

May I speak in the name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

How many of us have made New Years' resolutions? Next question. How many of us have resolutions that have already been broken? New Year's Day was on a Friday this year and I came across this tweet by someone called Simon Holland that said something along the lines of: 'Shout out to everyone who said that they would start eating healthily in the new year and have already decided to wait until Monday.' The laughing reactions and comments on the post show that the author of the words was not alone in their feelings on the matter. We often seem to be a people of excuses, trying to find loopholes and I know that I am not innocent myself in this regard, but thankfully we know that our Father in Heaven is aware of this fact and allows us to repent where we go wrong – 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us' – not that I am saying that eating the last of the Christmas cake or opening another tub of Quality Street is a sin of course! The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia* and it is exciting in that it invites people to look towards a new future where old mistakes are left behind and new possibilities open up. It is no coincidence that we celebrate the baptism of Jesus very early on in the new year. Baptism means the repenting of things past and looking towards a new future, being one with Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit.

The language that is used in Mark's gospel to tell us what happened during Jesus' baptism is quite significant and I am going to show that as an impact using this piece of paper. When the paper looks like this, it is open – we can see what is on the paper. When it is like this, it is closed, you can't see what is inside. You can open it again and close it again with no problem, but when I do this, it is ripped. It cannot go back to the

opening and closing again like I did previously, it is changed forever. Mark uses the words 'torn apart' to describe what happened to heaven when Jesus came out of the water after being baptised. I would like to take a moment to consider what that must have been like to experience that. All that was once closed to us was torn apart and any barriers that stood between us and God was removed forever. There are similar references in Isaiah 63 and 64 who prophesied the Messiah's coming, using the words in chapter 64 verse 1: 'Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down'. And that is exactly what happened at Jesus' baptism.

It is also interesting that the spirit coming down is described as a dove. I just have to think of a dove and I think of peace, love or specifically these days, hope. Thinking back to Noah, who after experiencing what must have been the most chaotic period of isolation in what can only be described as a floating zoo – I am sure that there are many of us that can relate to this – to be given that symbol of hope of better times from the dove with the Olive branch. We are all living through a very testing time at present. It is dark, it is cold and the news mostly just seems to be bad, although there are olive branches of hope in the form of the various vaccines already in our communities, the soon-to-be inauguration of the president-elect in the United States and days that will eventually get longer and warmer.

In the words of a popular song sung by Gerry and the Pacemakers:

When you walk through a storm, hold your head up high;

And don't be afraid of the dark.

At the end of the storm is a golden sky

And the sweet silver song of a lark.

Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain,

Though your dreams be tossed and blown

Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart,

And you'll never walk alone.

You'll never walk alone.

The message from God is that we should not lose hope. As stated in Romans 15:13, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.' When you accept God's hope and love, God's Spirit – the Holy Spirit becomes a part of who you are. God's love is within you. It guides you, nurtures you, and fills you with his hope.

Amen

Robyn Connelly, Children & Families Minister

Prayers

I would like you to take the water bottle that you might have with you to support you in your prayers. I would like you to turn your bottle upside down, listening to the sound it makes and if you can see through the bottle, look at what happens to the water inside...

Let us pray:

Eternal God, it feels as if the whole world has changed and yet in you there is stability and the opportunity of a new beginning. So, we pray now for those whose lives have been turned upside down by this pandemic.

We pray for those for whom the lockdown has come as a relief but we pray too for those who now as a result feel desperate, alone and worried.

We pray for young people as their schooling is disrupted, who miss their friends.

We pray for their parents, school staff, and all those who feel overwhelmed.

God of fire, water and dove

Bless them courage, healing and love.

Now, shake the bottle, listening to the sounds of disturbance and disruption.

We pray for countries around the world struggling against the coronavirus and their governments working towards solutions to the crisis.

We pray for the people of a divided America
at this time of political and racial tension and transition.

We pray too for countries around the world
struggling with wars and ethnic violence.

God of fire, water and dove

Bless them courage, healing and love.

*We will swirl our water around listening to and if possible, watching the
whirlpool that forms.*

We pray for those who have been injured
or lost their homes and loved ones in severe weather and natural
disasters around the world;

We pray for those who work in the emergency services,
whose work is dangerous and traumatic.

We pray for those in refugee camps,
those who sleep rough,
those who can't afford to heat their homes.

God of fire, water and dove

Bless them courage, healing and love.

*Now take a sip from the water in your bottle, feeling its coolness and
comfort.*

We pray for those that help to keep us safe and well;

for our precious NHS and its staff, the police, food service workers and
all whose jobs are vital to keep society going.

We pray for one another, our families,
our communities.

May we support those who are unwell or grieving.

In the silence of our hearts, we remember those personal to us in need of

prayer.....
.....

Bless them and keep them and may we share our faith in your Son Jesus in whose name we entrust these prayers to you, saying:

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.