

For Love of the World



Session 1: “Repent and Believe the Good News” (Mk 1:15)

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Gospel = Mark 1.9-15

Pattern = Denial

Practice = Courage

Discipline = Prayer

When I was a teenager growing up in the 70s, I came across a wilderness magazine. I can’t even remember the title, but in it I found an article about the dangers of nuclear annihilation. It was frightening and appalling. The generation before me had already been confronting this possibility, having lived with and through the reality of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Nuclear war on a global scale was annihilation on a grand scale. At the push of a button whole sections of the Earth would become obliterated and uninhabitable for centuries. It could still happen. Yet as the end of the 20th century approached we were faced with another crisis—ecological deterioration. Concerned scientists had for decades been warning any one that would listen that the ecology of the Earth was under threat from pollution, over-population, unsustainable farming practises and deforestation. Climate change is now considered the most critical of environmental issues for we have found that even the slightest amount of global warming can have devastating consequences for entire ecosystems, the survival of other species, food security, border protection and humanitarian needs of all types.

As the warnings grow more urgent, we have all become more aware of the issues and have sensed the need to do something. However, while the nuclear threat is clear and stark—it involves someone, somewhere, pushing a button to begin the process of annihilation¹—ecological deterioration is subtle and gradual. It involves the daily, seemingly insignificant, activities of every human being on the planet. Turning around human behaviour is extraordinarily difficult. We are creatures of habit. We are often driven more by selfishness and greed than by altruism. It seems we can be altruistic for a moment, as when we respond to immediate human need presented in natural disasters like the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 or the Japanese earthquake of 2010, but sustained altruism that involves daily delaying of pleasure and want for long period of time is much more difficult.

We are indeed much more like children who mindlessly consume and take than rational human beings who consider the facts and take appropriate action to avert catastrophe. We are not very good at delaying pleasure to attain a higher good—and I include myself unreservedly in this assessment.

One of the patterns that contribute to this ongoing issue is denial. We humans are masters at denial. It is one of the most common defence mechanisms we use.

- “Christmas was wonderful thanks” — even though we were depressed for most of it and over ate for the rest.

- “I don’t have an addiction problem” — as we find ourselves being unable to say no to that second glass of wine.
- “There is no such thing as global warming” — even though the peer-reviewed science overwhelmingly says it is true.
- “The consequences won’t be that bad, what’s a slightly warmer summer matter?” — even though we are already feeling the adverse effects of increased temperatures on a climatic scale.

Or perhaps you are more like me: I know the facts, I’ve studied the science, I’ve read books and talked to experts, but *I just don’t want to know*. Give me an entertaining movie to watch and let me forget all the difficult and confronting aspects of existence.

Scientists and those with an understanding of the dilemma have been perplexed by the response or lack of response by others. They thought that if they just presented the facts, the statistics and the overwhelming probability that anthropogenic global warming was real, then the lights would go on and we would seriously begin to address this critical issue. At the very least, they thought, the precautionary principle would motivate policy change. Yet we are stalled, caught in the politics of fear and the chains of denial.

A stark antidote to denial is our Lord Jesus Christ. In our gospel passage he steps up and proclaims, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news”. John the Baptist had just been arrested, surely a warning to any relative, acquaintance or anyone with a similar turn of mind. Jesus did not run from the facts or his commitment to do the work of his Father. He had just looked sin and temptation in the face and now he began to call others to the same task.

Yet Jesus’ proclamation holds together two seemingly opposite invitations. One is to repentance. In the Old Testament the idea of repentance is represented by two verbs: to return and to feel sorrow. In the New Testament the word translated as ‘repentance’ is the Greek word *metanoia* which, roughly translated, means “after/behind one’s mind”. Repentance is therefore primarily an after thought, different from the former thought—a change of mind accompanied by regret and change of conduct. It’s a change of mind and heart or a change of consciousness. Sorrow, a change of heart, a return to God—these are some of the words that capture the notion of repentance but behind them is the ability to look at reality squarely, a reality that is not pleasant to confront. Like the prodigal son, a cold hard look at the facts is a prerequisite for a change of heart.

The other invitation is the invitation to hope. Jesus says, “repent and believe the *good news*”. This is the core of the proclamation. We can repent, that is feel grief and sorrow and change our mind and heart precisely because in Christ Jesus we are offered good news, the very best of news. This may seem counterintuitive in the context of ecological deterioration and the almost apocalyptic scenarios run away global warming presents, yet this is the profound message of hope that comes from the God of love through Christ. When we have faith, that is trust God, then in the midst of any calamity or difficulty we can find hope—hope in our brothers and sisters and always hope in God.

The invitation to repentance and hope takes the practice of courage. Courage is a virtue that is critical in living a life to the fullest, entering God’s Kingdom. It takes courage to repent. The prodigal son had to summon up courage to take those steps that led him home. It takes courage to admit we have made a mistake. It took courage for Jesus to confront his tester in the wilderness and to choose God’s path over the easier-looking path of power and glory. It took courage for Jesus to stand and preach when his cousin

had just been arrested. It takes courage to look at the facts of climate change and truly sit with what it will mean for our earthly home if we as a species do not change our behaviour. It takes courage to sit with grief and sorrow.

How then did our Lord find that courage? Where does it come from? I would like to suggest that it comes from the discipline of prayer. It has been said many times but it is worth saying again, Jesus prayed—a lot. Prayer is our whole life of communion with God, a oneness with our creator. Evelyn Underhill wrote these words about prayer:

Amid all the varieties of prayer there are two movements which must, I think, be present in every spiritual life. The love and energy of prayer must be directed on the one hand toward God and on the other toward humanity ... Furthermore, “thou shalt love the Lord thy God” comes first (not only in the commandments, and not only in action, but in prayer). This means adoration, and not intercession or petition, is the very heart of prayer.

When we spend time praising, loving and adoring God we open the door to receiving God’s Spirit and grace. With this will come a deepening trust in God’s faithfulness and love. With this comes the gift of courage when we need it.

This is not like magic. It takes time and discipline, a continual turning to God, a putting into place a habit of prayer and a growing consciousness of God. It is said it takes over two months of *daily* repetitions before even the most simple of behaviours becomes a habit—and longer for more complex behaviours. If you want to deepen your relationship with God, it really is a case of fake it until you make it—it really is all in the practice.

Group reflection

Spend some time considering the above and the Gospel passage.

Discuss the Gospel passage first. What words and phrases in both stood out for you?

Questions for individual reflection and sharing if you wish

1. Look at the photo below. What thoughts come to mind as you look at it?



2. It is an old and weathered mangrove on a rock shelf that is battered by the ocean in high seas. What does it tell you about its resilience? What does it tell you about its fragility?
3. There are forty days of Lent, a little over a month, not quite long enough to form a habit. What needs to change in your life for you to form the habit of daily prayer, that

is daily communion with God? If you have managed to do this, what helped you?
What hindered you?

4. Grief and sorrow are difficult emotions to sit with, yet sorrow is part of repentance. Take a walk through your local park or sit in your garden. What feeling arises in you when you look at God's created beauty? Wonder, hope, fear, sorrow, concern? In what way's does it touch or move you?
5. In what ways is denial such a successful defence mechanism? What have you denied in the past but have then confronted? What was the difference?
6. When you read the words of Jesus, "Repent and believe the good news", what was your response? Your first thoughts? Your after thoughts?