

**Sermon for Epiphany 3, Magdalen College, Oxford**  
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May I speak in the name of God, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am not much drawn to the making of New Year resolutions. It isn't simply that I know I won't manage to keep most of them. It's more because I do not experience the beginning of January as any kind of new start. It's still the middle of winter, it's cold and dark, I'm usually tired, often ill, my energy is low and the impulse to hibernate is strong. Spring is still some way off, even if the first snowdrops are starting to appear.

May Sarton's poem offers us a gentler way into the New Year: not so much a shopping list of resolutions which we may or may not manage to achieve by sheer willpower, as an invitation to consider our deeper springs of action and desire, our fundamental orientation to the days that stretch ahead of us – not only in this coming year but for the rest of our lives.

**New Year Resolve / To Shove Away The Clutter /**

**To Come Back to Still Water**

The time has come  
To stop allowing the clutter  
To clutter my mind  
Like dirty snow,  
Shove it off and find  
Clear time, clear water.

Time for a change,  
Let silence in like a cat  
Who has sat at my door  
Neither wild nor strange  
Hoping for food from my store  
And shivering on the mat.

Let silence in.  
She will rarely speak or mew,  
She will sleep on my bed  
And all I have ever been  
Either false or true  
Will live again in my head.

For it is now or not  
As old age silts the stream,  
To shove away the clutter,  
To untie every knot,  
To take the time to dream,  
To come back to still water.

I love this poem, its delicate simplicity, its quietness, its invitation to go deeper. Sarton is a writer whose work I have loved for decades since I first came across her *Journal of a Solitude* in my twenties, and then read my way through all her many journals and novels and finally discovered her poetry. A prolific author, her writings expose her own quest for truth to intense scrutiny. She was by no means an easy person: someone of passionate feeling and conflicted desires between her strong need for solitude (every writer is by necessity a seeker of solitude) and her equally strong need to love and be loved, to engage with the outer world. Her journals and her poetry seem to be places where she glimpsed the equilibrium that often eluded her in life.

This poem is, at heart, an invitation to return to centre, to come back to the truth of who we are, to remember what we may have forgotten and to welcome silence into our lives.

The poem offers a series of simple images drawn from domestic life. There is the clearing away of dirty snow to make a path, to reveal the ground beneath – something many of us have done more than a few times this winter and may yet have to do. There is the perpetual work of decluttering both of the mind and of physical space which is a never-ending task for all of us who inhabit the highly pressured spaces of 21<sup>st</sup> century work and social life. At the heart of the poem, taking up the central two stanzas, is the extended image of silence as a beloved cat who sits patiently waiting outside to be let into the house to be fed and to sleep on the bed. As someone who lives with cats, I recognize Sarton's description of the way in which cats gift us with their animal companionship and their uncomplicated, absolute acceptance which can free us to see ourselves for who and what we are. Silence here is seen as the source of our deepest truth – the condition in which we ponder 'all we have ever been either false or true'.

The poem speaks of our perpetual tendency to fall away from the truth of our identity, to forget who and what we are and to need to recall that truth. This state of forgetfulness is one we all recognize, I think. It is part of the human condition of fallenness – not so much a deliberate accomplishment of evil or a willful turning away from the good, as a gradual erosion and erasure of what we know to be true, including the truth about ourselves. The pressure of daily life, the immersion in the many relationships, activities and issues which rightly concern us, can gradually accumulate like so much silt blocking a stream or like knots in a jumper or tapestry that obscure the pattern.

If forgetfulness, this falling-away-from-the-truth-of-who-we-are, is a central reality of the human condition, then it is appropriate that the invitation to 'return' is one we hear again and again in scripture. It appears centrally in both of our two scriptural readings today. Jeremiah describes the apostasy of Israel as a turning aside to crooked ways, a roving or going astray from the straight path, and a forgetting or ignoring of God's ways. There is a repeated call to 'return' to the Lord, to 'come back'; and the Hebrew verb 'to return' has a dual meaning of returning geographically, from one place to another, but also to repent, to turn back to God. This is precisely the meaning of the Gospel call to repentance, or metanoia, which Matthew describes as the essence of Jesus' preaching: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near' (Matthew 4: 17).

The gospel invites us to return – not just once, but many times over a lifetime – to the central realities of God, truth, justice, uprightness, to our own status as God's beloved children. Christian discipleship, with its repeated patterns of daily, weekly and annual remembrance, is designed to bring us back, persistently and gently, to these realities which we constantly fall away from. At our baptism, we – or someone on our behalf – answer a series of questions:

'Do you turn to Christ?' 'Do you repent of your sin?' 'Do you renounce evil?' In essence, these are questions about our basic orientation to life. Which way are we facing? What is our heart's core desire? If we can say that we long for truth, or for God, or for love, even though we know we repeatedly fall away from that longing, we are expressing our desire to repent and to turn to Christ.

The Gospel, I believe, is a call to nothing harsh or strange, but an invitation to clear away the clutter, to shove off the dirty snow, to let the cat in, and to welcome silence with its healing gifts of wonder and truthfulness. As we begin a new year and a new term, returning to patterns of work, study and shared living, I suggest we abandon the effort to drum ourselves up to resolutions we will fail to keep and which will simply make us feel worse about ourselves. Rather, let us resolve to reorient ourselves towards the sources of truth and love and faithfulness, 'to take the time to dream, to come back to still water'.

Amen.