

As we come into this first week of 2016 I wonder how many of us would look back at 2015 and be grateful that it's over? How many would say that 2015 was a great year? What about a mixed year – some highs and some lows?

Why is it that in a group of people who believe in God, there can be such a difference in what we would consider the Christian experience? I want to suggest to you today that it comes down to order. Order is important. The way that we prioritise the world and our lives creates and impacts the life that we experience.

It's like when you go shopping - you don't put the soft fruit on the bottom of the bag because they'll get squashed when the tins go on top. And you never go when you're hungry. Because when you go shopping when you're hungry, you end up with loads of stuff to eat right then but not enough for the week.

It's also the same with language – order matters!

I think order matters to God. I think that a life empowered by the Holy Spirit is not just about what we offer to God, but the order in which we offer it.

The thing is, God must be first. When God is first in every area of our lives then the rest of our lives will be filled with order. What Jesus said in our reading today, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Seek God first, that's the important thing. So today we are going to look at four firsts which I believe have the power to make 2016 your best year ever.

The first first is the first of our day. In the first of our day we need to seek God. Right at the start of the day. We need to take a moment to pursue a relationship with Jesus. We don't need to be legalistic and ritualistic about it, if you wake up and need to go to the bathroom it's okay to do that first. What I'm saying is that before you do anything significant take a moment to speak to Jesus.

We get the picture in Psalm 63:1 *O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water.* Time matters. Priority matters. Order matters. When we look at the four Gospels in the New Testament we see all kinds of repeated behaviour in Jesus' life. He's constantly speaking to large groups of people. He heals the sick and performs other miracles. He repeatedly and consistently got away and got alone with the father. Even in moments where people were still sick and needed him to heal them he made sure to get away, and connect with his father.

Mark 1:35 *Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer.* Before other people were awake. Before the sun rose and creation woke up Jesus needed to connect with his father. If it was important for him how much more important is it for us?

It's not that you can't pray at lunchtime, or in the afternoon, or just before you go to bed, but there's something significant about the first part of your day being where you connect with God. It sets the tone for the rest of the day. It's something that I've not been good at and good to try and do during this year. It's something I would encourage you to do during this year.

So, in the first of the day we are going to seek God. On the first of the week we are going to worship. It is so important that we worship God together as a gathering of his people. Acts 20:7 *On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.* When you read through the book of Acts you see that at the very beginning, the believers were meeting together every day, devoting themselves to fellowship, and prayer, the apostles, teaching, and Communion. It says they met and ate together every day with glad and sincere hearts, and the Lord added daily those who were being saved.

That's quite different to the experience we have of church today. Recent figures suggest that 22% of those who claim an association with the church tried to attend every week. I don't believe that those first Christians were

more holy than us, but I do think they were more honest about how desperately they needed God and each other. Someone here regularly reminds me that being in church gives her a boost for the whole week and that if she is not able to come her week is not the same. You see, we are designed for community. We need the strength, support and encouragement we get from worshipping together. Our souls benefit from gathering for worship and it should be a priority for us. It's not just about getting something for ourselves. It's also about hearing from God and supporting others.

So, the first of the day is for time with Jesus. The first of the week is for worshipping God together and the third first is worshipping God in our giving. *Leviticus 27:30 A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord.*

It is what? It is Holy to the Lord. A tithe. A tenth. The first tenth. It's not even just ten percent of your income Church. It is the first tenth. Remember what I said. God must be first. He cannot not be first. When we put him first the rest of our life is filled with order and provision and blessing. A tithe, not only is it the Lord's. Not only does it belong possessively to God, but he goes the extra mile to say it is Holy to God.

The Church of Scotland has decided that it's not appropriate to ask for 10% because it's too much and yet falling rolls means falling income. We know that the older generation are generally much more faithful in giving and now we have generations of people who have never been taught that giving sacrificially is an act of worship.

You may be listening to this and saying, "Wait a second. For me to give God the first 10 percent of my income first before I pay any other bill, I would have to utterly rearrange every aspect of my life to do that." Exactly. That's the whole point of all of this. The whole point is that we are choosing to rearrange our whole world so that that God is first. I'm not suggesting that it's easy and most of us couldn't do it overnight because of other commitments we have made. But isn't it interesting that we would use the word commitments – when we do our banking and set up standing orders and direct debits we 'commit' to making regular payments to something. What I'm saying is that we need to start committing to God with the first part of our income.

When we have the heart to say, "God you are first. Before you even bless me, I choose to worship you." What do you think that does to the heart of God for his children? I think it inclines his heart to yours.

In the first of our day we seek Him. The first of our week we worship Him together. The first of the month or whenever you get paid we're going to offer and worship God with our tithe. Lastly, in the first of the year we offer a fast. In the first of our year we offer God a fast.

Fasting is about sacrificing nutrition. Denying yourself physical nutrition for the purpose of pressing in to God's presence. People fast for all kinds of different reasons: for someone who sick to be healed; asking God for clarity over a big decision; looking for more of God's presence in their lives.

Fasting is something that occurs throughout the Bible. Moses, Elijah and Jesus, all fasted for a period of forty days. It's not about showing off or being proud about it - it's about getting closer to God. *Matthew 6:17-18 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

Fasting is one of the most misunderstood concepts in the Bible because if you're new to this whole thing, and you say, "Okay I'm going to not eat, and none of us are going to eat much." How is that going to produce anything but grumpy, hungry people? How does that bless God?

Let me explain it with a couple of verses that have nothing to do with fasting, but which I think it helps us to understand better than any other passage about fasting. *Galatians 5:16-17 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you*

*will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.*

Some translations say that the spirit than the flesh at war with each other. I am very confident that we have all experienced that tension between what our flesh, our physical bodies want and what we know is good for us. Our flesh is what our sinful natures craves and so fasting is about denying that appetite what it wants for the sole purpose of feeding what the holy spirit wants. If we really are to live by the Spirit, we need to make sure that the flesh doesn't always get what it wants, whenever it wants. Whatever we feed most becomes most dominant and if we feed our flesh anything it wants, whenever it wants it, then that's what comes to dominate our lives. What does the Holy Spirit long for? Intimacy with the father. Worship, a life of obedient and faith, surrender. When we feed the Holy Spirit we are led and empowerment by him. That is why we fast. So that we would be a group of people that don't just profess a faith in God, but we live a life propelled by Him. It is a life led by God's Spirit.

This year marks a significant moment for us. We are playing our part in a process of change and renewal as part of the wider church. The Path of Renewal process is new for all of us and, while we will be guided in part by the process that has been set in place, it is up to us to discern God's specific purpose for us. That's not my job, or the Session's job – it's our job. We're in it together and all of us bring something to it. We don't know how it's going to work out. For it to succeed we need to learn to listen to God and to do what he says. That's why I'm going to ask you to consider joining me in a fast for 21 days. If fasting is about controlling our desires and handing them to God so that we can be more intimate with Him, then what I'm going to suggest is that on this occasion you don't have to go without food, although that is the usual way to fast. You could choose something else which is 'feeding your flesh' – maybe it is about what you do with your money, maybe it's about what you watch on tv – only you will know what's in your life that needs sacrificing for God so that you feed your relationship with Him. It's about getting closer to God, deepening our relationship with him so that we hear him more clearly.

We're going to think about this again briefly next week and there will be an opportunity to confirm if you're willing to participate – it's anonymous and you can choose what you're willing to fast from so please think and pray about it this week.

In the first of our day we seek Him. In the first of our week we worship Him together. In the first of the month we offer our tithe. And, in the first of the year we offer a fast. Let's commit together to experiencing more of God in 2016.