

## Repentance – the anatomy of change

Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Luke 3:7-18<sup>1</sup>

I want to talk today about *repentance*. In doing so I want to just quickly work through our Gospel text and just see what it has to say to us. And in doing this I'm taking as background the short homily I gave at the 9am service last week.<sup>2</sup>

Those of you who were there will recall I looked at the nature of the “joy” promised to god’s people at the coming of the Christ. I noted that this joy was what the people of Israel called God’s *shalom* (their equivalent of the ancient Greek philosophers’ “good life”),<sup>3</sup> and what the Gospel of John calls “the *abundant* life”<sup>4</sup>.

We noted that the scriptural vision of this joy was a very *earthy* thing – something like an over-the-top celebration where everyone had more than enough of everything – a life like the wedding at Cana or like the abundance of family, land and food and drink promised to Abraham and Israel in in the “promised land”<sup>5</sup> in ancient times.

The scriptures everywhere argue that (contra to the examined, disciplined, self-denying life of Aristotle and Plato), this joy has its *source in God*. It is not the product of human reason or effort, but the *outcome* of lives *given over* to serving the one true God.<sup>6</sup> This is what it means when the scriptures talk about living in a *covenant* relationship with the God who judges, forgives, restores and blesses.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NB: These are Advent 3 Cycle C readings.

<sup>2</sup> Joy, repentance, and the Good News – of the coming Christ. See <http://stmichaels.org.nz/assets/pdfs/Joy-repentance-and-the-Good-News-Advent-3-2012-sermon-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See (for example) <http://fmmh.ycdsb.ca/teachers/FO0027452/FO0027453/arisgood.html> and <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics/>

<sup>4</sup> Jn.10:10.

<sup>5</sup> Gen.12:1-2; Ps.133:2; Is.25:6; Ex.3:17.

<sup>6</sup> Josh.24:15.

<sup>7</sup> Jer.31:31-34 c.f. Rom.11:26-27.

Yet, as we hear in today's Gospel (echoing the prophets before him), John sees that the way to this joy is through *repentance* – and this is something that *we* do (even if at *God's calling*), and something that requires of us and amended life as evidence of our change of heart.

“John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!’ ”

What then is the nature of this repentance?

I want to mention just three things about this that stand out from the text.

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**Firstly, we have to name the need:** we have to unequivocally say when God's people fall short<sup>8</sup> of their calling (that is, when we *sin*), and clearly say what is required of us – *repentance*.

John's prophetic role was to call the people of God to *get ready* for the coming of the Messiah – the anointed one who would deliver them from servitude and set them free to enjoy God's promises of abundance. The Lord God's emissary and deliverer, the “anointed one”, was coming to save his people.

The people's God was a *holy* God – a God set apart from and over all other “gods” and non-gods, a God of justice who cannot tolerate evil, yet a God of mercy who restores those who turn to him.

The people of God were, therefore, to be a *holy* people – a people also set apart – if they were to meet with their God and receive God's blessing. They had to be different.

As we just heard, John didn't pull his punches when he issued his call. Why would he? The God the people professed to worship was the one who would come baptising with the *fire* of his very *Spirit*, and if they

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<sup>8</sup> The Greek verb *hamartanō*, used 43 times in the NT, means to “miss the mark” or “fall short” (e.g 1Cor.6:18.). Similarly, *planaō*, used 39 times, means to “go astray”.

were to be restored to their God, they needed to be reminded of this in no uncertain terms:

“I baptize you with water [says John]; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”<sup>9</sup>

This was John’s “*good news*”.<sup>10</sup> ☺ Christ, the holy one from God, was coming and they needed to be ready.

John went further... He warned the people against relying on privilege or any sense of entitlement.

“Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. [And] Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”<sup>11</sup>

In the face of God’s scorching assessment of us, our “natural” response is to self rationalize and claim privilege. How often when faced with our sin do we trot out a plausible explanation of our behavior which excuses us from owning it? “It was my relationship with my mother that made me do it” (poor mother, she’s had a hard time since Freud). “It was my upbringing, my genes, society! Besides, I’m not that bad, I’m hardly a Sinner (with a capital S). I pray. I go to church. I try to do good. I do my best.”

A very experienced pastor said to me recently, “have you ever noticed how when people visit you in your study they always have “issues”, they never have sins; they’re always “working things through” and “processing”, they’re seldom repenting.

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<sup>9</sup> Lk.3:16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Lk.3:18.

<sup>11</sup> Lk.3:8B-9.

But the scripture here is plain. John names the need: only the frank acknowledgement of sin and the call to *repentance* is sufficient to solve the problem of our un-holiness before a holy God. This needs to be said plainly.

**Secondly, we need to *acknowledge* our sin before God and *respond* with earnest contrition.** Let me clear here. I'm not arguing for a wallowing in false guilt, for *feeling* guilty and worthless and sorry for myself. This is not contrition. It says in 2 Corinthians 7:10, "Godly sorrow leads to *repentance*". Godly sorrow leads to change.

Look at the people's response. Three times they ask the prophet, "what then should we do? (v.10) What should we do? (v.12) What should we do" (v.14)<sup>12</sup>

The appropriate response to sin is *contrition*. It is *acknowledging* we have done wrong and, *seeking* the right. This is engine of repentance: a heartfelt *desire* to do the right thing.

Sin is offensive to God.<sup>13</sup> Like those who came to John, we need to frankly acknowledge this and turn to God in repentance. One of the Greek words for repentance is *met-an-o-eh'-o*. It means to change our mind for the better and heartily to amend with abhorrence of our past sins.

This brings me to the third matter arising from this text: **Repentance needs to be *specific* and evidenced by the *works* of repentance that address specific sins.** A generalised "we're sorry", will not do.

"The crowds asked [John], "*What then should we do?*" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

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<sup>12</sup> Lk.3:10, 12, 14.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek noun for sin, *hamartia*, means offence, and is used 174 times in the NT. A breaking of Gods law for which we are culpable.

Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”<sup>14</sup>

There are three groups of people mentioned here: the general crowd (the down trodden and poor of Judah), the tax collectors (the hated *outcasts* of their people), and the Roman soldiers (those completely outside the covenant community though equally hated for their occupation).

Each group is addressed according to their particular sin: the poor according to their selfishness, the outcasts according to their corruption and treachery, the oppressors according to their violence and greed.

Note how each group’s sins are understandable given their circumstances. Who can blame a hungry peasant for not sharing? “Skimming” was how tax collectors made their living. The soldiers were “just doing their job”, there had to be something in it for them given all their years away from “civilisation”.

Yet John’s admonition is unwavering. We need to own our specific sin, acknowledge it, turn away from it and embrace the good. It’s not about blame. Ultimately, it’s not even about grief. It’s about change, about putting it right.

What then should we do?

We read at the end of our passage, “the people were filled with expectation”,<sup>15</sup> if not confusion. There’s nothing better than a bit of hell fire to warm up the crowd. Some thought John might be the anointed one, the Christ, come to save them. They looked for someone, something, to solve their problem.

John, however, points them back to the issue: if they are to avoid the coming judgement of God and, equally importantly, if they are to experience the joy that comes through God’s forgiveness, they should

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<sup>14</sup> Lk.3:10-14.

<sup>15</sup> Lk.3:15.

first look, not to the Messiah, but to *themselves*; they should repent, they should cease to sin and do right.<sup>16</sup>

When sinners do this, when we repent, then we are able meet the holy one of God; when we repent we are able to enter into God's "abundant life", when we repent we experience God's *shalom*.

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<sup>16</sup> Lk.3:16-18.