



Second Sunday of Christmas  
Sunday 1 January 2012

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A sermon by the Right Revd Peter Hullah

### Readings: Galatians 4.4-7; Luke 2.15-21

Expand your horizons and go on a course. That generous offer was made by the educational group to which I belong.

It sounded good in theory and a great privilege to be sent to Harvard Business School for a short leadership training course and I confidently got on the plane with 200 pages of pre course reading to do. Having dozed for most of the way and not opened a book, the course seemed less of a good idea.

Sitting in a lecture theatre with men and women from all over the world each one with a major role title was daunting to say the least. Before we could even finish the pleasantries we had the first instruction. On the card in front of you, write one word to describe your leadership style. After 55 seconds of panic, I wrote in pencil decisive, then at second 58, rubbed it out as I wasn't really sure. Luckily I wasn't chosen to read mine out and we did repeat the exercise at the end of five days and it was easier by then – I wrote then innovative – but had to ask a new friend to help me spell it. New Year Resolution 1 – improve spelling.

The learning style was intense, listening and questioning in groups of various sizes. Our views were probed and refined and once the fear had gone, I learnt that I was in the presence of highly motivated people who work very hard, in the main have a real sense of moral purpose and who want to connect with others and talk God as well as business.

And along with new friends, there was one definition which I brought home with me. Half way through the course we explored this sentence - to lead is to use who you are to make change happen.

That dynamic, “use who you are to make change happen” is a phrase which has stayed with me. It's especially valuable today as we turn the page to 2012 for it helps take us from where we are to where we would like to be.

So “Use who you are to make change happen”.

As we worship here after Christmas day the manger scene and the shepherds are fading a little into the past. We have painfully to let go of that as it was 2011 news. Now we have the new child growing with us and together we are going into the future.

That child immediately has found a place within the family, a rank order within the tribe and a name. From somewhere a special name has emerged and aspects of the child's identity are cast and will probably not be changed.

That is the continuity of life, the reproductive process at its mechanical level - unto us a child is born – unto us a son is given and his name shall be called ....

We learn from the single sentence at the end of today's reading from St Luke's gospel that God's child, only a few days old was confirmed into the tribe according to the custom of the day through circumcision.

He was also given the name Jeshua- for that is what he was called in Hebrew. It was the name Mary had been told to give him and she obeyed. Jeshua was in those days a common name full of meaning, powerfully rooted to ensure continuity of tradition. Jeshua –a compound meaning - God and the one who saves - was a well respected name – a name with ancient pedigree.

It was Jeshua Son of Nun who took the mantle from ageing Moses, completed the task of leading the exiles into the promised land and secured his place in history by force of arms and personality.

The name Jesus has come from the Hebrew root to Greek to Latin and finally into English, changing along the way from Jeshua to iesous to Jesus. But the resonance is the same – a combination of noun and verb – God and to rescue or to deliver or to save. And in the very name of God's child comes our expectation. We want, we are waiting for deliverance, for change, for God's change.

From our Old Testament study of Jeshua we think we know what change looks like. For people living in hard times it means rapid external political change to bind together the chosen ones. It means a show of strength, it means raw power combined with an unbroken line of continuity with past heroes. Round Mary and Joseph there were those who wanted a true Jeshua and wanted him now, fully formed.

But what God gives is the unexpected - a Jeshua who surprises. God gives us a child who enters fully into our experience, plays on our imagination and through that transforms us and changes us. God's child is not a prince but a poet. He is powerless in worldly terms yet powerful in an upside down way as a healer and teacher. This is not the old way of things and there is a newness and a difference and a magnetic quality about the child.

The kings are already travelling with high hopes. However, they will find in a strange place a child who overturns their way of thinking, causing them not only to return home by another way but live radically different lives.

Therefore as we look with new eyes at this child at the beginning of a new year, we see change ahead and as fellow travellers with the child we are partners in making that change happen.

And it is the child who is defining the change from day one.

See the world from the manger up rather than from pedestal down and the world is a different place. From that perspective it's what you have in your heart which matters rather than the position you occupy on life's success ladder.

From the manger perspective there is no place for a system which diminishes the weak or excludes those who don't fit in. That is how it will be with God and there will have to be changes, some painful and some joyful.

By giving us a child God takes us back to our own childhood. For in childhood we have a powerful imagination and we all love stories. As children, we are all amazed in an upsized down way at small and wonderful things. As children all of us feel loss, rejection and injustice acutely. But we also know the power of being hugged, forgiven and affirmed. That was and is childhood.

The trick is to retain that sense of childhood as we grow in years. As Picasso puts it so eloquently "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he or she grows up."

The key for us is that our name continues with us from childhood to the end of our days and we want to be known for that and by that. It is our external label and when it's not recognised, we feel hurt.

I particularly like John Peel writing poignantly of his schooldays. “Despite my efforts I failed to impress Miss Jones. So much so that the Headmistress’s report the end of my first term at school read in its entirety “Robin has failed to make much impression at school.””

That failure to remember a name could be me so New Year resolution 2 – remember names better.

Whatever our parents had in mind for us when they chose our name, it was shared between us and God from day one.

When we are confirmed as Christians, we say “God has called us by name and made us his own.” That is God calling us, accepting us and then changing us in ways we may never know.

Our call, our commission is then to use “who we are to make God’s change happen.”

So a New Year resolution – in addition to more exercise, less chocolate, better spelling and remembering names, we should expand our horizons, exploring, testing and questioning like children the changes we can make to the world.

As it was for the Jesus child so it will be for us. The effects of change through teaching and patiently listening to sharing burdens and acting ethically will reshape the social agenda for our society. This will last a lifetime and beyond. And our actions and our prayers may change people in ways we may never know.

Those are the signs of God at work among us his children, who are called and known by name. Those signs are found here at St Martin’s and are evidenced daily from one year to another.

In 2011 this community was very richly blessed. We now turn the page to 2012 and the gospel teaches us that the best is yet to come.

“Use who you are to make change happen” in the name of Jesus and I wish you a very happy New Year.