

Repentance

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O Lord, raise up we pray, your power
and come among us,
and with great might succour us;
that whereas through our sins and wickedness
we are grievously hindered
in running the race set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy
may speedily help and deliver us.

My text can be found in today's gospel from Luke chapter 3, verses 2 and 3:

'The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.
He went into all the region around the Jordan,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance.'

Last week, Advent Sunday, I touched on the theme of regret. The case of Thomas Arnold Kemp – as reported in the Global Edition of the New York Times for Wednesday 14th November – had caught my attention. Back in 1992, he'd robbed a student of \$200 and in the process killed him; 20 years later, in April this year, he'd been executed by a lethal injection. Sadly, his last words were: "I regret nothing." This morning, therefore – if you'll forgive me –, I'd like to return to the notion of regret but this time through today's text from Luke's gospel **proclaiming a baptism of repentance.**

John the Baptist preached a gospel of repentance. A voice crying in the Wilderness, as Isaiah had foretold, John was preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. And the way to make straight his way was to bring about a change of heart in the people. At the heart of Judaism is a vision of purity. The whole of the Jewish food laws are about being kosher, eating only the things that are ritually clean in the sight of God. Blood, bodily fluids, dead bodies, all render those who touch them or are touched by them ritually unclean and there is an obligation to wash oneself properly and thoroughly before one can stand with the gathered congregation in the presence of the Most High.

No surprise, then, that John the Baptist practised baptism, a ritual immersion in water that reflected the Jewish ritual baths – the mikvahs. At the wedding at Cana in Galilee, those six large water jars with room for at least 20 gallons of water were designed to store water for just such a purpose. In preparation for such a cleansing, John demanded true repentance from those who came to be baptised, washed clean, in the Jordan.

So what is repentance ? Regret ? Regret certainly, the regret that starts with a recognition that what we have done is wrong; that what we have done has fallen short of the mark. Repentance starts with a recognition that we've got it wrong and an acknowledgment of our short-comings. Having admitted that we've screwed up, we ask to be forgiven. We come to God in prayer and we tell him what he knows already: what we've done and our sorrow for what we've done. Recognition and acknowledgement leads to saying sorry. Because we are genuinely upset by our wrong-doing and we want to start again and try to better

next time, we are forgiven. I want to say that Christianity is a religion that centres on salvation, the forgiveness of our sin because God loves us, has made us in his image, knows each one of us intimately and wants to welcome us home. But he allows us the space to find us ourselves, the space to be the people we could be by giving us the space to make mistakes through wrong choice. But thanks to his grace, we can come back to him and say sorry – just as the prodigal son came to his senses in a foreign pigsty and walked home, barefoot, in rags, to say sorry. And his dad met him while he was still on the road home !

Repentance then is a vital part in knowing who we are and what we've done. Repentance is to acknowledge what we've done and to take responsibility for our actions. Repentance is saying sorry in the confidence that we will be forgiven. Not to regret, as Thomas Arnold Kemp did, is to fail to accept God. It is not God who rejects us but we who reject him !

No regrets – oh yes I have. I wouldn't be human if I didn't !

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

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G: Sermon 27 : Repentance

