

Sermon preached by David at St Alban's on Alpha Sunday 19.01.20

New Year - new you?

“New you” on the outside...

Here we are in 2020 with lots of encouragement all around us to make the most of the new year and a decade of the twenties ahead of us. It's an opportunity to make a fresh start, to break new ground, to change for the better. The adverts tell us that we could try a new diet, take up a new exercise regime, get some new clothes, buy a different perfume. I even heard an advert on Classic FM which advised “New year... new you... new car!” The adverts all seem to focus on a new you on **the outside**.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus warns against focusing only on outward appearances. When we wash up we don't just wash the outside of a cup or a bowl. We need to wash the inside as well - in fact that is much more important.

“First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean”(Matthew 23:26).

If we are to make the most of 2020 (and indeed the rest of our lives) we need to pay attention the new you on the inside - to our hearts. This is where real and lasting change can take place.

One of our neighbours has had an old mini car on their forecourt for nearly twenty years. It no longer goes and the body has been slowly rusting away. One day our friend Richard was visiting us and saw the possibilities in this old car. He bought it, has towed it away and started to renew it: a new subframe, new floor, restored bodywork and paintwork, a new sliding sunroof, repaired upholstery. But the key thing of course will be to renew the engine. The engine is the heart of the car and without that it is no real use and won't go anywhere.

“New you” on the inside?

Here is God's promise to us for 2020:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you” (Ezekiel 36:26).

If we are looking for a dramatic improvement or breakthrough in our lives during 2020 then it needs to come from **the inside**, from our hearts. In Ezekiel's prophecy God promises to take away our hard and stony hearts, giving us new soft hearts.

Our hearts can so easily be hardened as we struggle with the troubles and difficulties of this world. They can be hardened by suffering and grief, by bad habits and addictions, by the sin and darkness all around us. They can become hardened to the voice of conscience and the voice of God. We need our hearts to be touched by God.

Also the Bible tells us that the human spirit is inclined to wander away from God, even to run away from Him and reject his plans for each of our lives. It's rather like two magnets that are brought together the wrong way round and they repel each other. But when God puts a new spirit within us we can fulfil what God intends for us: to be attracted to him and fulfil the potential he has for each one of us.

How do we go about receiving this new heart and this new spirit, this new you on the inside?

“New you” needs a new owner.

The turning point for our neighbours mini came when it had a new owner. For years it had been neglected until Richard bought it and it began to receive loving care and attention. This is the turning point for our lives, when we put them into the loving hands of Jesus:

“Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The way to receive God's promise of a new heart and a new spirit is simply to put ourselves in the hands of Jesus Christ, to give our lives to Him. This is where Christian life begins for each one of us - when we belong to Jesus.

All the time we just belong to ourselves or another person, things will carry on as before and change will be marginal. But when we belong to Jesus "old things have gone and new things have come." Living with Jesus in charge means that every year can be full of new things and fresh surprises.

New life that will never die!

Perhaps we can believe this when people are young but what happens when we get older? Can we still expect to experience this newness? How long does the new you last?

Thelma and I visited an old lady called Dorothy just two weeks before she died of cancer. You would have thought that we would find her fading away but her spirit was shining brighter than ever. We offered to read a passage of scripture to her and she knew immediately what she wanted from Paul's letter to the Corinthians:

We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. (2 Corinthians 4:16-17)

During our marriage Thelma and I have another verse that has helped us from the book of Proverbs. It talks about the life of a believer being like the breaking of dawn, shining brighter and brighter until the perfect day. In one translation it reads like this:

"The longer they live... the brighter they shine" (Proverbs 4:18)

Three years ago a lady of 101 years of age suggested we might use the piano in her front room for Songs of Praise. It has been held monthly ever since then and Elsie (now aged 104) still joins us.

Whether we are young or old this morning, God wants to do something new in our lives this year. And He will do just that if we trust him. **May 2020 be your best year ever** as you belong to God and enjoy a new heart and a new spirit.

God wants to give you a glorious new life
That can satisfy... that can never die.
His life will change you and set your heart free
To be all that God... intends you to be.

Oh my child when they nailed me to the cross of Calvary
Do you know that I died there so you could be free?
Yes free of condemnation... from all your guilt and shame
So that you could be pure and blameless evermore.

God wants to give you a glorious new life
That can satisfy... that can never die.
His life will change you and set your heart free
To be all that God... intends you to be.

Oh my child there is no more that I can do for you
I have opened up a doorway that you can go through.
I offer you forgiveness and the joy of eternal life.
Don't shut the door, just open your heart and let me love you.

God wants to give you a glorious new life
That can satisfy... that can never die.
His life will change you and set your heart free
To be all that God... intends you to be.

Marilyn Baker