

Repentance and salvation

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Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Pet 3.8-15a; Mark 1:1-11

When Rob and I were talking about sermons for this year's Advent Season, it seemed that I was destined to give this one which is the second Sunday in Advent. Without missing a beat Rob said something like "Advent 2 is always about the John the Baptist" — and, guess what, he was right! I think he might have done this before ...

So, I took this as a sign, and today's sermon will be revisiting everyone's favourite topic ... which is, of course, — repentance! But when John preached on repentance, he was also preaching about salvation too. So we'll find ourselves reflecting on the meaning of salvation too. Sounds fun, doesn't it!

I thought an interesting way of getting into this might be to put ourselves in the position of considering how we might personally go about trying to explain the idea of repentance, and why it is important, to a non-Christian friend if she ever asked. Not only is this useful if that ever happens, but it also helps put us on the spot and consider what repentance (and salvation) really mean to us. Take it with a pinch of salt though, because of course in practice it is the Holy Spirit that moves people to repentance which is often a "heart" sort of thing rather than a "head" one.

Anyway, let's start. If we get past first base, I think the discussion will probably revolve around some basic questions such as: what is repentance and why is it important? and how should I go about it? So let's start with Q1.

What is repentance and why is it important?

We could give the textbook answer which is pretty much the one that John the Baptist gave : repentance is making a decision to turn away from sin, and towards change. It involves examining our particular sins and doing something about them. The main reason John gave for why we should do this is that it is necessary for our salvation.

Now the problem with the simple textbook answer is that it won't mean much to our post-modern, non-Christian friend, and indeed it may well confirm her prejudices about the dourness of Christianity and its always going on about sin — particularly if she doesn't feel particularly sinful. And in particular, if we tell her the point of the exercise is salvation, she will probably want to have some idea what it means to be "saved". What do you think salvation means?

In pondering this it might be helpful to work through three "models" about what salvation might entail. These will hopefully get us thinking.

Salvation model 1 is what I call, somewhat cheekily, the "bank balance" model. While there is an element of truth in it, I don't like it much in its pure form — which is why the following will sound to some of you like a slightly unfair caricature.

The way Christianity and salvation is often explained to people to me sounds like a kind of bank balance in which each person during their life has been running up a long list of bad deeds (a.k.a. "sins") that God essentially sees as "debts" that somehow need to be paid for. This all happened because a long time ago someone called Eve was disobedient and ate some fruit she shouldn't have — and therefore we have original sin. Salvation amounts to getting the bill squared away before you die, otherwise you are damned, probably to burn in hell. In this model, Jesus' suffering on the cross is in essence the ink on the "debt paid" stamp and

repentance (which on this view tends to mean really regretting having done the bad things) then becomes what you need to do to avail yourself of Jesus' gift.

As I said — a bit of a caricature. While the story about our sinfulness may be true, it is certainly not the whole truth. Unfortunately, though, the potted version I just gave IS the PRIMARY way Christianity is often presented to outsiders — I can point you to scripts on internet websites to prove it! It is actually no wonder that we find ourselves in a situation where large chunks of society think it's all weird and a waste of time. Personally, I don't think I can make the "bank balance" model sound either credible, nor particularly edifying — at least not by itself...

But fortunately, at the other end of the spectrum is a much more interesting, radical and exciting model of Christian salvation — which happily also happens to have better pedigree. This sees salvation as being about transformation and growing towards union with God. In this transformational view, we are not so much being saved FROM something (ie. damnation), as being saved FOR something (transformation in the Spirit).

St Paul is right into this stuff. A good example of this comes from his second letter to the Corinthians:

“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” (3:18)

Now that really is an interesting idea that might just get the interest of our friend. That we are spiritual beings whose true potential is way beyond anything we can currently comprehend, and that we are on a transformational path, through various states of glory, into becoming the same image as our creator.

The Orthodox church uses the Greek word theosis for this. Theosis is word that means our essential being is permeated with God. Striving for theosis was what the early churches thought our earthly lives were supposed to be about.

In this view, we keep on repenting because our sins that are the things that are blocking our progress into transformation. St Paul's favourite icon of the Christian life is not a bank balance — which I suspect he would have seen as an example of legalism.

But he still makes it clear that sin remains a problem for us. I may want to take this journey towards God, and indeed God may be continually calling me to transform, but my little (and not so little) daily sins are like rocks along the path, hindering me from drawing closer. To the extent we don't see or address them, we potentially slow down reaching our full potential in Christ.

This is maybe why Paul's favourite image was the intensely practical one of ourselves as athletes training for a race — the great race of transformation in Christ. On this view, repentance is maybe best seen as an important training tool. It is how we examine all the things that are preventing us from performing and developing.

For the baptised and seriously practicing Christian, I think this is in fact the best way to view repentance. It is something we practice at over and over again and hopefully get better at in the way a professional athlete trains their body.

But I doubt we have quite yet convinced our non-Christian friend to repent. She may agree that this sounds like a more attractive and reasonable sounding idea than the bank balance approach. But, she might say, although my current life may not be perfect, why should I go to

all that trouble just on the basis that some people 1900 years ago said that transformation was possible.

We need to find a way of explaining “the problem” with our current lives as well as pointing to transformation. The best metaphor I have come across to explain “the problem” is that we are, spiritually speaking, ill. We have an invasive disease that is slowly killing us. The symptoms of this sickness are manifested in all sorts of actions we take and thoughts we mindlessly follow. It is those symptoms — our actions and thoughts — that are called sins.

But the CAUSE of this sickness is actually the fact that we are slaves to a wide range of urges and have lots of false views about the way things are.

