

## *Advent repentance*

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Third Sunday in Advent, 14th December 2008

*Isaiah 61.1-4, 8.11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5.12-28; John 1.6-8, 19-28*

I was talking to a colleague at work during the week about the whole December experience. Like many people, she said she increasingly finds the whole December thing pretty stressful. In our culture this is the month for (often drunken) end of year parties; for frenetic shopping expeditions to buy all those things we are expected to buy for family and friends (but which we increasingly know they don't need); for getting in provisions in preparation for Christmas, which will be a time for over-eating; and maybe for pondering forthcoming family encounters — which may be pleasant or worrying prospect, depending on what is going on in your family. As we talked about it, my colleague admitted that increasingly she just wanted to run away over Christmas itself, because it was getting too much. And she is a Christian!

Even at Calvary Hospital last week, during our little St P's outreach service, we had an interesting chat where one of the two visitors we had was wondering how it was practically possible to do a "sombre" (her word) thing like thinking about repentance in December while all those pressures are around us.

Which had me wondering — how did our culture get to this point? How is it that the lead up to Christmas has become a time of stress for many people; an oddly barren time, despite all the superficially festive gloss? And all this empty excess is happening in a world where there is so much need.

I finished my Advent sermon last year with a reading from a beautiful letter of the late Father John Main. Not only is this generally good — and indeed the quiet dignity of his prose stands as counter to the worldly mayhem outside — his letter also gives some specific clues as to the source of our wider cultural malaise:

As the four week period of preparation for Christmas draws to a close and we approach the feast itself I would like you to know that we wish you much joy and deeper peace as we are led more deeply into the mystery of the Lord's birth. Our period of preparation for celebrating the mystery is itself a joyful time, because there is a quietly deepening understanding of whose birth it is we celebrate and just how eternal an event is involved. Each year, it seems to me, the mystery of this birth becomes greater and yet the greater it grows, the closer it seems to come to us. In a society that seems to have lost so much of its capacity for peace and so much of the peacefulness needed to prepare quietly for anything, we run the risk of being left only with the worship of the instantly visible, the immediately possessed, of being left finally only with the dryness of the instantly forgotten....

Let's pause there with that telling piece of diagnosis, and worrying prognosis: "in a society that seems to have lost so much of its capacity for peace and so much of the peacefulness needed to prepare quietly for anything, we run the risk of being left only with the worship of the instantly visible, the immediately possessed, of being left finally only with the dryness of the instantly forgotten."

That's a large part of it, I think. As a culture, we have lost a lot of our capacity to prepare quietly — and maybe even worse, lost our capacity to recognise that fact, and even why it might be important. As a result, we've ended up largely worshipping the instantly visible — the material things of the world, those things that look tangible and that we *think* we can possess; and we're each addicted to our own form of stimulation.

One of the points that religion makes is that we all end up worshipping something whether we realise it or not — we can't really help that. Worship — which in part means the things we show by our actions we regard as being worthy of respect — ends up being a question of where do we direct our attention and our desires and our striving. Is the object of our worship in this sense something real, or something essentially unreal — in other words, idols?

Is it then any wonder that the result of all this December activity can end up seeming so pointless after the event — the “dryness of the instantly forgotten” as Father John so nicely put it. Really, how many of those toys and pointless gifts will be even remembered in 6 months time?

It's easy to just blame retailers and the media for having “stolen” the spirit of Christmas. While there is some truth in that, maybe we should try and look deeper. Maybe by the time Christmas Day comes around it's all too late. Maybe the problem is in the lead up, in the preparation time.

It's interesting that there are five main themes to Advent : The four of our wreath —Hope, Peace, Joy, Love all seem nice enough. The fifth one — repentance — seems at first somewhat dissonant. Maybe, though, the reason we as a culture can't prepare quietly for anything is we don't see the link between repentance on the one hand, and the other four. The world has taken the other four and sentimentalised them. It hasn't gone in for repentance at all though!

One price of that is that is the loss of any real ability, or even sensibility, to do any kind of real or edgy self-introspection. While the culture has embraced psychotherapy and self help stuff in spades. While these can often be useful and important, they are also somewhat self-centred activities. The culture hasn't really gone in at all for a deeper questioning of our underlying assumptions, about ourselves and our self-centredness. Maybe part of the way of getting off the spinning lab rat treadmill of the December nonsense is in fact to do something quite counter-cultural — to actually listen to John the Baptist and his message?

So it is worth at this point pondering what repentance is, and is not. It is not (at least in my book) about medieval self-flagellation; self-indulgent guilt trips; or standing around in sandwich boards saying the end of the world is nigh. I only say that because those caricatures are what some people do think it involves. Remember, even our Anglican visitor at Calvary Hospital thought the idea was “sombre”.

Rather, in thinking about what repentance is, it is worth looking at the Hebrew and the Greek meanings of the words, which sort of gives the range of ideas:

The main Hebrew word for repentance — *teshuvah* — means to return : we are walking down a (wrong) pathway, and we turn around and start coming back.

