Bible Sunday

Bible Sunday is, by tradition, celebrated on the last Sunday in October - and is an opportunity for us to celebrate not only its importance to the Christian faith, but also celebrate the fact that it's available in so many languages. Readers worldwide have access to the messages and teaching contained in the texts.

We hope and pray that people from all backgrounds may have life-changing experiences as a result of what they come to understand from the historical facts, prophesies, and fulfilment of those prophesies in the life and teaching of Jesus.

We live in a world full of uncertainty and instability. Yet it occurs to me that the Bible has a great deal to say about the potential for new beginnings under any circumstances:

- things were pretty grim for the Jewish race in Old Testament times - yet they returned to the homeland promised to them by God.
- Things were pretty grim, too, for the Jews of New Testament times 2000 years ago - who were then living under Roman occupation. At that time, they didn't embrace the message that Jesus taught the Gospel of redemption and forgiveness for those who had the faith to believe.

In our uncertain world, where change seems exponential (especially in the field of advanced computers and artificial intelligence), we may often seem helpless to influence its pace or direction…. And Helen Steiner Rice said this in one of her poems: ***In this fast moving world, of turmoil and tension with troubles and problems too many to mention Our days are so crowded, our hours so few, There's so little time, and so much to do***.

Thought for the Day: I'd submit that the Bible still has a lot to say about how we can cope with this, and the potential for a better tomorrow. Both the Old and New testaments speak of God's wish to for us to experience "new beginnings" simply because God's love and care for us is **un**changing – no matter what.

The Bible tells us so! And this fact should enable us to hope for, and receive, a gift of a new beginning, appropriate to our circumstances, at the start of each new day. In the meantime (paraphrasing that well-loved prayer):

"God grant us the serenity to accept the things we can't change; the courage to change the things that we can, and the wisdom to know the difference… So may each new day be a potential new beginning for all those who struggle in this one".

We are approaching another New Year, in more ways than one... The imminent season of Advent, of course, is the official start of the Church's new year. Swiftly followed, at midnight on December 31st – that's the threshold of a new calendar year.

Now in considering a theme of "New Beginnings", a simple Google search (however did we cope without the internet?) revealed immediately no less that 77 quotations, from the Old and New Testaments; a more in-depth study revealed dozens more. Suffice to note that God—through the authors of the Old and New Testaments—has a lot to say about new beginnings, that is as relevant today, as to the days in which they were written. Here are a few examples…

- Whether or not we have had a "good, or bad, 2015", Isaiah prophesies the coming of a Savior, who will promise new beginnings: ***"Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended."*** So whether we're wanting to move past a year that was filled with tragedy or hardship, or just want this coming year to be better than the last one – God will be there, offering new beginnings all the time – not just on January 1st.

- In the book of Ecclesiastes, we read: ***"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do."*** This verse is not intended as justification for any careless decisions we might make. But it speaks about God's love for us and His desire for us to enjoy ourselves. If we make a new year's resolution or life-decision - in prayer and in keeping with God's Word - then according to this verse, we now have permission to relax and enjoy the results of your new decision.

- The Christmas story itself points out a new way of life, and better way of living it. In St Luke's words: ***"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."***

- St Paul builds on this in his letter to the church in Corinth: ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."***

- And in another part of the letter, Paul reminds us ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"*** **-** that if we truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God and died for our sins, then we are no longer what we once were. It's true that bad things happen even to believers, and we all still make mistakes – but we don't have to live with the permanent spiritual consequences of those mistakes. Jesus has made all things new for us.

- And in his letter to the Hebrews, the writer invites: ***"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*** Sometimes a new year or a new beginning may not arrive with feelings of joy or excitement. But this verse is an important reminder that we can come to God with any need, and we will receive His help. If we're facing a difficult decision or an uncomfortable transition, we can come boldly to God's throne and receive His grace and love.

And in the last book of the Bible, we are reminded about God's promise, fulfilled in His Son: ***"And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'"***

None of us knows what lies ahead in the next few minutes – let alone over the weeks, months and years ahead. The opening quotation from Ecclesiates tells it as it is in real life. And Christianity isn't a passport to to a trouble-free existence indeed, Helen Steiner Rice reminds us that we live in a world with problems and troubles too many to mention.

What God does does promise us, though, is strength for the day, perseverance for the task, and love to the last.. He invites us all to grasp the opportunity of a new beginning – an opportunity to never give up, and the opportunity to try again, and again, and again – until we get things right, if you will!

Whilst I hope you have all had a safe, healthy and enjoyable 2015, may I (on the threshold of the new church's year and in advance of Christmas) wish you and your families a healthy, happy and prosperous New Year. Not only in the sense of a new calendar year, but in the hope and expectation that in Christ, each new day is potentially a new beginning – whatever our circumstances. *That's the good news of the Gospels, that was predicted by the prophets – but only realised on the first Christmas night so long ago. It's up to us to not only believe it, but to take comfort that through Jesus, God continues to make all things new…*