

**Sermon 29 December 2024: 1 Samuel 2:18-20,26, Colossian 3:12-17, Luke 2:41-52**

**2025: a year for growing**

And so the curtain is coming down on another year. And what a year it has been. On a personal note, I became a father and discovered that it is possible to operate on a very small amount of sleep, though not advisable!

Yet more widely, there has been loss and sadness for many other people, and in the wider world, great oppression, violence, destruction and calamity. The Middle East is on the threshold of war; Gaza is in ruins and thousands upon thousands of innocent men, women and children are in graves they should not be in. Sudan is in civil war, the DRC remains horrendous, and more than 100,000 people have become refugees fleeing conflicts across this world. Ukrainians of course continue to live in fear of rockets, and gangs are inflicting devastation across Haiti. We could go on and on...

It's not been a great year.

**So what should we do about this? Why not start a charity** and go out to campaign for justice, build homes, install water, and pressure governments. Surely that will fix things?

Well, let me be clear, **thank God for NGOs and charities that do this work**. Without the incredible work being done by millions of often unpaid charity workers around the world – and let's face it, **most of them are Christian or motivated by roots founded in Christian faith** – we would be in **an even worse situation globally**.

Yet in my work at the United Nations, I have seen the non-governmental agencies line up to tell governments of the atrocities and destruction they are dealing with, and UN reports telling governments of the wickedness and acts of evil depravity taking place in this world. And I can tell you....the evil goes on.

The governments all know the problems. But somehow stopping the arms trade, reducing consumption...these things just seem somehow too difficult for the "world's greatest minds"! **We can start another charity, but the problems in the world will still continue.**

Doing good is nice, but it often rests on shaky foundations. So many organisations do good for the wrong reasons: aid workers actually enjoy being "saviours" and traveling the world; or rich donors feel powerful giving to the poor who are dependent on them.

**There is a deeper problem – one of attitudes. We need to change what happens inside us!**

So the answer is surely to make sure we have **better theology!** Surely that's the solution? I've met many people who are articulate, eloquent, impassioned, and who can argue you down to the last jot and tittle, and know all the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic answers to every question. Their lives are prim and pristine, they live in comfort and correctness, and ...they often have large bank accounts.

And yet, despite their excellent theology, somehow, they don't seem to know about the words of Jesus to "Love your neighbour as yourself", and "forgive the other person 70 x 7 times..." or "go, give your wealth to the poor, and come, follow me..." They are too busy to spend time with the homeless, or visit the sick and dying. **Despite their excellent academics, they aren't much use – a bit like the pharisees of Jesus' time (impressive scholars, but not much else!)**

**If only we could combine the two: internal knowledge and external actions!**

Today in our readings we heard about Samuel, the young boy who was handed over to the service of God at Shiloh in Israel, and how he grew in wisdom and insight as he served God. He grew and developed and became a man who spoke the words of God, having studied and learned the ways of God. He was one of the greatest prophets in history, and brought Godly justice and education to the people, traveling around and teaching the tribes of Israel how they should live, and helping them settle disputes.

**His theology was amazing – and it drove him to action! You could not separate the belief and the behaviour.**

In Luke's gospel, Luke deliberately parallels the stories of Samuel, drawing comparisons between Samuel's birth from Hannah and Jesus' birth from Mary (they both sing songs of joy with similar themes). Luke highlights the connections of Jesus with the Temple, where Samuel also grew up, and Luke draws priestly comparisons.

And in our gospel reading today, Mary and Joseph have been to the temple, and they've lost Jesus in their group. They return to the Temple and find him with the teachers, who are all amazed at the wisdom and answers being given by this child. And Jesus says "didn't you realise I must be in my Father's house?"

**Jesus shows them all clearly where he belongs, and who his father is, and who he must follow. He must be with his Father where the wisdom and favour of God would grow in him.**

We see the parallel between Samuel and Jesus, both who took God's words to the people: they grow in wisdom (though Jesus of course has a head start; he's the one helping the temple teacher's learn!). But note the age too: Jesus is 12, a key age in Jewish culture when the child becomes an adult, a responsible person, who has to take up their own place and responsibilities.

**As we wave goodbye to 2024, I hope the message to us all for 2025 is this: let us make 2025 a year of taking up our daily responsibilities, where we are, and let it be a year of growth.**

It would be wrong to say "I believe in my faith" but then do nothing to learn more and develop. We have to honour the Lord our God by intellect *and* action – good theology *and*

learning to actually love your neighbour in practice. Prayer and sacrificial kindness. They all go together.

Our reading from Colossians takes up this theme: **We are God's chosen ones: so live like it!** Let the word dwell in you, teach and learn wisdom, practice forgiveness – because you too are forgiven.

You know, we are not an NGO or charity, we are the church! We don't sign a contract to come here: we choose voluntarily to associate. But it involves **risk**. It is in some ways a bit like a **marriage**. We don't always know what we are getting into when we enter into marriage, but it is a **covenant**. We **give some rights away**, and **accept responsibilities**. And at first, we think "great, what a wonderful person", but as time goes on, we discover they are not quite as perfect as I first thought...but it's too late – we are committed!

Angela my wife is discovering I'm not perfect. She can't believe how I somehow make the bathroom mirror dirty every time I brush my teeth; and discard information I deem unimportant, only to ask her a short time later what she said! But, too late! – she's committed to me! But I have a commitment and duty to her too: she is a great cook, I am not. But when baby Hazel came, I had to take up my duty to help in the kitchen. **I have to honour my side of the covenant, and develop in this area, and grow!**

But if in marriage, like our church family, the other party does not grow and develop with you, then problems emerge. We have to move with each other, or we begin to hold them back. **And if we hold them back, if we hold each other back by not growing ourselves, we are no longer being loving, or considering the welfare of the other person.**

So as we enter 2025, let us **hear the call of God to keep growing.**

And let us know that the calling of God is not just "be nice and kind". It is a genuine challenge to all of us to **reform our lives from within and deal with root motives. To be generous and loving to those we also find difficult.** I've seen so many people do good, beautiful things ...out of guilt. We are called beyond that – to genuinely love one another, and invite the people we find difficult for a meal – discovering what makes them tick and what drives them.

Alongside this love for one another, **God is also calling us all to development and growth.** If you have great theology but are not living your faith, you are holding us back. And if you are not growing in your knowledge of Jesus, however kind-hearted you appear to be, you will actually find your motives will be misplaced.

We stand on the threshold of 2025, let us give ourselves to **roots in Jesus**, living out our faith in **radical, risky generosity**, and **deepening our growth and love of God and for one another.**

**Let us be like Samuel and Jesus – growing in wisdom and depth** for the year ahead, and knowing our heavenly Father and His call on our lives.