

Order of Service for 2nd January 2022

Heaven's Below!

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 2nd January 2022. Our talk this week is called *Heaven's Below* and looks at the activity of planning and goal setting from a Christian perspective. Let's begin by focusing our full attention on the presence of our Lord as we draw near to worship.

Call to Worship

They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;

they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord –
the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more.

Jeremiah 31:12

We joyfully celebrate the saving power of God as we sing our opening hymn...

Hymn (BPW 189) **As with Gladness Men of Old**

1. As with gladness men of old
Did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onward, beaming bright,
So, most gracious God, may we
Evermore be led to thee.
2. As with joyful steps they sped
To that lowly manger-bed,
There to bend the knee before
Him whom heaven and earth adore,
So may we, with willing feet,
Ever seek thy mercy-seat.

3. As they offered gifts most rare
At that manger rude and bare,
So may we with holy joy,
Pure and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to thee, our heavenly King.

4. Holy Jesus, every day
Keep us in the narrow way;
And, when earthly things are past,
Bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide,
Where no clouds thy glory hide.

5. In the heavenly country bright
Need they no created light;
Thou its light, its joy, its crown,
Thou its sun, which goes not down.
There for ever may we sing
Alleluias to our King.

Prayer of dedication (Angela Ashwin, in the Book of a Thousand Prayers)

God of day and night,
of frost and sunshine,
of rest and growth,
we praise you for the rhythms and patterns of life:
for the gentle dying of each season
and the coming of the next;
for the wonder of new life, in all its forms;
and the quiet flowing of youth into age.
Give us eyes and hearts to perceive you
in the unfolding of our years,
and help us in this new-born year
to make more space for you,
the giver of it all. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

We sing now three songs in quick succession, as we dedicate ourselves to serving God.

Song Medley: (WT 63, 76, 358)

(WT 63) **Come and Praise Him**

Come and praise Him, Royal Priesthood,
Come and worship, Holy Nation.
Worship Jesus, our Redeemer,
He is precious, King of Glory.
X3
He is precious, King of Glory.

(WT 76) **Emmanuel, Emmanuel**

Emmanuel, Emmanuel,
His name is called Emmanuel.
God with us, revealed in us,
His name is called Emmanuel.

Emmanuel, Emmanuel,
His name is called Emmanuel.
God with us, revealed in us,
His name is called Emmanuel.

God with us, revealed in us,
His name is called Emmanuel.

Song (WT 358) **Reign in Me**

Reign in me, Sovereign Lord,
Reign in me,
Reign in me, Sovereign Lord,
Reign in me.

Captivate my heart,
Let Your Kingdom come,
Establish there Your throne,
Let Your will be done.

* Repeat from beginning

Reign in me, Sovereign Lord, Reign in me.

Offering Prayer

Loving Lord, we acknowledge that you are the giver of every good gift, and we bless you for all we have. Take our gifts to church and charity and use them to bring your gospel and further your plan. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession Roger Woodward

Our Father, we live in a world that is waiting:

Waiting for peace;

Waiting for justice;

Waiting for human rights to be enjoyed by all;

Waiting for the next food parcel to arrive;

Waiting for medical care.

May the hope of Christmas ring out.

May we be the people that bring hope to the world.

The leaders of the world wait for each other:

Waiting for others to make the first move in sharing their wealth,

before making decisions on their own assets;

Waiting to see what others do about climate change,

before making their commitment;

Waiting until they feel secure,

before considering the insecurity of others.

May the hope of Christmas ring out.

May we be the people that bring hope to the world.

Lord, we pray for those people who are waiting for their difficulties to come to an end:

Those who are ill, waiting for healing;

Those who are worn out and wait for death;

Those who are anxious and wait for time to pass;

The lonely who wait for others to visit;

The unemployed who wait for a job.

We pray for any we know who are waiting at the moment.....

May the hope of Christmas ring out.

May we be the people that bring hope to the world.

Lord, we your people are waiting:

Sometimes our waiting is impatient, wanting things to happen now;

Sometimes we see the world and wait in despair.

We are waiting for the coming of your Kingdom.

Help us to see, as we wait, the signs of your Kingdom already amongst us:

The generosity we saw in so many people in the time of waiting for Christmas;

The touch of another human being that expresses love for us.

May the hope of Christmas ring out.

May we be the people that bring hope to the world.

Lord, we your people are waiting.

During this New Year, may the expectations of our waiting be fulfilled and may your Kingdom come on earth as in heaven. Amen

Bible Readings

Ephesians 1: 3 – 14

Praise for Spiritual Blessings in Christ

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory.

John 1: 1 - 18

The Word Became Flesh

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was with God in the beginning. **3** Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4** In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Let's reflect on the nature of God's great plan for the world in our next song.

Song (WT 37) **Beauty for Brokenness**

Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in the suffering world this is our prayer:
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace;
Sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!

Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for the craftsman, trade for their skills;
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
Voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak.

Chorus

*God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion we pray:
Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.*

Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
Cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share;
Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain.

