

Come to the Lord with Thanksgiving

SERMON · Prayer, Repentance and the Spiritual Life · 31 December 2017 (Year Ending, the Covenant Service)

2 Chronicles 24:17-23

Psalm 51

John 8:12 (quoted)

Luke 24:46-47

Matthew 28:18-20

‘Come to the Lord with Thanksgiving,’ is the theme given to us for meditation by the Church of South India, this last day of the year 2017. Since our English congregation will not have a Covenant Service tomorrow, a service I love because it is compelling and sets the agenda for our spiritual journey in 2018, I am attempting to encompass the two messages, briefly, in this sermon.

Jesus, God the Son, does not want us to merely sit around inertly for the past to vanish into oblivion, nor does He want us to be passive observers of the future fulfilment of His promises, or just make merry and celebrate this occasion. He wants both the past and future to shape our lives for thanksgiving, faithfulness, service, and commitment to Him and His mission, always persevering in faith and trust.

It is not how you start; it is how you finish. It is easy to start well and then lose your focus and spiritually collapse. Backsliding is an accurate description of the situation. It suggests that we were making progress but then we veered off track and started sliding backwards in our spiritual life. Second Chronicles 24 is a sad story about losing passion for the most important relationship in the universe: a relationship with God. It describes a man who had everything, riches, power, influence, a rich spiritual upbringing, meaningful work to do, and a good track record with the Lord, but threw it all away. Like every part of the Bible, this story is here to lead us to Christ. You will be surprised what you are carrying in your mind, unknown to you, which will be used by Satan as a weapon against you. Before we usher ourselves into 2018, we need to do something about 2017, which will come to an end at midnight today.

Years ago, my wife and I got off the Paris Metro at a wrong station, on our way back to our hotel. Soon we realised that we were in the suburbs of Paris. All our attempts to find a cab were futile. Language presented the biggest hurdle in seeking directions. So, we walked, looking for some familiar building, a signboard in English, or a landmark. We walked on the well laid out roads, through immaculately maintained parks with pretty flowers; we walked along messy construction sites; we passed rubbish dumps; we witnessed a brawl between two drunks; we saw lonely-looking old people with sadness writ on their faces walking along, and

also a young couple in love. We were on the strange roads of Paris for nearly three hours before we found our hotel.

If you dare to take a walk through your soul, recounting the year that is about to end, your experience would be somewhat similar to what we experienced in the suburbs of Paris. Suddenly you will realise that you are threading through unknown territory. You would never have imagined that was how the year was. Nevertheless, you should press on through the twists and turns of your mind. Such a venture, however, should have a purpose, though such a walk is not an easy one. You are going to discover plenty of landmines of hidden sins, the wrongs you did, the good you have failed to do, doubts about Christ you secretly harboured, fear of the unknown, and deceptive ideas planted in you by the evil one, and much more. These are memories and matters you have managed to hide deep within your inner self. You need to look out for these landmines, as soldiers do, without stepping on any, but neutralising each one with prayers and the help of the Holy Spirit, before you enter the new year. You need not be petrified when you encounter these landmines. Remember what Jesus said: "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). His light will guide you on this journey of yours. Jesus will restore your soul, and His rod and staff will comfort you as you progress.

You will also find beautiful things during your journey through your memories of 2017, just as my wife and I saw beautiful gardens full of colourful flowers. You will encounter the many blessings you have received from Jesus. You will discover how much Jesus loves you, and how many times He has forgiven you. You will come across those angels Jesus had sent to help you out of difficult situations, in the form of a stranger, even in the person of someone you disliked. You will understand the value of forgiveness, knowing how Jesus forgave you, time and again. You will know the beauty of pure love and compassion. In the process of the spring cleaning you do, you will retain some things which are good for the next year and completely wipe out what was undesirable. That is when you should drop to your knees and say a prayer of thanks to Jesus for all His mercies in the year 2017.

On New Year's Day, most churches celebrate what is known as the Covenant Service. That is the time during which the congregation gets an opportunity to introspect and reflect on the covenant of love, forgiveness, peace, and life eternal that Jesus is offering us. That is the time we should spend to earnestly seek to renew the covenant and proclaim our intent to be active participants in the mission and ministry of Jesus, a time to meekly accept our circumstances as the will of Jesus Christ for us.

There, definitely, exists a difference between a covenant and a resolution. In form, a covenant is an agreement between two people and involves promises on the part of each to the other. The concept of a covenant between God and His people is one of the central themes of the Bible. In the biblical sense, a covenant implies much more than a contract or a simple agreement between two parties. There are five covenants that stand out as most critical: those God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, and the fifth, which is more relevant to us, the Covenant of Jesus Christ. A resolution, on the other hand, is by definition an intention, a resolve, or a decision made by a person. As we bid goodbye to 2017 and look forward to a new and bright 2018, many will make a New Year's resolution. Polling suggests that around three in ten people make a resolution on the first day of the New Year, yet only about eight per cent go on to keep it.

This information did not surprise me a bit. Christian believers know about the biblical covenants, both the Old Covenants and the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. Humanity has changed most of these covenants into 'resolutions.' I mean, they have made it one-sided, for God to keep His promises. If that is how we dealt with our covenants with God, it would not take a second thought for us to break our own resolve — to give up sin, bad habits, or to take on an attitude befitting a true believer in Jesus, and so on.

Unlike the Mosaic covenant, the New Covenant of Jesus Christ is intended for all mankind, regardless of race. In the Great Commission, Jesus sent His apostles into the entire world so they could tell the story of the cross (Luke 24:46-47; Matthew 28:18-20). The Gospel call extends to every man and woman today! The love of God is demonstrated through the death of the Testator and the granting of promises that brings all the people of God into unity with Him and with one another. We are people belonging to the "Covenant of Redemption," in which God the Son agrees to enter the world as a man, live obediently to the commands of the Father, become obedient even to death on a cross, and gather the people the Father had given Him. The Holy Spirit in this covenant empowers Christ to fulfil His ministry by indwelling in each believer to apply the benefits of Christ's redemptive work for His people.

God gives us great signs of salvation in the New Covenant: the sign of baptism into Christ, the sign of the Lord's continuing presence with His people at Holy Communion, the sign of forgiveness of sins after confession, the sign of healing in the laying on of hands, the sign of the apostolic ministry of the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit. These and other signs of the covenant assure us of God's gracious and loving intention for His people who live in covenant relationship with Him.

On our part, in acknowledgement of this New Covenant, let us rise and pray the Covenant Prayer, asking for inner strength to carry us through to the rough and tumble of 2018, renewing the covenant. Let us pray:

*I am no longer my own, but Yours.
Put me to what You will, set me with whom You will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for You or laid aside for You,
exalted for You or brought low for You.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to Your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
You are mine, and I am Yours. So be it.
And the covenant now renewed on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.*

Wish you all a fulfilling 2018.