

Sermon for 8.12.19

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In the first reading Isaiah prophesies about the coming of the future king of the peaceful kingdom where the wolf shall live with the lamb and the nursing child will play over the hole of the asp. The future king will have such wisdom understanding and counsel he will be independent of foolish advisers. He will rule with perfect justice that leads to perfect peace.

The Psalm is a prayer for guidance and support for the king.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul's exhortation is that gentiles and Jews should with one voice glorify God for Christ has been given to us to confirm the promises given to Israel.

Then we come to the gospel and John the Baptist's call to repentance because the kingdom of God, the peaceful kingdom, has drawn near.

Today I would like to talk about repentance.

We are familiar with the call: repent for the kingdom of God is at hand – proclaimed at the beginning of the gospels, first by John and then by Jesus.

The very fact that it is at the beginning of the gospels points to its importance. Many believe repentance is at the heart of the Christian faith. We proclaim our own repentance – every Sunday – as we have done this morning in our confession - but sometimes I wonder how we understand the way of repentance. What it means and what it delivers.

From my experience in ministry and particularly as a spiritual director, repentance is something that is largely misunderstood - something that we may tend to shy away from, something we even fear. I believe this is a consequence of it being associated with blame and shame, embarrassment and unworthiness. There has been, and still is, I believe, very little insight offered about the wonder of its virtues.

I remember back to my childhood days and Sunday school when we were taught about John the Baptist. I imagined him to be a big man who dressed in a funny way, ate awful things and called people bad names. This man, we were taught said that repentance was what we had to do when we'd been naughty - the very thought of it frightened me.

I can remember my young thoughts ran a bit like this – *Oh I've been naughty, that must mean God doesn't like me – when I repent – when I'm sorry – God might like me again, but what if I don't do it right - that will mean God will never like me.* I wonder if when we grow into adulthood, what we learned in those tender years, just gets bigger as we do.

The reality of the way of repentance is not meant to plunge us into feelings of shame and self-worthlessness. It is meant to do the opposite, to cleanse and free us to grow.

It is not something to fear! But rather something to embrace because it is the first and necessary step on our journey of transformation. Without it, our inner voices can remain seemingly superior and in an elevated position, when in truth they are the voices of our woundedness and fear of change.

Repentance is the opposite of denial - as are their outcomes. Through repentance we accept and seek forgiveness for our sin and a path forward can then come into vision. Denial on the other hand, allows sin to be ignored and continue on unchanged and unchecked. No path forward is able to come into vision, because it has been deemed unnecessary.

Repentance is the invitation to change in attitude towards sin and to walk in a new direction of righteousness - and one of the greatest blessings we discover, is that as the process of transformation circles back through our lives again and again, our ability to detect the need for correction increases. We get better at it in other words and as this happens, so does our capacity and comfort level in completing the task. Repentance, therefore an integral part of our communion with God where we are accompanied and nurtured.

In the New Testament we are given examples of this nurture in the stories that expound the key elements of repentance, and the wonder that can flow from it.

The first key element, as we might expect, is to feel sorrow for our sin. We remember how the lost son in that beautiful parable of the prodigal son felt great sorrow when 'he came to his senses' and said 'I have sinned against heaven' - and when the tax collector prayed to God to have mercy on him, a sinner.

Another key element is that we are to turn away from sin - like in the story of Zacchaeus who stopped his cheating ways and the rich man who gave up his attachment to material possessions.

We are also to shift the course and motivation of our life; for repentance is not only to affect our mind, rather, positive change is to take place, and we are to trust completely in the grace of God, as did the lost son as he made his way home to his father and as did the tax collector in submitting himself to God's mercy for forgiveness.

In the New Testament repentance is presented as both a gift of God and the responsibility and duty of every person. Just imagine the outcome when these key elements are implemented not only on a personal level but on a broader one.

Our lack of good stewardship for the planet will be addressed, appropriate change will take place and a new direction sought. And also in the church. How different things will be when our sins are repented of when they occur rather than when they are found out and great damage has already been done. How blessed the church will be when we grow through repentance and follow a newness in Christ.

As John the Baptist reminds us in the gospel reading, we are gifted with the Holy Spirit in Jesus - the one whose way John came to prepare.

We, therefore are not alone and we are loved more deeply than we can imagine. So when we hear the call to repent and believe for the kingdom of God has drawn near, may we be filled with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord be with you.