

SUDNAY 3B BIRKENHEAD 2018

When I was a child I can remember going with a friend to a school holiday programme run by a local church. There were the usual songs and games which I enjoyed. There was also a lot of instruction which I didn't enjoy. Each day a \the woman running the programme told us we had to repent. I didn't know what it meant nor did I know how to do it. What I did know was that I didn't like the sound of it at all. It certainly wasn't Church of England!

As I grew up I came across this word again. Usually it was in phrases such as "repent and be saved" or "repent the end is nigh". And such like. There always seemed to be the suggestion that if I didn't do this thing called repentance then something terrible was going to happen. Being told to repent didn't scare me, though I had the feeling it was supposed to. Somehow I also gained the impression I was supposed to pass on this repentance business to others. But I didn't do that. So my lack of understanding of repentance led me to think it was something unpleasant and therefore unimportant.

2

It seems to me that for most people repentance isn't something to get too worried about. It belongs to a particular type of religion based on fear, so let's forget about it. All these associations with repentance are quite foreign to the scriptures.

No matter how much we might like to forget about repentance we cannot remove it from the Gospels nor from our Christian living. It is in fact the starting point of Christian life and it's the way for Christian life to grow. As we heard in today's Gospel, Jesus began his public ministry with a call to repentance.

But let's not turn off too quickly. In the Scriptures repentance is about turning around. It's about a change of direction. It's about a look at life from another perspective. It's about seeing something better than what we have got and following that which is better.

One of the best stories about repentance is that of Jonah and the Ninevites. I know we usually think of Jonah and the whale, but that's not the point of the story. It's really a story about Jonah, the Ninevites repentance and God. When you go home today its worth reading the whole story of Jonah. It's one of the shortest books in the Bible so it won't take long. It also occurs only once in our Sunday readings and that's the short passage we heard today.

Jonah was told to go and tell the people of Nineveh to repent. Like most of us Jonah didn't want to do that. So he caught a ship to Tarshish which went in completely the opposite direction. He was trying to escape what he knew God wanted him to do. Well we know what happened. There was a storm at sea, Jonah was thrown overboard, swallowed by the fish and spewed out on dry land. Again God's word came to Jonah. "Get up and go to Nineveh." So this time Jonah did as he was told. He turned around and went to Nineveh. When he got there he told the people to repent of their wickedness.

And wonder of wonders they did. They changed direction. They turned from wickedness to goodness. And God forgave them and did not bring on them the calamity intended.

That made Jonah very angry. He was so angry he wanted to die. I doubt Jonah repented at all. He just couldn't cope when the Ninevites did repent.

Outwardly Jonah was a very pious man. He tells the sailors on the ship that he's a Hebrew who worships the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Sounds good but it didn't translate into action. When the storm arose at sea this pious man didn't pray. The sailors did. When the Ninevites repented and turned to God, Jonah wasn't thankful, He was angry. He said to God, "this is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning. For I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing." (Repeat??)

Jonah really didn't want God to act graciously to the Ninevites. Jonah wanted them to remain wicked and outside God's steadfast love. It made Jonah very angry. He was angry that God could love such wicked people. Their repentance meant nothing to Jonah but it meant a lot to God.

I fear Jonah didn't repent. You see repentance requires an acknowledgement of the wrong within. Jonah was so pious he thought he didn't have any wrong within so he had no idea what repentance was about. Repentance is not just about an outward turning around, which Jonah did. It also requires a change of heart. That was beyond him.

Jonah teaches us a lot about human nature and about repentance. One of the strange things about repentance is that it requires us to recognise what's going on inside ourselves. That recognition is to face the painful reality that we are not perfect. It is also to face the reality that there may be a better way of living.

Yes change is possible but we have to work for it. Too often we can become like Jonah. We can be pious people, worshipping God, doing all the right things outwardly but with no change in our hearts. It is a particular problem for clergy, always doing God's work, but it does happen to others too. Like Jonah we often don't want wicked people to change. We keep saying things like "they are wrong", they are bad, they need to be shut away, they should be punished, they do not deserve God's love. For as long as we make them "the others" the wicked ones, then we don't have to face the wrong in ourselves. The wickedness, the wrongdoing, is always in them - outside of ourselves. And these sinful wrongdoers must be kept that way. If they reformed, if they were encouraged to repent, then they might win God's favour. If that happened we would have no one to blame for the ills of our society. We too often think that the ills of the world are caused by these bad people. The story of Jonah tells us we need to look within to see the wrong there too.

7

Jonah couldn't face the fact that he might have wrong within himself. When the Ninevites repented he lost his scapegoat for the ills within himself.

Perhaps this is why nation continues to fight nation. There has to be someone else causing the wrong. Its not us! Let's keep those others as the evil we have to fight, then we won't need to bother about the evil within.

The story of Jonah also teaches us something important about God. The story tells us God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing. Jonah couldn't cope with the enormity of God's love. God's love wanted to embrace the wicked Ninevites who turned from their wickedness to live. God's love asks us to accept all those whom God accepts.

8

Sometimes we too find the enormity of God's love difficult. But God's love cannot be restricted to ways which we want. God's love is given where God sees it is needed most.

Repentance in the end is really about God's love. A God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing. It's about a love which seeks us out whether we are like the Ninevites or whether we are like Jonah. It's about a love which keeps calling us to follow and to copy. Repentance is about whether we will turn around from what we are doing and face that love and allow ourselves to be embraced by it.