**8th January 2012**

**Mark 1.4-11; Genesis 1.1-4**

Every New Year starts with new year resolutions. As you know one of my resolutions was to use Nicky Gumbel’s daily notes on reading the Bible in a year. If you have been using them this week you will know that he has commented on our two passages from scripture this morning.

He wrote on New Year’s Day;

I belong to a squash club which is also a gym. Each year on 1 January they bring in extra equipment. The place is packed out. By 7 January, they move out all the extra equipment as most people have given up their New Year’s resolution and the club returns to normal.

• Get fit
• Lose weight
• Reduce drinking
• Stop smoking
• Get out of debt

There is nothing wrong with making these common New Year’s resolutions. Of course, all of us make resolutions we fail to keep. The good news is that each year is the opportunity for new beginnings. But then so is each week. Every Sunday is the first day of the week – a new beginning. Actually, every day is a new beginning: God’s mercies are new every morning (‘the Lord’s … compassions never fail. They are *new every morning*’, Lamentations 3:22–23).

The first three words in the Bible are, ‘In *the beginning* …’ (Genesis 1:1).

This time of year is about new beginnings and a fresh search for identity and focus for our lives in the year to come.

We all start the New Year with questions. What are we going to do with his new yea? Will I be happy? Will I be loved? Will I find something meaningful to do with my life? Will I be healthy?

The last question was a pressing one for my wife Debbie over Christmas. She was told on December 22nd that she had an incurable liver disease. Debbie (who has given me permission to tell you this) had to wait until Januray2d to see a consultant. It turns out that whilst she has the condition, called primary biliary cirrhosis, it may not affect her unduly through the course of her life. We were relieved to hear that. But I want to pay tribute to my wife for her strength and courage over this Christmas period. She rested in God and was at peace. Last Sunday’s covenant prayer (which is on the website if you missed out) was very meaningful and powerful:

I am no longer my own but yours

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will

Put me to doing, put me to suffering….

You are mine and I am yours

Debbie is a full time primary school teacher and her first day back at school was an inset training day. As the RE co-ordinator she had been asked to do a slot looking at the RE syllabus for the school. RE in most schools is treated as a bit of a Cinderella subject. The attitude is that it’s not going to get you a job, or at least not a proper job, so it ranks low in the priorities. Debbie wanted to convey to her colleagues the value of faith and give them a new respect for its value. So she bravely shared with her colleagues the story of her Christmas and how her faith had given her strength. They were, as you can imagine, deeply moved. Debbie felt vulnerable but through her vulnerability the staff of this school came to a new appreciation of the value of faith and fellow teachers are still talking with her about spiritual issues.

Nicky Gumbel said this week that life is a continual battle and blessing. He quoted Rick Warren who says that he *used to think* that the Christian life was a *succession* of battles and blessings, whereas *now* he thinks of life as being on *two tracks*. At any given moment in life there are usually blessings, but also battles to face.

He gives the example of the huge blessing that came to him through the publication of *The Purpose Driven Life*, which became the fastest selling Christian book of all time. It gave him enormous influence. But at the same time he found out that his wife, Kay, had cancer. On one track of his life there was great blessing. On the other track there was a massive battle to face.

There will be battles and blessings this year. There will be questions. I was fascinated to read Nick Gumbel point out that the first two questions asked in the Bible.

He was asked ‘What is your first question going to be?’ as he was preparing my cross-examination for one of the first trials that I was involved in when I practised as a barrister. A senior and experienced barrister was helping me prepare. He explained to me how significant the first question would be.

The first question in the Bible is about God's goodness

God gave to humankind everything they could possibly want. The whole created world was made for us to enjoy.

Yet, in spite of the fact that God had given so much, it was not seen as enough. Human beings wanted not just all the wonderful things God has given us legitimately to enjoy, but succumbed to the temptation to take forbidden fruit.

The temptation started with doubts about God. Here is the first question in the Bible: ‘*Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden”?*’ (3:1).

Eve’s first mistake was to engage with the serpent in conversation. We are created to converse with God, not the devil.

The devil, in the form of the serpent, fools Eve into thinking that there will be no consequences to her sin – ‘You will not certainly die’ (v.4). He imputes bad motives to God, ‘For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’ (v.5).

The first question God asks in the Bible is about you

Adam and Eve’s friendship with God was broken. When they heard God coming, they *hid* (v.8). But God immediately came looking for them, and we find his first question in the Bible: ‘*Where are you?*’ (v.9). God did not give up on them. He came looking for them, wanting the relationship to be restored.

The first question human beings ask is about relationships

The result of the fall is a broken relationship with God. Adam and Eve blamed each other, and in chapter four we read that their children also fell out with each other. Cain was angry with his brother Abel.

God’s questioning continued: ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it’ (4:6–7).

