

Thoughts at the Turn of the Year

As one year ends and another begins we cannot avoid thinking what effects the passage of time has on us. Looking back, we see that times have changed, and we have changed with them. We have grown older, and we have come one year nearer our real home. Looking back, we think with regret of how things are not as we might have wished. There have been missed opportunities and disappointments. The old philosopher Heraclitus championed the principle, *"All things flow."* He meant that everything is in a state of flux. He said you could never bathe in the same river twice, because when you go there the second time the previous water has moved on! Human beings have a longing for permanency. Even though they accept the thought that eventually they will die, they cling to the desire that what they have been able to do, achieve, build, and so on, will live on after them, for some time, at least.

Alongside these thoughts are the more sombre ones. We are mortal. This present world has been subjected to futility, or meaninglessness, because of sin. The writer of Ecclesiastes said that everything is *"vanity"*, a chasing after wind. Human beings are like the grass, which flourishes in the morning, and in the evening has been cut down and is withered. Psalm 90 is a psalm of Moses, who lived till 120, and had seen a whole generation of his contemporaries die in the desert. It talks about the shortness of human life, the anger of God over human sin, and God's eternity. It pleads for the Lord's compassion and favour, and ends with the prayer, *"Establish the work of our hands for us."*

In the midst of the change and decay all around us, we have that deep longing for stability. In spite of the uncertainty of everything, there is a certain constancy in things. The writer of Ecclesiastes also said, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." There is an in-built repetitiveness in human affairs. People don't learn from their mistakes. In this futile world, what we can be sure of is that human greed, sin, and violence will continue, just as the devil continues his assault on the people of God as long as this age goes on. So often even the new inventions are variations of the old ideas. As people have failed to make good use of even the new developments, in technology and so on, we can be sure they will continue to fail to do so.

There is, however, another side to the statement that there is nothing new under the sun. What is true is not new. Truth is constant. It could also be argued just as lucidly, what is new is not true.

So what are the constants? The most important is God's abiding love and faithfulness. Often in the psalms and elsewhere the mercy of God is coupled to His faithfulness to His covenant. He abides by His promises, and never goes back on them. When we think of the saving grace of God, we need to remember that it is not fleeting emotion that will pass as quickly as gushes of human emotion do. In grace God has chosen people to be His own in His Son, whom He planned from the beginning to be the Saviour of the world. The reason why people will be saved is that God has laid His loving choice on them in eternity. There is great mystery here. We should never try to rationalise this out. We need simply to accept that our coming to faith in Jesus the Saviour is not the chance result of events here in time. Hebrew prophets often used the perfect tense for what they foretold in the future. So sure were they that what the Lord told them would unfailingly happen. In such things nothing has taken God by surprise. Those whom He has elected, He has called. Those whom He has called He has justified, and those whom He has justified He has glorified (Rm 8:30).

Though the writers of the Scriptures often speak of the eternity and changelessness of God, they do not leave us with the kind of changelessness that human reason assumes. His changelessness does not mean that His wrath and His grace are levelled out into some kind of constant. If God were absolutely unchangeable, He could never change from wrath to love and grace. He would be like the "blessed gods" of the Epicureans, who supposedly dwelt in the inter-mundane spaces, and were quite aloof from human affairs. If they got involved with human affairs in any way, they would become sad! The God of the Scriptures impinges directly on human beings, both in wrath and in mercy. He reacts to their faith and their disobedience. God is never the cause of evil. When Amos asked, "When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?" (Amos 3:6) He was talking about the Lord's intervention in human affairs to punish wickedness (Amos 3: 1). We are not fatalists, because we do not believe that God sends evil and well as good, from some kind of implacable changelessness. We believe that God hears and answers prayer. Though He exercises His divine providence and government of all things, He has graciously taken account of the needs and the prayers of His people. An unchangeable god in the sense of human reason could never forgive. However, we know that the Lord's mercies are new every morning as Jeremiah wrote, in Lamentations 3:23. Yet that same passage points us to God's constancy as our reason for trusting Him. It is because of the Lord's great love that we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.

Great is His faithfulness (Lam 3:22-23).

Human reason also misinterprets God's changelessness in the sense that, because He is eternally the same, He could never have become incarnate. The incarnation did mean a great change, a great condescension, in God the Son. It was a great change for Him, an even greater humiliation, as a full human being, to have fully divine power and glory, and yet refrain from using them, for our sakes, to save us, by laying down His life and taking it up again. Our nature, which He assumed, was fully human in the sense that He experienced all the temptations that human beings are subject to (Hb 4: 15). He was not play-acting. Yet in them all He did not sin. During His life on earth, Jesus offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission (Hb 5:7). That is reason for us to be confident, because we know that He can sympathise with us in our weaknesses.

We say, correctly, that this incarnate Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and for ever (Hb 13:8). What the writer has in view is our reason for confidence in the Lord's help. We do not need to be afraid of what human beings can do to us. Our confidence is based on the word of God, which our leaders have proclaimed to us long ago. New and strange teachings will only carry us away from our constant Lord (Hb 13:5-8).

The other constant is God's Word. This present world will be folded up like a garment, but the Lord will endure. His word will also endure. Though human beings are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field, the Word of the Lord stands for ever (Isa 40:6-8). Jesus Christ's words will never pass away, even when this present heaven and earth pass away (Mt 24:35). For that reason they are fully reliable. There should never be a hint among us that the Word of God is capable of error or being ineffective in any respect.

The inner yearning of human beings for the stability of eternity is tantalising. God has put the thought of eternity into human minds, but our minds continue to boggle at the thought. For the Christian, too, the thought of bliss and glory continuing in God's wonderful presence without end is too much to grasp. Our thoughts are conditioned by what we know about this present world, that things do not continue here for ever. All Christians can do is to put aside nagging thoughts about eternity and leave them all to the gracious Lord. He has assured us that He has gone to the Father to prepare a place for us, and that we shall be with Him, and behold the glory that the Father has given Him before the foundation of the world. His Word assures us that we are already God's children, and that we shall be like Him, and see Him as He is. We dismiss as unhelpful speculation in our present age about what we shall be like beyond those great privileges. We leave them all to Him, whose love is constant, and whose mercies even in this life are new every morning. Our Lord is the One who Was, and Is, and Is to Come, the Almighty. He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Since He will reign for ever and ever, it is enough that He has promised that we shall live and reign with Him in His kingdom.