**Sunday 31st December 2023 Christmas 1 Benefice Holy Communion, Oswaldkirk.**

**In our Gospel today we heard what followed the birth of Jesus both for Mary who ‘pondered the words of the shepherds’ and the shepherds themselves who returned ‘glorifying and singing God’s praises.’ because they had all been told who exactly Jesus was.**

**On this eve of another new year, I'd like you to consider with me this morning the consequence of Christmas for us. I'm not talking about a house that needs to be tidied up, or a waistline that needs to be minimized, or thank you notes that need to be written, or decorations that need to be packed away. I'd like us to consider the consequence of Christmas by considering two questions, ‘Who am I?’ and ‘To whom do I belong?’. These will be the first questions I will consider with my new confirmation candidates when we start classes in a couple of weeks, and indeed, is an opportunity for anyone to consider confirmation of any age, and to be able to affirm their identity as a persona and in the church.**

**In our Epistle this morning, we find St Paul telling the Jews, "You were born under the Law”, and to the Gentiles he goes on to tell them they were slaves to all the false gods, saying “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”**  **What did these Jewish and Gentile converts have in common? Whether through the Law of Moses, or through the worship of false gods, they all sought make themselves slaves to what St Paul refers to as the “elementary principles of the world”.**

**What are these? They are what cause every fallen, human heart, which drove both Jews, Gentiles and every human being from then until now, to embrace the most elementary of sinful ideas that if I just follow my rules, I will be at peace, I will find enlightenment, my true self, or heaven where I will be justified before God. Not so.**

**So, what about you this morning and those two questions, ‘Who am I’ and, "To whom do I belong?" Could you be, this morning, a slave to that self-justifying mentality, focusing more on what you or others must do, or what you or others are failing to do, rather than what God has already done, and who He is, and being thankful? It's easy for us too to depend on our steps, methods and rituals, deeds and affirmations, opinions, and agendas to somehow prove something to God, to others, and to ourselves about our goodness and worth.**

**I suspect all of us experienced gift-giving a few days ago on Christmas and many of us talked about the gift that God gave to us in Jesus Christ. St. Paul reminds us, as he did the Galatians, that another gift can be possible: the gift of belonging and of being truly who you are as a child of God.**

**As the words of a contemporary Christian song puts it, speaking of God giving us this gift out of grace alone, not because of any action on our part; *“Not because of who I am, but because of what You've done, not because of what I've done, but because of who You are.”***

**St. Paul tells his readers, at just the perfect time, the first Christmas was celebrated, and God sent His son into the world, a Son who was to be like us, born of a woman like you and me, born under the elementary principles of this world, like you and me. But unlike you and me, this man was without sin and this man was sent to redeem us, literally to "buy out of", that is, to buy you and me out of slavery to ourselves and separation from God.  St. Paul states the reason for Christ's birth, His suffering on the cross, and His resurrection is that we might receive the adoption as His Father’s children, through faith in His Son. In doing so, He offers us belonging and realisation as to who we are. We all long to belong, don't we? It's part of what it means to be human. We long to belong because we were made for*ultimate belonging,* and yet, we search on our own below for what can only be found above with God. Below is filled with the passing things of this world, the shifting sands of human character and its selfishness. Even the richest relationships cannot satisfy that longing for ultimate belonging. They're not supposed to.**

**Ultimately, because we are always part of the elementary principles of this world, we die. The Law condemns us, but because of His grace, because of Jesus’ offer of salvation, God also offers us the gift of adoption. In other words, He calls us to discover who we really are, and belong to Him. I pray that all of us, in 2024, will learn more and more who we are and grow in the joy of being His and belonging to Him as His children. Thanks be to God. Amen.**