

## **3<sup>rd</sup> January 2021    Second Sunday of Christmas**

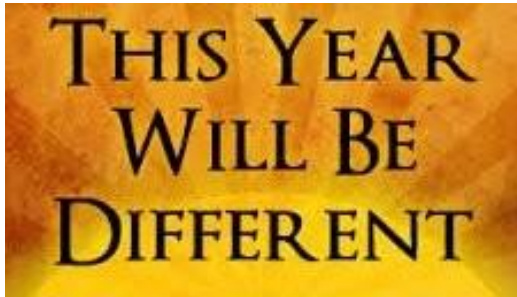
### Readings

Jeremiah 31: 7 - 14

Psalms 147: 12 - 20

Ephesians 1: 3 - 14

John 1: (1 - 9) 10 - 18



### **New Year Promises**

I received an unexpected gift this Christmas – a '*Promise Box*'! It came from two friends with whom, a little while ago, I was reminiscing about chapel life in the Dales. We shared memories of. Generally kept in a prominent place such as a cottage's kitchen table, the box contained many cards or miniature paper scrolls. Each card or paper had a text from the Bible written on it. Some were illustrated. Most were well worn. Each day, the owner of the box and other family members could select a text at random trusting the Holy Spirit to let it be a word from scripture which spoke to their need that day. They would receive it as a personal prompt or encouragement from God. The text may not always have been what the recipient wished to hear but for the most part it was a helpful, comforting or challenging thought to carry with them throughout the day. The current interest in mindfulness - living at peace in the present - with its emphasis on meditation – has produced a new and relevant interest in the Promise Box.

My thoughts this Sunday are about the New Year and about promises – even resolutions – this being the time when many of us remember God's promises to us and renew our promises to him in the Covenant Service. Appropriately, this Sunday our Bible readings are crammed with God's promises to his faithful people.

The Psalm refers in part, to the words from Jeremiah. The prophet is speaking of a great time of renewal, restoration and new beginnings for God's people when he brings them home from years of exile in Babylon. Returning to their land it would be difficult to resume life just as it had been in the past. They had been living in strange times, stripped of privilege, wealth, employment, family, religious life - and unable to attend their place of worship!

In a similar way we hope this new year will be really '*different*'. We have learned many things through the pandemic experience. We have been challenged to ask how we can be new and renewed communities of compassion and service - churches working together to offer the best things in life - God's things - to all. With all our dreams, hopes and plans we know we can count on God's promises. Promises like those in today's scripture readings - *restoration and enlargement for his church - the healing of broken hearts - the mending of relationships - new wisdom learned from painful experiences ....* Do read on to discover from these words more detail of God's promised good things - though I shall be interested to learn where Jeremiah's *dancing girls* will come from!

Over and above all this is God's greatest promise of all- the promise of his unending and constant love. The words of John in the Gospel and of Paul in his letter to Ephesian Christians take us much further into that immense promise. They confirm from personal experiences how with the gift of Jesus, of his life, his words, his death and his resurrection, accompanied by God's gift of faith, we may also become his children and have access to many more gift promises - *peace - forgiveness - fullness of life - every spiritual blessing in heaven - all signed and sealed through the Holy Spirit!* Paul sums it up. '*Out of his gracious love he gives us blessing after blessing*'.

After the grief and anxiety of past months, what an exciting way to begin a new year! With certain promises of new faith, love and hope strengthening life with God in Jesus! This is of course our covenant relationship. There are two sides to the Covenant promises. All this which God has for us requires a promise from us too - to trust his love - to follow his Kingdom Way - and to honour him with our lives.

The new year will again be full of the 'unknown' but we enter it with confidence that it's all known to God. Whatever comes we know that in the strength of our Covenant promises we will not encounter anything which is able to separate us from the Father's love - from his boxful of promises!

### **A Prayer**

Lord give us strength to renew our covenant with you as we live devotedly, expectantly, trusting in your love, whatever the New Year may bring.

