

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy spirit, Amen.

Good morning everyone, and a happy new year to you all, its lovely to be here today to lead this morning worship as we come together to build our relationship with God

I hope many of you have found the time to relax and rejuvenate over the Christmas period, to refresh yourselves as we draw the old year to an end and look forward to the New one which has just began.

In many ways Christmas symbolises the end of the old and the beginning of the new. As Christ came the promised messiah who fulfils and transforms the law that God gave to Israel through Moses and the old testament. Jesus is the destination of old testament history but also the content and purpose of the Church's mission.

Through the miraculous conception, the Christ child, the promised messiah, brings salvation for all, shows Gods undying love for us, and invites us into a new living faith with him, which is illustrated and set out through the new testament.

So as we end the year, many of us choose to make a new years resolution, a promise to ourselves, a new year, a new me. We will be bombarded by marketing companies trying to sell us the latest fad diet, a new form of exercise which will burn calories faster than before. Self-help books become best sellers, and trying to get on a cardio machine in the gym will be harder than hitting a cow's backside with a banjo.

We know we are flawed, we need some work, so we tell ourselves that this might actually be the year that we are going to do something about it. We try exercise, eating right, kicking our bad habits, positive thinking, and a whole host of things to make that change. We also know that the new "me" probably won't last until the middle of February.

So this year instead of focusing on worldly things I thought I would focus on growing my relationship with God, and deepening my faith? Why spend time relying on myself and my own personal endeavours which are bound to fail and instead turn to Christ? And I wondered if anybody would like to join me?

God is waiting to form a stronger relationship with us, He is always there for us, His love is so unfathomable that he died for our salvation. So why do we find it so hard to commit time to God?

In our reading today from Hebrews we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice for us, Christ came to earth as a human being, therefore, he understands our weaknesses and shows mercy to us. He has paid the penalty for the forgiveness of our sins with his life, and we can depend on Christ to restore our broken relationship with God. Yet we still won't give him ten minutes a day of our most valuable time.

In our reading from Matthew, we see Herod's fear of the coming Messiah, as he believed that Jesus would take his throne away from him. This couldn't be further from the truth, Jesus wanted to be King of Herod's life, he wanted to give him eternal life, not take it away from him. Perhaps deep down in ourselves we also fear that Jesus may take something away from us if we allow him fully into our lives.

The irony in this feeling or thought process is that if we let Christ in fully he will give us real freedom, peace, and joy. We shouldn't fear Christ we should give him the thrones of our lives, we should build our lives around God and trust him implicitly, yet we find it difficult to attend Church or pray other than on a Sunday because it impacts so heavily on our lives.

It's funny really, we spend so much time trying to control our lives, portion our time up, be happy and healthy, and yet the one thing that could truly change our lives for the better, developing our faith, we can't spare time for, as we are too busy. I say busy, but really if we are being honest, we choose not to, why is that?

Matthew 7:7-12 tells us:

7 'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? 10 Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Ask, Search, Knock, so this year this is my personal new year's resolution - Ask, Search, Knock – and I hope that this will be your resolution also, but how do we go about growing our relationship with God?

Prayer for me is the cornerstone of growing my relationship with God,

without prayer I cannot grow, I cannot hear what God is calling me to do, I cannot allow God to work in my heart and change me, heal me, strengthen me.

Through prayer my faith deepens, I find myself talking to God throughout the day where once I would pray only on a Sunday. So why not try to spend ten minutes of your day in prayer, it's just a conversation, or just spend those ten minutes in Gods presence, allowing him to talk to you. You may decide that its time to attend a morning prayer service during the week, or our Wednesday evening prayer service which specifically focuses on contemplative prayer.

My favourite prayer to grow my faith and relationship with God when I'm making a cup of tea or only have a brief moment to spare is:

- Lord I love you, help me to love you more.
- Lord I believe in you, increase my faith.
- Lord I want you, help me to want you more

This encapsulates the very essence of wanting to deepen my faith, and reminds me that God is in control.

The bible is something we can all commit too daily whether you read a short parable or a whole book, as part of the "search" we should regularly engage with the bible, on our own, in a group, or with friends. Forming a group who commit to reading and studying the bible weekly is a good way to deepen our understanding and faith. Maybe you might like to buy yourself a study bible and fully immerse yourself in the word of God. A good friend of mine gave me my first study bible about three months ago and its been a revelation to me.

We have lots of planned study this year over lent and advent, maybe God is prompting you to join some of these sessions, or maybe God is calling you or a family member into baptism or confirmation.

Confirmation marks the point in the Christian journey in which we affirm for ourself the faith into which we have been baptized and our intention to live a life of committed discipleship. Through confirmation the Church asks God to give us the power through the Holy Spirit to enable us to live in the way of Jesus, so what is holding you back?

What else can we do to grow our faith, the bible shows us the way, in Matthew 22:36-40 when the Pharasiees try to trick Jesus and ask:

'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment.

WOW How many of us can really say we do this? Have we really opened our hearts up to love that much? Are we open to the concept? Have we asked God for help in this area, can we commit this to prayer on a daily basis to allow God to work on our heart and mind?

Jesus then goes on to say "And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

We are to "LOVE our neighbours as ourselves, well that's not a tall order at all is it? What if we don't love ourselves very much, how does that impact this commandment? Well I come back to prayer if we allow God to work on our hearts and open ourselves up to allow God in he will show us how to truly love, he will show us how to truly love.

What else should we do, well we need to try and surrender to God, to be obedient. If we are truly to surrender to God, we need to let him into our lives, we need to stop fighting him at every move, we must listen to God rather than blocking him out. We must trust that God loves us and has our best interests at heart, rather than trusting in ourselves believing we know best, because we don't.

If we want to grow in faith and move on from our childish ways, we need to attend Church regularly, to be with our brothers and sisters in Christ as we give thanks to God and remember Christ's sacrifice for us in the breaking and sharing of bread. When we come to Church we should want to deepen our relationship with God and be in his presence allowing God to shape us and move us on in our faith, to give thanks for his gifts and many blessings. To be supported by our Church family as we journey on.

But in order to allow God into our lives we need to take action, its not just a case of asking and expecting an answer as we carry on as normal, to allow change we need to actively change and that maybe as simple as reading your bible daily, praying daily, committing to Church regularly, giving up some time for God, but unless we make a commitment to change how are we going to change? Christ died for us, for our

salvation, is it too much to ask for us to sacrifice some time to give thanks and grow our faith, to further God's kingdom?

Ask, Seek, Knock, that is my personal new year's resolution and I pray it will be yours too.

I would like to finish this homily with today's old testament reading which reminds us of God's love for us:

Isaiah 63.7-9

7 I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,  
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,  
because of all that the Lord has done for us,  
and the great favour to the house of Israel  
that he has shown them according to his mercy,  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

8 For he said, 'Surely they are my people,  
children who will not deal falsely';

and he became their saviour

9 in all their distress.

It was no messenger or angel

but his presence that saved them;

in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;

he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old

**Amen**

*Kris Seward 1/1/17*