Chorus

Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams
Plundered and poisoned - our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;
Make us content with the things that we need.

Chorus

Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
Until your justice burns brightly again;
Until the nations learn of your ways,
Seek your salvation and bring you their praise.

Chorus x 2

*God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion we pray:
Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.*

Now may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

Heaven's Below!

I wonder whether you made any New Year resolutions... Last year I resolved to read a new poem quite often and make notes on ones I liked in a notebook. It was a way

of remembering what I'd read and becoming a little more familiar with the amazing array of beautiful literature. I did quite well, but after about four months my habit began to fade and I became less committed to it. I wonder what it is about New Year resolutions that makes them so hard to keep.

It's interesting, though, to reflect on the theme of goals as the calendar enters 2022. I was interested in last year's Reith lectures on the theme of artificial intelligence. Prof Stuart Russell's talks insist that all human society needs to get ready for what he calls *general purpose AI*, something he regards as the biggest event in human history, though some way into the future, as technology currently stands.

At the moment we have artificial intelligence which is designed for specific tasks, and sometimes exceeds human performance in that one area. Specifically, dedicated AI can play chess, plot journeys, and spot certain patterns quicker and better than any human being. The goal of the developers of AI is to create robots able to outperform humans in many different areas, with the capacity to learn new skills and take on new tasks. That's quite a goal.

Prof Russell asked what it meant for a robot to be conscious, and argued that this was not the critical issue. How can we detect whether something is self-conscious, or just learning responses that mimic what humans would expect of a self-conscious robot? He was more concerned with the concept of AI **intelligence**. What did it mean for a robot to be intelligent? *Machines are intelligent to the extent that their actions can be expected to achieve their objectives*, he remarked.

It meant that, if set a goal, an intelligent robot could make it happen. A stupid robot would have goals set and not achieve them. A smart robot has objectives and gets them done.

What sort of goals should Christians set? Might we be guilty of behaving like stupid robots? Are we sometimes guilty of setting grand objectives whilst having little notion of how to achieve them? Are we guilty of coming up with beautiful New Year resolutions and then letting them melt away after a few weeks or months? Or might we tend to set objectives without considering whether they are in fact desirable?

Why do we find it hard to work with goals as Christians?

Christian goals and the Lordship of Christ

Quite properly, a Christian has one goal that supersedes all other goals, namely to worship God and follow his leading in any and every situation. When Jesus faced his temptations, he was working out that his goal was not to make bread out of stones for hungry people, nor yet to be a ruler of the nations, nor yet to be a spectacular worker of miracles. Although he would feed the hungry, announce the Kingdom of God and heal the sick, even Jesus had to learn that his primary goal was to worship and serve God. If a church sets a goal, say, to reach out to migrants, well, God may send several non-migrant families their way. A particular goal of serving migrants can't trump the general goal of serving God.

Christian goals and the mystery of God

And then, when it comes to serving God, well, as the old hymn put it, *God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform*. The Lord God, King of the Universe will not be reduced to some three-point action plan.

This aspect of God is sometimes called the *Ineffable* - meaning that which cannot be adequately described by words. If we accept this unknowable aspect of God, then, it might be argued that almost by definition, a believer cannot set a goal in relation to God. God's ways are inscrutable. Even familiar religious language can only point us in the general direction of God.

Christian goals and self-sacrifice

Reith lecturer Stuart Russell pointed out that *self-preservation* is a logical necessity for pursuing almost any objective. And yet we follow a Saviour who gave up his earthly life and taught his followers also to take up their cross. The way of **self-sacrifice**, rather than self-preservation, is a part of spirituality. Jesus said:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? (Luke 9:23 - 25)

Whatever the size of the worldly goal, it is not worth comparing with the heavenly one. The words of Hebrews 12 capture the balance between earthly and heavenly goals well:

*For the joy that was set before him he [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame,
and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

* * *

The opening eighteen verses of John's gospel both confirm and transcend the reservations about goals I have been exploring. They are certainly not a three-point action plan, and convey a sense of the mysterious nature of God. Consider the very famous first verse...

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

We could read libraries of books on what that might mean. Here are some immediate attempts on my part:

- Before time began, God existed with God's story...
- Wisdom exists with God beyond time...
- God the Son and God the Father exist regardless of time, and the Son is both God and yet also separate from God...

Would it be too much to read this verse this way? :

In the beginning God had a plan, and that plan was a Person, who was always with God... ?

Perhaps the most famous verse from this reading is verse 14:

*The Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory,
the glory of the one and only Son,
who came from the Father,
full of grace and truth.*

In planning terms, we might read that God's plan became a human being who lived in our neighbourhood. He was a glorious sight, God's own Son, overflowing with grace and truth. So God's plan always was and always is a **Person** who became a human being shining with glory and overflowing with mercy and integrity.

