

Repent

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God, the giver of life,
whose Holy Spirit wells up within your Church:
by the Spirit's gifts equip us to live the gospel of Christ
and make us eager to do your will,
that we may share with the whole of creation
the joys of eternal life.

Our text today may be found in Luke's gospel, chapter 15 and verse 7:

**'there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents
than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.'**

For the second Sunday in a row, I need to apologize to you for failing to preach on one of the set texts of the day. Last week, my excuse was my desire to preach on angels, having missed the chance to do so on Michaelmas. This week, my reason to preach on something else dates from my sermon on 15th September on 'The Parable of the Lost Sheep' and 'The Parable of the Lost Coin'. The sermon had majored on the surprising truth that God loves us, that he never gives up on us and that he is ready and waiting for us to come back home to him. But one thing first is needful: the willingness and readiness on our part to have change of heart, to change how we see things: to repent of what we've done by being sorry for where we went wrong.

Jesus concludes ‘the Parable of the Lost Sheep’ with the words that are our text today: ‘there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.’ You may remember that Bishop Tom Wright suggests that the second half of the text is in fact Jesus being ironic. Of course, there is great joy in heaven over a sinner repenting but the hidden irony may be found in the idea of 99 righteous folk not needing to repent. Everyone does no matter how good they are because, sad-to-say, no one in this life is ever perfect except Jesus and possibly the Blessed Virgin Mary .

So what does the word repent actually mean ? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, its root in English is the Latin word, ‘paenitere’, via the Old French word, ‘repentire’. The OED defines repent as ‘to feel contrition, sorrow or regret for something one has done or left undone; to change one’s mind with regards to past action or conduct through dissatisfaction with it or its results. It is related to the word penitent and penitence. In the New Testament, the word in Greek is μετανοεω (metanoeeo) meaning to have a change of mind, another mind, to think differently.

So what in fact does it mean to repent ? ‘The Parable of the Prodigal Son’ tells us clearly – the part where the young man has reached rock bottom, a good Jewish boy who has fallen on hard times, who’s wasted all his money and is now forced to work as a swineherd looking after pigs ! He’s so hungry, he is forced to scavenge food amongst the pig’s swill ! Gross or what ? But at his lowest point, the boy comes to his senses. He sees clearly his situation, the hard, harsh facts of life: that his father’s hired hands have enough to eat while he is starving. So he

resolves to go home, to ask for a job from his dad, not as his father's son – he no longer feels worthy to be considered as such – but simply as a servant.

So what exactly is going on? Firstly, it is the realisation that he has screwed up – big time. That what he thought was a good thing to do was in fact a big mistake. Party-time might be fun; sex can be fun; but the pleasures of eating, drinking and making merry can lead to a massive hangover. And so the boy has a change of heart. He admits he's gone wrong, he is facing up to the fact he's gone wrong and now he is going to go home to confess to his father, to tell his dad face-to-face, that he was in the wrong and that he is sorry. Repentance, then, is simply a change of heart, a sense of regret at having done wrong, an acceptance and an expression of guilt and a desire to do better in future.

And there we have it. But, sad-to-say, not everyone can or will say sorry, not everyone can or will admit they are in the wrong. With the arrogance of ignorance, with the delusion of perfection, with contempt for the feelings of other people whom we may have wronged, it is possible not to see that we need to repent. The problem for the 99 righteous of 'The Parable of the Lost Sheep' is their belief of having lived the good life according to the precepts of the Torah that have no need to repent. An extreme example might be someone like Hitler who he never considered his persecution of the Jews as evil so that it would probably never have occurred to him that he needed to say sorry for what he had instigated. It's hard to say sorry if you don't feel you have anything for which to apologise.

So let me leave you with the good news and the bad news. The good news is we can; the bad news is we can choose not to. The good news is we can repent: we can come to our senses, have a change of heart, say sorry and try to do better in the future. The bad news is we may fail to repent: we may never see that really we are less than perfect, that truly any blame could ever be attributed to us, that actually we ever need to apologize or to say sorry simply because we couldn't possibly ever be in the wrong.

I believe that we always have a choice. Let's be sorry instead of being 'sorry' because we're not !

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

13th October, 2013

G: Sermons 28 : Repent