Those urges — which the early church called demons and the “passions” — include raw bodily urges like gluttony, greed, lust — which are hard to beat in terms of raw power; mental demons like anger, and sloth and acedia. There are also spiritual demons such as pride and vainglory. These primary passions also mix to produce a palette of more complex urges such as competitiveness, judgementalism, envy, selfishness and so on.

We are slaves to the passions because we don’t understand how they work in us, we are conditioned to following them, and we have a weak and flawed will.

For example, when I find myself having just blown my top at someone, I usually somehow manage to delude myself that I chose to do this — and that they deserved it! But in fact, 99 per cent of the time the actual process is nothing like this at all. An urge to be angry and lash out arose within me, and I either just acted or chose to indulge the urge. The demon won. They usually do.

The vast majority of the time I know that I just act, without much watchfulness. So who is the master and who is the slave in this house that is me? That is the disease. It is slavery to the passions.

The long term consequences of slavery to the passions is that they become progressively more entrenched, and we risk ceasing to exert any meaningful power over them. We have become the puppet of a lot of urges that are themselves programmed into us by the world. And we find we are never really content, but don’t know why. We behave badly and often don’t even see it. We are totally caught up in an illusion that we exist independently of God. In a real sense we have become nothing more than the demons and passions that are pulling at the strings. At this point, John the Baptist would say, uncompromisingly, that you are nothing more than a dried out husk. And he is probably right. St James said in his letter that the consequences of sin full blown are death. That is what he meant.

And this helps us see what salvation is about and why repentance is important. Salvation is the process by which we are healed from this slavery to passions and being healed. We will continue to sin — indeed we will probably become much more aware of this fact. But hopefully as we improve we start being able to live as we were meant to live — and this is where the transformation we talked about earlier comes in. Jesus is not only our physician, he is also our helper and rescuer and transformer, and he helps us reach out to others.

Repentance is indispensable to this healing process. Initially it is the recognition that we are ill, the decision that we want to get better, and the decision to visit the doctor. Later it provides much of the energy and the basis for ongoing diagnosis along the way. Repentance is the gateway and a good deal of the path.

So there we have some approaches to question 1 — I actually think it needs all three models, but particularly model 3 to make sense.

Hopefully our friend, prompted by the Holy Spirit, is now gaining some realisation that there may at least be a real issue to address. So her next question is probably going to be : so, how do I repent?

The ideal would be that our friend is at this point immediately moved by the Holy Spirit to a complete change of heart, but alas not all of us are given the gift of repentance in that form. More prosaically, I think I would explain that for me repentance is more a discipline and an art, rather than a science. It is personal, and it depends quite a bit on where you are in your journey.

The basis and starting point probably starts with something coming out of bank balance territory. A standard repentance procedure would be to reflect on your sins as honestly and fully as you can; if possible listing them with as much accuracy and detail as you can (because one of our favourite avoidance techniques is generalisation — that is why we need to acknowledge our specific sins); doing your best to feel genuinely sorry about them; asking for forgiveness properly; and then making a genuine commitment to try not to do them again. Done properly this kind of repenting has a cleanliness and honesty about it that can be a good and useful restorative.

But we then need to move on. As we move into a more transformational view of salvation, repentance means continuing to do a lot of the same steps as I mentioned above, but with a different attitude. We acquire that sense of an athlete in training. In particular, we realise the benefits in our life of continuing to do it, especially as it becomes allied to other disciplines such as prayer or meditation and we see why fasting in some form is interesting and useful.

Repentance then takes on a kind of a work-in-progress creative dimension in which I become interested in figuring out how I work; why I keep on running up against stumbling block X; how the passions work in me and why I fall for them; and has me see how I actually interact with other people. It's not always pretty. In fact we'll almost certainly be horrified as the consequences of our past behaviours really sink in, and at how stubborn our conditioning really is.

I also become more watchful of what I am doing and thinking. But interestingly, at the same time, probably more relaxed too, because as soon as we become more in tune with how the passions are working within us, we generally become a little less enslaved to them and the background sense of compulsion starts to lift. I also start to see over time just how illusory these passions are too — their power comes from their ability to ensnare and create illusion. A repentant mind starts to be able to dispel the enchantment they cast.

And healing approach towards repentance brings the two others together and makes sense of them. Self-help books often urge following your dreams, and your heart. The healing repentance view is actually the opposite. As the confession in the morning and evening prayer service states the problem : “we have followed too much the devices and desires of our hearts”. I really like that reference to the devices of our hearts — which gets at those unrecognised patterns that get us to sin without necessarily desiring to. Healing repentance is a kind of deep diagnostic scepticism about one's own urges. The repentant mind starts to value obedience, in part because it is such a useful counter to the slippery invasiveness of the passions. The penitent mind becomes increasingly interested in any kind of grasping feelings, or self-delusional lies. Rowan Williams (the Archbishop of Canterbury) came out with a line that I liked. He said that we need a deep commitment to the “truthful awareness of our frailty”.

As healing progresses, repentance does work its way from the head to the heart. It is the heart of course, that ultimately has to learn how to surrender and repentance is the way through.

So hopefully this has provided some thoughts for considering your own approach towards repentance this Advent. My answers might not be your answers, but even if you disagree that may be helpful in deciding what you plan to do! In any event, it hopefully shows why the figure of John the Baptist, who is in his honesty and intensity an archetype of repentance, rightly towers over the beginning of our liturgical year in Advent.

One last final thing we can say to our friend : one of the good things about John, repentance and Advent, is that you don't even need to be a Christian to do these things. Advent is the time before Christ arrives when the way is being prepared. A repentant stance is in fact useful to everyone no matter what happens, because its healing and transformational qualities are an open gift.

It is as though, as Isaiah put it, you are making straight a way in the desert for the coming of later truths, or levelling out the uneven places in your soul ...