The Greek word for repentance — *metanoia* — literally means to change your mind. *Meta* — change. *Noia* — mind. And this is change in the sense of transformational change our minds — which is in fact a phrase St Paul uses.

So putting these range of meanings together — repenting means something involving turning around, and making a choice to enter onto a transformational path for our minds and hearts. It's significant that all of the four gospels all give John the Baptist a prominent part right at the beginning of Jesus' own story. In fact in Mark and John's gospels John the Baptist is the first character to appear, and, as we heard today, gets a very significant role. Why? Surely it's because the gospel writers saw John and his message as being a critical and early part of our pathway into transformation in Christ.

It seems that hearing at some level of our being the call to change, and then responding to it, is a precursor to letting the magic that was Jesus life and his message start to change us. It's why we hear John's story even before we learn of Jesus' arrival. It's a repentant attitude in the heart that helps prepare the ground for the sowing of the seed. Making the rough places plain and all that.

A clue to how this might actually work comes from the Greek word for sin which is *harmatia*. This literally means to miss the mark in the sense of an archer shooting arrows and missing the target. I like to think of repentance as mainly being like making a decision to stop just drifting along and absorbing what the surrounding culture tells me to do and to be, and instead to become an archer. If we do that seriously we become interested in our own archery skills. We start realising that there is indeed a mark to be hit. We don't like missing the mark, but when we do, we acknowledge what has happened, and become interested as to why that happened. In short we become truthfully interested in ourselves and how we work — about the desires and devices of our hearts as the Morning Prayer Confession puts it — and we become interested in dissolving the myths we spin about ourselves to ourselves.

When John the Baptist — and indeed Jesus — talked to people about repenting of their sins, yes, they did mean of the individual things that they may have done. But this is because one of our (or at least my) favourite subconscious strategies for avoiding change is to generalise. I find it quite easy to ask for general forgiveness — for example to say something like “Lord, please forgive me for being incredibly selfish”. As that is definitely true, this is progress. But it's harder, but generally more useful in actually changing, for me to try and recall all the particular instances where during the day I have been selfish in practice; to ponder the consequences; to seek forgiveness (which is a kind of integration in fact); and to think about the circumstances and triggers and how I might in practice prevent that kind of thing happening in future.

Maybe that is sombre — although I think maybe sober is a better word. But it is also liberating. It is how we actually become, with the Lord's help, better archers. It also the thing that teaches us humility as we start to see the extent of the problem. I remember a line from Sister Wendy Beckett — you know, the nun that does those art commentaries — that she said that she had discovered she was like an onion — just after she had peeled back one layer of self-centredness she discovered another layer underneath. Maybe that is why John the Baptist said that he was not worthy to tie Jesus' shoe laces. As an expert repenter, he had started to find out who he was.

Oddly, if we start to take this change thing seriously, we do in fact start to change. Doors open. The seed starts being sown and grows underground “how we do not know”, as we water it. Help does come. We start to see how so much of our lives is in fact just a script we are following dictated by the world around us. We start to see how addicted we are, and maybe even how our notions of happiness might be a bit shallow? All that language from Isaiah we have been hearing about over the last few weeks about unexpected flowerings and God's promises being fulfilled are beautiful, but they all have a kind of desert edge to them — which is one reason they are so beautiful.

We might even start to become more thoughtful, contemplative and nicer people as we start to walk the path of change with Jesus — and joyful that this path exists — a beautiful pathway of liberation from slavery and of self discovery, and of transformation into something potentially extraordinary — and not only of us but of those around us too.

Of course repentance is not just about the beginning of the story — it goes with us right to the end as we learn who we are, and unlearn all we thought we were. We hear the lessons ever year because we have to keep on coming back to it : the world sucks us back in like gravity.

John the Baptist towers over the beginning of the Christian path for a very, very good reason.

We can't finish without mentioning what I regard as the essential Advent companion to repentance — which is quietening down. Remember when the Angel Gabriel first visits Mary and makes his big announcement, Mary's first response is not, in fact to say anything. Rather, she ponders to herself — what kind of message is this? Part of our preparation should also be trying to find ways to still our souls so we can listen for, and tune into at another level of our being, a very strange message about how we can be rescued and set from our mental, emotional and spiritual slavery to the things of the world and our own conditioning. It is in silence that the seed of this path is a baby born in a hidden and rejected place. It is there that we sense the joy and wonder of Christ.

The words of the 3rd verse of the carol “O little town of Bethlehem” capture this beautifully:

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven  
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin  
Where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in.

With that, let me finish with the rest of the quotation from Fr John Main's letter:

If we are to know the truly spiritual quality of Christmas, the meaning of our celebration and ritual at home or in worshipping communities, we have to know what it means to enter the space where celebration becomes possible with prepared and peaceful hearts ... As we prepare, and as our more materialistic expectations and possessiveness drop away, it dawns on us that the great event we are preparing for has preceded us. The great liturgy has begun in spirit and in truth. (John Main — *The Present Christ*, p.33)  
Amen.