

**OT: Isaiah 43.1-7**  
**NT: Acts 8.14-17**  
**G: Luke 3.15-17,21-22**

**“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals,”**

Are you one of those people who begin each year by making a resolution to change something in your life? New Year resolutions, in which a person resolves to continue good practices, change an undesired trait or behavior, accomplish a personal goal, or otherwise improve their life at the start of a new year has its origins in ancient history.

The first New Year’s resolutions date back over 4,000 years ago to ancient Babylon. The Babylonians are said to have started the tradition during Akitu, a 12-day New Year celebration. During the Akitu festival, the ancient Babylonians would plant crops, crown a new king (or pledge their loyalty to the reigning king), and make promises to the gods to pay their debts and return any borrowed items. They believed that if they kept their word, the gods would look favourably on them for the year ahead. If the Babylonians broke their promises, they would fall on the bad side of their gods.

According to YouGov, one in seven British people made a New Year's resolution this year. Doing more exercise and improving fitness top the list of resolutions (49%), with resolving to improve their diet second at 41% and losing weight (40%) a close third. Resolutions around improving health are universally more popular with women, with the biggest difference being changing diet; a resolution for 47% of women making resolutions compared to 26% of their male counterparts.

The biggest non-health resolution is saving money, with approaching two in five (39%) resolution-makers aiming to put more money away this year. The biggest change year-on-year is with resolution-makers and their loved ones: 22% of resolutions for 2021 include spending more time with family members, an increase of eleven percentage points on 2020. Men are more likely to want to see more of their family than women (27% v 19%).

In another increase from last year 16% of resolution-makers aim to spend less time on social media, up 1 percentage point from last year. Some of the resolutions Britons listed in the 'something else' category include moving house, passing their driving tests and "listening to one David Bowie track every day".

Sadly, the reality is that only 8% of people are successful in achieving their resolution and making a lasting change 92% fail. It is no surprise then to read that in the UK more than £4 billion a year is wasted by those with New Year resolutions on unused gym memberships. Despite the best of intentions, the majority of people find difficulty in keeping their resolutions as the normality of life resumes and replaces the freshness of the new year.

New beginnings, starting something new is a concept that we all recognise, in the church baptism is a recognition of the new life in Christ and for that reason at the beginning of the year the first Sunday in Epiphany we celebrate the Festival of the Baptism of Christ.

An opportunity for each of us to reconsider the implications of our own baptism as in the New Testament lessons, we are introduced to the baptisms of the Samaritan converts (Acts 8) and of Jesus Christ (Luke 3). Baptism signifies a new beginning, an act of initiation and a sense of belonging in a fold or family. In our readings we see baptism as an affirmation of the

relationship between God and humanity – Jesus was baptised alongside many others, in the same water and by the same person.

Baptism enables unity and should break down the barriers that often divide us. We are all, as Christians, baptised into the God in whose name we are called. Isaiah 43 reminds us that it is through and in the same God that we are created, redeemed and called (v1). It is in this same name that we are formed and created for the same purpose – for God's glory (v7). The implication for us, at the start of the year, is to recommit to our baptism, in acts of unity, inclusion, and welcome.

This theme is strong in the Old Testament reading of Isaiah 43:1-7. In the same vein, there are no aspects or seasons of life where God is not present and in control. This theme that God is with us, and that God's voice can be heard through all creation is pertinent at the start of a new year with all the uncertainties of the future.

We see the presence of the Trinitarian God manifested to the people at Jordan's baptismal waters. This linkage to the Old Testament lessons is critical as it unfolds the significance of the Spirit of God in the affairs of humanity. Similar words from God to the Israelites in Isaiah 43:4: "you are precious in my sight, ... I love you," are seen in Luke 3:22: "you are my Son, the Beloved, with you, I am well pleased." In these readings we are reassured of God's presence in our lives, not because we are worthy, not because of anything we have done, not because of any resolution to change what we do but simply because we are precious in God's eyes, because God loves us despite what we do he loves us because of what we are precious in his sight.

A theme emerging from all the passages in today's readings is that of commissioning. It poses the question: what do we do with the reassurance of God in Isaiah 43, the powerful God who conquers our fears, and the baptisms of welcome that we have received in Acts and Luke? In Acts 8, we find the Apostles restless in the work of spreading the good news and encouraging the believers. We could stay with this passage and imagine ways of ministry in our church community this year. How might people be encouraged and affirmed? How might we live out our faith courageously and fearlessly in a world influenced by secularism and godlessness? Or we might also focus on John the Baptist's role as the forerunner. John takes his mission seriously and points people to the Christ. How might we, today, carry out the ministry of pointing people to Jesus Christ, beyond the act of charity and towards faith in Jesus Christ? The passage in Luke enables us all to revisit our baptism, if we can recall it, or to reflect on what it now means to us in whatever stage of life we find ourselves. As we step into a New Year revisiting our baptism enables us to wash off the old year and step forward in faith into the new and start afresh before God.

At the beginning of the passage Luke tells us the people were filled with anticipation. They were seeking, searching, longing for the Messiah, their saviour. John in turn gives them hope in his witness of who is to come and what the Messiah will bring, for John understands his role and God's purpose for him. John intimates through his narrative that this coming Messiah will be judge and Saviour and will demand justice where there is none. Later when Jesus is baptised by John, He receives the Holy Spirit and God's approval, prophesy is fulfilled and Jesus' ministry begins in earnest.

In many ways these words of scripture create a sense of calm in this soothing passage, given that in the lectionary calendar it comes to us at the beginning of January, after the rush and

excitement of Advent, Christmas and after the bringing in of the New Year and all that accompanies it. The words of Isaiah bring for us – all of us, regardless of our background, ethnicity, age and stage in life, ability or disability – assurance and comfort.

In a few moments each of us will have the opportunity to give thanks for our own baptism and in an act of penitence and dedication we will respond to these words

“May we, whom you have counted worthy, nurture your indwelling Spirit with a lively faith, and worship you with upright lives; through Jesus Christ”.

And in the liberal sprinkling by the rector of the water of baptism we can recall our own baptism and make a resolution not live a life changed by the Holy Spirit.

At the start of this New Year, we are assured that we do not face things alone, we go in the strength and presence of God into the New Year with all the challenges and opportunities that will be ahead of us but in the knowledge we are not lone , we can allow ourselves to take a deep breath, exhale and utter, 'With God, I can do this.'

Fr Bill Addy