

***Tracks in the Snow* – Ephesians 1: 3-14 7 John 1: 10-18**  
**New Year Sermon for 3 January 2021 by Rev Phil Wootton**

Like many others, I was caught by surprise on Monday morning to see a blanket of snow across the ground. ‘Deep and crisp and even’ summed it up – well, several inches, anyway. Before it’s disturbed, the snow makes a beautiful new landscape, soft and smooth, and all white. Like a new page of a book or a clean sheet of paper, a fresh snowfall offers a new world of beckoning possibilities. Children grasp possibility fastest: snowballs, or snowmen, or sledging – whatever they do will make new tracks in the snow. Grown-ups, meanwhile, worry about slips and falls, or getting the wheels of the car stuck in a rut made by others. In short, it’s a perfect metaphor, as Christmas turns to New Year: the chance to ask, for the year ahead, what new tracks will we make, or are we going to allow ourselves to be stuck in the rut of what has gone before?

Both our Bible passages today are rich and dense and full of fruit, rather like a good Christmas pudding that needs full concentration and a long time to digest. St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians opens with a magnificent hymn of praise for all that God has done for us. Paul may actually have been in prison for his faith when he wrote it, and yet his thoughts are not trapped in his own circumstances but bursting with joy at what God has done. The Prologue to St John’s Gospel, so associated with carol services or Christmas night, is even more rich in its poetry – a profound meditation on what it is for the eternal God to be born a man at a particular point in history. As we put our minds to each of these passages, we find our eyes lifted above the everyday to the mystery of God’s purposes. When we return to the everyday, it’s with new perspectives on all that is most familiar. Doing so, we free ourselves up to make our marks in the snow.

This morning I’m just going to pick up on one theme, touched on both by St Paul and St John – the extraordinary message that through Christ we are children of God. Now, of course, in a sense all human beings are God’s children; if God is our creator, we have the spark of the divine within us (although, for the most part we bury that spark so deep within, effectively to deny any suspicion of divine parentage). The good news that both Paul and John identify is that Jesus, the true Son of God – ‘the only begotten Son of the Father’ – came so that human beings might once more live out their calling to be, themselves, sons and daughters of God.

Paul and John are subtly different in what they say, and it’s worth looking closely enough to appreciate both. Let’s consider Paul first. Paul says we become God’s children through adoption. (Ephesians 1: 5 – ‘In love he fore-ordained us to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ.’) What does it mean? An illustration comes to my mind that was used with my church youth group a long time ago. Imagine, said the youth leader, you’d been caught trespassing on someone else’s land, and you’re dragged before the magistrate. ‘Yes,’ you admit, ‘I was on the property but I was allowed to be there. I was with the owner’s son.’ And then that very son comes forward and says, ‘It’s true. He was with

me; we're like brothers. In fact, we are brothers. Here's the certificate of adoption. He's now part of our family too.'

Any analogy will only go so far, of course. This one, I think, suggests too much it's about avoiding punishment, but it makes its point. In the ancient world adoption was not about caring for a child but about legal status. When adopted, you took on your new father's place and role in society, and that determined your rights and your inheritance. Adoption was used by many a Roman emperor to fix who would be the next emperor. Paul suggests we've been granted an even higher status: God's adopted children. That's no reason for arrogance; it's none of our own doing; it's all Christ's. But in a world that tries to marginalise the role of faith, we should hold our heads up high as we take up the privilege and responsibility to be about God's work. We can dare to make tracks in the snow.

John does not talk about adoption but rather new birth: born of God and given the right to be called children of God. This birth is not a matter of being descended from the right ancestor. It's not about who your father is (or grandfather, or great grandfather). It's not being of the right ethnicity or nationality or class or background, or how you were brought up. This is an act of God that happens when we receive Christ by putting our faith in him. Later on, in John chapter 3, when Jesus talks to Nicodemus, he goes on to explain you need to be born anew by water and the spirit – wash away the old life and accept a new life-force within. New Year is a good time to reclaim that identity as a child of God, continually made new by the Holy Spirit. New tracks are what God's children make.

In a minute or two we'll have the song, 'I am a new creation.' It fits this new birth theme. But it shouldn't just be 'I am a new creation'; more 'we are new creation' – indeed part of God's making all creation new. Or, to shift back to Paul's language, we are family, God's family, brought into the family firm. For Paul, it was vitally important this was the family of Abraham – through Christ, Gentiles sharing with Jews as the people of God's Covenant. For us, we may want to add further diversification – Christians of the worldwide church in every culture, tradition and expression. And, especially in these times of enforced separation, we need all the more to know we are family here, supporting, encouraging and enabling one another to live and make an impact as God's children in these days.

Today, we'll be making use of the Covenant Prayer, so much part of the lifeblood of Methodist churches, and their gift to the rest of us. It's a beautiful and challenging way to start the New Year. The words of the prayer orient us to God, to God's purposes, and living our lives in response to his calling. Let its words speak deeply to you today. At the start of this new year, we remind ourselves who we are and whose we are. In the coming months, as we resume the habits of highly restricted lives, there'll be a temptation to stop thinking for ourselves and accept what everyone else says. But as God's children we need to know the moment to pull ourselves out of the rut, and to make fresh tracks in the snow.