
- ⁶ Remember Your mercy, O LORD, and Your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
- ⁷ Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to Your steadfast love remember me,
for the sake of Your goodness, O LORD!
- ⁸ Good and upright is the LORD; therefore He instructs sinners in the way.
- ⁹ He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble His way.
- ¹⁰ All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep His covenant and His testimonies.

Psalm 25:6-10 (ESV)

In 1972 a song of David Bowie's, from his 1971 Album 'Hunky Dory', was released as a single: "Ch ch changes". The song ranks number 128 on the Rolling Stone list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time. Bowie wrote this when he was going through a lot of personal change. Bowie's wife, Angela, was pregnant with the couple's first child, Duncan. Bowie got along very well with his father and was very excited to have a child of his own. However, the lyrics really focus on the compulsive nature of artistic reinvention, as well as pointing to his various 'personas' of his artistic expression.

Changes.... Very often people want a 'new start' to 'things' in their life, but they do so remaining in the same situation, not really seeking to change any circumstances, attitudes or values – and then they wonder why 'things' don't 'change'.

A month after quitting smoking marijuana a young man, who had been a chronic user, and who had been in counselling to help quit, picked up a 'joint' at a party. Later, in relating this encounter to his counsellor, he said, "I messed up. But you know what happened? Half way through taking a drag I paused, and I thought to myself, 'What are you doing?'" In that moment this young person recognised his self-destructive behaviour for what it was. And, following the advice of his counsellor, he developed a support network to help 'keep him off the wagon'. He avoided those 'friends' who used, he re-enrolled in school, he explained to those around him of his challenge, and he committed them to also watch out for him. This young man had not simply a 'new start' in life, but a 'new beginning'.

Very often people want a 'new start' to 'things' in their life, but they do so remaining in the same situation, not really seeking to change any circumstances, attitudes or values – and then they wonder why 'things' don't 'change'. A 'new beginning', however, requires not only a 'new set of circumstances', but also a new understanding, and 'new' values

Again we stand at the beginning of a 'new year' for us as Christians. This is the first Sunday of Advent, and we prepare to celebrate God's 'new beginning' to us in Jesus'. However, as the Psalmist (as well as Jeremiah) remind us today, 'new beginnings' start not so much within our own 'selves'. Rather, in many ways, they are a 'gift' from God in His amazing grace and love to us in Jesus. The Psalmist says this: "Remember Your mercy, O Lord, and of Your steadfast love, for they have been from of old."

What do you 'want' for Christmas, this year? Are you looking forward to receiving some 'material gift'? Or would you like a 'new start' in some area in your life? When it comes to a 'change' in life for the psalmist (perhaps because he was ill; perhaps because of some trouble someone was inflicting upon him; perhaps because of some 'sin' he had difficulty in shaking), the psalmist says this: "Remember, O LORD, Your compassion and Your loving kindnesses, for they have been from of old."

Remember... In Hebrew 'remember' is 'zakar'. The one Hebrew word you don't want to forget is the word for remember: zakar. In the Old Testament, to zakar is not merely to rifle through the files in your head until you find that fact you've been searching for. To zakar is to employ your hands and feet and lips to engage in whatever action that remembrance requires. In the Bible, 'remembering,' particularly on the part of God, is not the retention or recollection of a mental image, but a focusing upon the object of memory that results in action.

'From of old'... Here we may go back to Abraham and his call from God; "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.*" Abraham had to 'change circumstances' in his life. But he did not do this without God's promise to guide, protect, and bless him. God's promise is to guide, protect, and bless you.

But, when it comes to 'change' in life, there is another dimension we need to keep in mind. The psalmist also says this: "Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to Your steadfast love remember me... Good and upright is the Lord; He instructs sinners in the way."

It's amazing how often people say that they would like 'things' to 'change' in their life, but then they seem to ignore what God has in His word (the Bible) about the way we ought to live in relation to God, His church, and people around us. For example, the Bible says, "Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Heb.10:25). But sometimes people will say, "I don't like it at church. The people aren't friendly." But, instead of complaining, have ever thought what would happen (if you ever felt like this) if you were encouraging and welcoming of others?

Is this your problem, wishing things would somehow 'change'? What's stopping you from making 'the changes' you wish to see...?

But... there is another dimension to all this: very importantly, the psalmist says, "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness."

God's promise through His word is not only that we have 'new direction' for life through His word (in terms of His Law, and how we are to live). God's promise is also that we have a 'new power' for life through His covenant-love, as we now know it in Jesus.

Jesus is God's promise of God's love and faithfulness. As we prepare to celebrate another Christmas, we are preparing to celebrate God's great 'change' to this world, and our life, and a whole 'new way' we may 'see' 'things'. In Jesus God's kingdom has come. In Jesus God has revealed to us the ultimate shape of what it means to be human. In Jesus God has revealed to us a 'new community'. In Jesus we are called to remember and rejoice in a 'new life', believing that salvation and peace and forgiveness and love has come to us from God in Jesus. There's a new 'way' of 'living'; there is a 'new way' of life'. That's the theme of all our Bible readings today.

In a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip - this conversation takes place. In the first frame Calvin speaks to Hobbes and says, "Live for the moment is my motto. You never know how long you got". In the second frame he explains, "You could step into the road tomorrow and WHAM, you get hit by a cement truck! Then you'd be sorry you put off your pleasures. That's what I say - live for the moment." And then he asks Hobbes, "What's your motto?" Hobbes replies, "My motto is - Look down the road."

Today's Bible readings are about what is coming down the road towards us; they are about the promise God has made to us. That's why Jesus tells us to be alert... to watch... to not get so caught up in the everyday things or the big tragedies that we lose sight of the larger scheme, that we fail to look down the road, that we fail to see the presence of the Kingdom looming towards us with all its hope - all its promise.

The kingdom is coming. Jeremiah has said that 'a righteous branch will sprout from David's line; and he will do what is just and right in the land.' He has come – and He is returning. We are called to be ready for him when he does, to be praying and loving and doing the things he has commanded us to do. And that is the attitude of Advent – of being alert to what is going on around us.

The promise of God – the promise of Christ – is that the future is not going to be like the present. That is why Jesus talks about the future. That is why Jesus mentions the signs of this coming. And that is why Jesus also says: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down." Now... who really wants a 'weighed-down heart'?

Life can be about 'new beginnings'. Our God is a God of 'new beginnings'. He has given this world... He has given us... He has given you (!)... a new beginning in Jesus.

God gives you a 'new beginning'; He 'remembers not your sin' (your sins are forgiven in Jesus). You have a 'new beginning' in Jesus.

And here the 'new beginnings' does not mean we 'throw out the old' in terms of God's Word and God's way. Indeed, the very opposite. God gives you a 'new beginning'; He gives you a word to guide you in life (He has spoken this word to you in Jesus – listen to Him). You have a 'new beginning' in Jesus. God gives you a 'new beginning'; the psalmist says "all the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness". You are always surrounded by God's great care and His love.

We all have a 'new beginning' in Jesus. And in Him we always have the power and the grace to commence 'new beginnings'. May you, as God's child, always rejoice in this great gift of grace and love in Jesus. Amen.