

The Times

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If I'm honest with myself, this time last year I had the same hopes, and the year before and the year before that. The new year is always full of resolutions - to shed a few pounds, sort out that relationship, or change that work situation. The problem is, the needle never really seems to move, and I'm always left with a niggling sense of failure, which leads me to question whether I should even bother trying again.

As we enter 2018 with specific hopes for the year ahead, there is a hesitation for us all because we've been here before. After a few days or weeks, we revert to old patterns and behaviours, and so instead of beginning afresh, we plough on with life as usual.

The 'self-help' movement often claims that if we discipline ourselves in a new habit for 21 days we will be changed. Others will tell you that this is a misunderstanding of the original research, and it actually takes 66 days to make a permanent change. Either way, it's not easy.

So how do we go about creating lasting change in our lives? Lasting change actually starts in our inner world of attitudes, beliefs and values, rather than in our outer world of habits, discipline and behaviour. The law of correspondence explains that our outer world reflects our inner world. So if we want to see lasting change, we should work inside out.

God specialises in lasting change. The Apostle Paul explained to the church in the city of Corinth, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation the old has gone and the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). If we follow Jesus, he will change our life inside out.

Recently I visited a social business at Vineyard Compassion in Coleraine, Northern Ireland and met a man who was working there on day release from prison. He shared his life story with me; in places it was completely devastating and would have crushed even the strongest of us. But a smile began to spread across his face as he told me how he began to follow Jesus and the way his life had changed.

In nearly every family, neighbourhood and workplace there are people who have a story about how Jesus has changed their life inside out. Pew Research says that in 2010, 2.19 billion people worldwide, or 31% of the world's population, followed Jesus Christ. Whilst following Christ doesn't make people perfect, it does make them a better version of themselves – something I know from personal experience.

When I first met someone who talked about 'following Jesus', I found it strange and uncomfortable, yet I was interested and intrigued. Still unsure of what would happen, I began reading about Jesus in the Bible, hanging out with other 'Jesus people' and one day I simply said, "Jesus, I want to follow you". There was nothing particularly wrong with my life but I severely lacked self-confidence and so when I discovered that Jesus not only loved me but also liked me, my world was transformed from the inside out.

Whether we are a person who seems to have everything together on the surface, or someone for whom life has had some more obvious glitches, Jesus offers us lasting change – from the inside out.

The opportunity God provides for a new beginning is not limited to us as individuals either. In the New Testament, there are accounts of whole families whose lives were transformed when they decided to follow Jesus. Jonah tells the story about how a whole city respected God and was changed. God's words "I will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14) cries out, calling on us to humble ourselves and pray to God.

It is tempting to blame politicians for the state of families, our cities and our nation. But it is important to recognise that the most effective change will not come from external sources. Legislation is important but it is not the best mechanism for change. Transformation happens when the hearts and minds of men, women and children are renewed from the inside out.

So as we begin the year, let's not just reflect on the changes that we would like in our own life. Let's consider the changes we would like to see in the life of our family, our city and our nation. Whatever our hopes or resolutions for 2018, the best chance we have of achieving them is when we make changes from the inside out.

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