ and our ‘outer thoughts? ‘Outer thoughts, I would suggest are what we bring to the surface by the words we utter. It is in our words that we hear ourselves, it is in our words that others hear us and come to know what sort of people we are. But all of us know that we have some ‘inner thoughts’ that are never brought to the surface in conversation with others. Our inner thoughts roll round in our own head, affect our hearts – our emotions –and have a very significant impact on our lives.

Some of us are extroverts and some introverts, some of us are very able to put our thoughts into words, others less so. Some people have bared their soul and received negative reactions and have retreated into their own world. But all of us, I want to suggest, have inner thoughts which we do not share with others, do not want to share with others, inner thoughts about our own fragility and vulnerability, inner thoughts which cause us to doubt our own lovability, inner thoughts full of guilt and despair.

I have been reading a book over the holiday called ‘Selfie’ about the dangers of self-obsession which can be the outcome of living on one’s iPhone, taking, storing and sending endless ‘selfies’. I am not sure yet if I agree with all of what the author of this book says. His name is Will Storr and he has some very thought-provoking things to

say – not least for people who call themselves Christians and seek to lead a life based on the example of Jesus.

Storr finds and I quote, “no remedy for self-dislike and concludes that the self (and our current pre-occupation with it) is a false divinity and in worshipping the self we easily ignore profounder truths – that we are a highly social species.”

But and this is much more significant I think, the competitive frenzy of social media so easily masks an inner hollowness – a noisy denial of our own weakness and incompetence. Many of us here may not be affected by the culture propagated by social media, though our young people certainly are, sometimes with disastrous consequences seen in increasing incidences of self-harm and suicides. Yet I think we are all affected by the pervasive culture which defines a ‘good person’ as high achieving, high status, slim, attractive and popular – it is a culture that prompts inner thoughts of inadequacy, self-doubt and confusion.

It is here that our faith can bring us peace and liberation and a meaning and purpose in life beyond a pre-occupation with self.

Luke, whose passage we read has a focus on the inner life, on the thoughts of our hearts and on our emotions as the real motor for transformation. Luke writes of the Kingdom of God which Jesus has made known, as a Kingdom which calls for an inner transformation of our whole being – body, mind and spirit – so that our whole motivation comes out of that heart which God has given us. Such a transformation, which Mary would experience – ‘a sword shall pierce your soul’ – is not an easy transformation.

When God calls us to faith, God calls us to this transformation of the heart, this transformation of our deepest and most hidden thoughts. It, too, is not an easy transformation – it cuts to the core of our being, to our hearts and inner thoughts, to who we think we are in contrast to who in God he calls us to be.

So we have a message of the Kingdom of God, which is addresses to our very hearts, our innermost thoughts and calls for our transformation from self-preoccupation to the true liberty of a child of God.

In our Methodist tradition we are called to this transformation especially in the service we shall celebrate next Sunday – our Covenant Service – our annual renewal of our Covenant with God. It is a challenging service, a difficult service because it cuts to the heart of the matter – our innermost thoughts and feelings and whether we are prepared to surrender them to God so that we may become fully his children, heirs of the kingdom, people carrying that kingdom forward.

“Christ has many services to be done
some are easy, some are difficult
some bring honour, others bring reproach,

some are suitable to our natural inclinations
and temporal interests,
others are contrary to both,
in some we may please Christ and please ourselves
in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.
Yet the power to do all these things
Is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

Jesus – a sign revealing our inner thoughts, laying our self-centredness and shallowness bare.

Jesus – the person who loves each one of God's children and gives us power to live and work for the coming kingdom.

May the coming days give us pause to examine our inner thoughts and make us ready to make a new spiritual journey in this year 2018. Amen