We will either master sin (now through the power of the cross and resurrection and with the help of the Spirit), or else sin will master us. In Cain’s case it did. He killed his brother (v.8). God asked him yet another question: ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ (v.9a).

In response, Cain asked the first question by a human being in the Bible: ‘*Am I my brother’s keeper?*’ (v.9b). Cain wanted to avoid responsibility. He was saying, ‘Do I really have responsibility for anyone other than myself?’

This is a crucial question for today. Do we have responsibility for others? Do we have responsibility for the bad stuff that is happening in our city? Do we have responsibility for the bad stuff that is happening in our nation and around the world? If 30,000 children die every day as a result of extreme poverty, is that our responsibility?

Lord, help us this year not to say like Cain, ‘Am I my brother's keeper?’, but to see that we are responsible for the needs of those around us.

The Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury in their Christmas addresses both drew on this question whether we are our brother’s keeper – and the need to rediscover our mutual solidarity and commitment to one another.

The Archbishop of Canterbury says Christmas challenges individuals and whole societies alike not to build lives based on selfishness and fear, but to be open to searching questions about identity and solidarity, stark questions that are more pressing in the wake of falling confidence in institutions and challenges to social order.

 “Very near the heart of Christian faith and practice is this encounter with God’s questions, ‘who are you, where are you?’ Are you on the side of the life that lives in Jesus, the life of grace and truth, of unstinting generosity and unsparing honesty, the only life that *gives* life to others? Or are you on your own side, on the side of disconnection, rivalry, the hoarding of gifts, and the obsession with control? ... What we say or do in our response to Jesus is our way of discovering for ourselves and showing to one another what is real in and for us ... the truth is still an uncompromising one: if you cannot or will not respond, you are walking away from reality into a realm of trackless fogbound falsehood.”

He cited the Book of Common Prayer, which is this year celebrating its 350th anniversary, as providing an example of how a society’s response came to be articulated. It underlines, he says, notions of duty and common interest; speaking of and to a world in which the church, the state and the rich and powerful need continually to be aware of the immense obligations owed by those who have much to those who are poor and vulnerable.

In the Long Exhortation in the Communion Service, the Book of Common Prayer tells people what questions they should ask themselves before coming to the Sacrament, They show a keen critical awareness of the new economic order that, in the mid sixteenth century, was piling up assets of land and property in the hands of a smaller and smaller elite.’ He quotes from the communion service as a pointer to a developing understanding of mutual obligation:

“If ye shall perceive your offences to be such as are not only against God but also against your neighbours; then ye shall reconcile yourselves unto them; being ready to make restitution."

The need to learn these lessons is all the more important, he argues, in the wake of the events of the past year:

“The most pressing question we now face, we might well say, is who and where we are as a society. Bonds have been broken, trust abused and lost. Whether it is an urban rioter mindlessly burning down a small shop that serves his community, or a speculator turning his back on the question of who bears the ultimate cost for his acquisitive adventures in the virtual reality of today’s financial world, the picture is of atoms spinning apart in the dark.

And into that dark the Word of God has entered, in love and judgment, and has not been overcome; in the darkness the question sounds as clear as ever, to each of us and to our church and our society: ‘Britain, where are you?’

Speaking in his annual BBC New Year message, the Archbishop of Canterbury reflects on the importance that Christianity bestows on young people and challenges us to actively support our local youth facilities and opportunities which, he argues, play a crucial part in a healthy society

The Pope said that the often the motivation is lacking for individuals and large sections of society to practice renunciation and make sacrifices. Where is the force that draws the will upwards? He said there was a crisis of faith in the west due to scepticism and unbelief. He contrasted that with the faith of the Africa church where they have a joy in being Christian, buoyed up by inner happiness at knowing Christ and belonging to his church.

Where does that joy come from? How is it to be explained? In his view the crucial element was faith: I am wanted; I have a task in history; I am accepted; I am loved. Only from the You can the I come into itself. Only if one is accepted can one accept oneself. Those who are unloved cannot love themselves.

The Pope went on:

This sense of being accepted comes in the first instance from other human beings. But all human acceptance is fragile. Ultimately we need a sense of being accepted unconditionally. Only if God accepts me, and I become convinced of this, do I know definitively; it is good that I exist. It is good to be a human being. If ever a man’s sense of being accepted and loved by God is lost, then there is no longer ay answer to the question whether to be a human being is good at all. Doubt concerning human existence becomes more and more insurmountable... where doubt over God becomes prevalent, and then doubt over humanity follows inevitably. We see today how widely this doubt is spreading. We see it in the joylessness, in the inner sadness that can be read on so many human faces. Only faith can give the conviction: it is good to exist. It is good to be a human being, even in hard times.

When Jesus was baptised and came out of the water, ‘Heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him’ (v.16). The dove is a symbol of peace which the Holy Spirit brings to our lives.

A voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son’ (Matthew 3:17). Jesus is *the* Son of God in a unique way. However, the Holy Spirit assures *all of us* that we are sons and daughters of God, ‘The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children’ (Romans 8:15–16).

The voice from heaven said ‘… whom I love ...’ (Matthew 3:17). The apostle Paul writes that God’s love for us is poured ‘into our hearts by the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 5:5).

The voice from heaven says, ‘with him I am *well pleased*’ (Matthew 3:17). Again, it was supremely true of Jesus but God wants us all to know his pleasure. Think of the moment in the film *Chariots of Fire* when Eric Liddell says, ‘When I run *I feel his pleasure*.’ How can we give God pleasure this year? But more importantly, this statement comes to Jesus at the start of his ministry – before he had even done a thing – God says I take pleasure in you. Creation is good. We are loved. We are accepted. Whatever questions we have in this year, whatever battles we face – may we know we are loved – God takes pleasure in us. Let us live in that blessing and be a blessing to others.

**The Revd Dr Michael N. Jagessar, moderator-elect of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church looks ahead to the wonderful challenges of 2012.**

“Last year I experienced several converting moments which very clearly showed me two things: that the United Reformed Church is full of very gifted people; and that there are numerous small acts of transformation happening in our congregations and communities in which the ministry of love and hope is taking root.

“It also became clear to me that that we need to reframe the urgent questions before us to help us re-author our conversations to reflect the many “positive vibrations” in our life together. We must resist paralysing story lines and wisely embrace the positive narratives we embody.

“2012 offers us an opening full of possibilities to release ourselves from the past, embrace a future and occupy a present in which we will actively practice our faith in God in a changing world. The Christian community, ever being renewed, must not revert to default habits that stifle and grid-lock our life together.

“The Gospel and way of God in Christ calls us to be bold in our vision, to try things that may seem impossible, and to turn to God for guidance and assurance in challenging times. After all, we do believe that with God nothing is impossible!

“To seize the challenges before us as opportunities will demonstrate that: we are a church that supports, cares and accompanies; we are a church committed to living out God’s mission for all in our specific contexts; we can be a living house for all hungering for flourishing spiritual lives in these anxious times; and we are a church open to the surprises and “fresh” leading of the Spirit.

“There are no boundaries to hope, because there are no boundaries to God. For the Christian community, hope is not an occasional act: it is a permanent habit. So may hope - embodied and enacted – swell, rise, overflow and take wings in our lives as we dare to believe, in spite of the evidence around us, that with God all things are possible.”

**The Revd Roberta Rominger, general secretary of the United Reformed Church, sets out some of the challenges and excitements facing the denomination in 2012**

“We have quite a year ahead of us. The Queen celebrates her diamond jubilee in June. The 2012 games come to the UK in August. Events like these are occasions for creativity in United Reformed Church mission. What can we do that will catch the public imagination, deepen our community engagement and enable us to share what we believe? Imagination is already hard at work in many of our congregations.

“Alongside the public celebrations we have New Year prospects of our own to look forward to. It has been awhile since we’ve seen any serious progress in ecumenical relations, but 2012 begins with a service in Westminster Abbey to express reconciliation between the United Reformed Church and the Church of England. This is the fruit of bilateral conversations that resulted in resolutions at URC Mission Council and the Anglican General Synod in 2011. Our service on 7 February will mark the 350th anniversary of the 1662 Great Ejectment by looking to a future of shared work and witness.

“My personal hope is that developments in our relations with the Church of England will also allow us a proper place at the table which they share with the Methodist Church under the Methodist-Anglican Covenant. This will offer opportunities in England to mirror the Episcopal-Methodist-URC (EMU) partnership already established in Scotland. Similarly there is renewed energy in the life of the Commission of Covenanted Churches in Wales with October 13 planned as the date for a major gathering in Aberystwyth in which we and the Methodists will play a significant part along with our other Welsh ecumenical partners. By this time next year I expect that significant progress will have taken place in joint working with the Methodist Church across the three nations. Conversations these days are determined and practical and I believe that we are on the verge of a major ecumenical breakthrough.

“When General Assembly meets in Scarborough this July we will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the founding of the URC. I look forward to hearing about local celebrations as well as being involved in teh national ones. My plea would be that we use this occasion to reach out a hand of friendship to nearby Congregational Federation churches. We must not forget that it is their 40th anniversary too.

“In the meantime, some of our churches will be celebrating their 350th anniversaries this year. Many of them have invited me to visit and I look forward to hearing their stories. The unofficial theme for this commemoration is ‘Courage, conscience and conviction’. That is the title of an innovative conference to be held at Mansfield College in March to ponder the meaning of dissent in our time. Watch for details shortly.

“Courage, conscience and conviction are indeed what we offer in our determination to live faithfully in these challenging times. Our valiant church makes contributions out of all proportion to its size. God bless you for all the lives you will touch in the year ahead and the faith that will shine from you.”

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