If we consider our reading from Ephesians 1, we learn more about God's planning. The heart of the plan comes in verse 10:

*To bring unity to all things
in heaven and on earth under Christ.*

This plan is vast in its scope, because it includes everything that exists - in heaven and on the earth. A modern understanding of this would be that God's plan is to bring everyone and everything that exists in the unimaginable vastness of space into a sense of unity under Christ. What exactly could that mean?

We might think it makes our own planning to learn, say, conversational Italian or reach grade 4 on the clarinet, seem rather parochial by comparison. Even worthy goals, like becoming a street pastor or helping in the food bank seem like tiny atomised details in God's cosmic design.

* * *

And yet... God's universal plan was and is centred on a person, Jesus Christ. His sacrifice on the cross reveals God's merciful heart to all the persons of the world. God's planning is **personal** by nature. We are easily deceived by considerations of physical size. But the universe is both vastly greater and vastly smaller than human minds can comprehend. It stretches from the receding images of stars born at the beginning of the universe, which astronomers hope the new James Webb telescope will be able to glimpse; down to a neutrino, which weighs roughly 500,000 times less than an electron. God chooses to work at the personal level, and so our plans, whatever they may be, to redesign our garden or see the Northern Lights or help out at our luncheon club - well, they matter to him because they matter to us. That's the astounding aspect of God's plans. They're personal. Individuals matter.

So, we have God's plan of sending Jesus to redeem the world. We have God's plan to unite everything that is, under the authority of the merciful and victorious Christ.

But what we might call **God's grand cosmic plan** does in fact allow other planning work to go on.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the risen Lord unfolds a concentric mission plan for the apostles to follow. Receiving power from the Holy Spirit, they will be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Like ripples in a pond, the gospel will radiate out from where they are - in Jerusalem (Acts 1). At the end of Matthew's gospel the risen Jesus gives a more specific version of the same plan - to make disciples of all nations, baptising and teaching obedience to Jesus' teaching (Matthew 28). The Apostle Paul planned his mission trips - but was always open to divine correction, as when he planned to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow him to go there (Acts 16:7).

Jesus' brother James explicitly addressed planning in his round-robin letter, saying, *Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. (James 4: 13 - 17)*

Our planning at the very least involves knowing the good that we should do, and doing it.

All these reflections bring a healthy note of scepticism into all talk of New Year resolutions and project planning. So, should we abandon planning and goals altogether? I don't think so, but, when we plan, we should be aware of the following four aspects of what we might call Christian planning:

1. God already has a plan to bring everything under the authority of Christ. Any of our planning must be consistent with the values taught by Jesus Christ, **in every respect**. God impacted on the world by making heaven a flesh-and-blood reality in Jesus. He brought heaven down to earth. Our planning is **heavenly**.

2. God is always the planner-in-chief. He has his grand cosmic design, so our plans are always subject to his correction, adaptation or even rejection. Our planning is **subordinate**.
3. God's grand cosmic plan centred on becoming a person; and to bring everything to unity under Christ means that our planning must always respect the integrity, value, dignity and humanity of any other person. Our planning is **personal**.
4. The gospel's planning always involves calling people to discover the life of God in their own hearts, calling them to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Our planning is **spiritual**.

So our planning is heavenly, subordinate, personal and spiritual. With these caveats, we can get on and plan.

Perhaps we should begin this New Year with a reminder of what I call *One Thing Spirituality*. King David had many concerns on his mind and yet he wrote:

One thing I have asked of the Lord, this is what I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and seek him in his temple. The apostle Paul wrote, **one thing** I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. And when Martha complained that her sister Mary wouldn't help with the chores, but instead sat as a disciple at the feet of Jesus, Jesus told her, *Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few are needed, or indeed **only one**. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*

How would you complete these words for yourself? :

One thing I have asked of the Lord, this is what I seek...

As you ponder and pray over that, remember, God wants to bring heaven into your own heart and life; God wants a loving relationship with you; God calls you to live your life in response to his Lordship; the Lord Jesus Christ wants to make you into his disciple. God's grand cosmic plan must encompass ours, as we seek to bring heaven down to earth.

One thing I have asked of the Lord, this is what I seek... So, what lies at the heart of your resolution or plan for 2022?

We dedicate ourselves to God in the words of our closing hymn.

Hymn (BPW 219) **It is a Thing most Wonderful**

It is a thing most wonderful,
almost too wonderful to be,
that God's own Son should come from heaven
and die to save a child like me.

And yet I know that it is true:
he came to this poor world below,
and wept, and toiled, and mourned, and died,
only because he loved us so.

I cannot tell how he could love
someone so weak and full of sin;
his love must be most wonderful,
if he could die my love to win.

It is most wonderful to know
his love for me so free and sure;
but 'tis more wonderful to see
my love for him so faint and poor.

And yet I want to love you, Lord;
O teach me how to grow in grace,
and I will love you more and more,
until I see you face to face.

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you

Wherever he may send you;

May he guide you through the wilderness;

Protect you through the storm;

May he bring you home rejoicing

At the wonders he has shown you;

May he bring you home rejoicing

Once again into our doors.