

## Advent 2 – Repentance

St James, Colwall, 6th December 2009

Before we had our current service book, taken from the *Common Worship* prayer book, we used the *Alternative Service Book*. The communion service we used had the Gloria in the first part, you know, that bit that goes, “Glory be to God on high . . . , which I always enjoyed. However, I was told off for using this during Advent and Lent, as these were times of repentance and preparation. Now I was younger then, so this was news to me, because I had always thought of Advent as counting the days to Christmas and basically a rather joyful time. But no, here we have in our Old Testament reading, “He is like a refiner’s fire”, which doesn’t sound very comfortable, and in the gospel, John the Baptist preaching repentance, which is not much better. So Advent is a time of preparation, but repentance is a very important part of that.

Repentance is all about changing direction, so I suppose the negative aspects come from focussing on what we are turning from, rather than what we are turning to. Thinking about what we should turn to is much more positive and really is a message of hope. But what we are turning to may be difficult to see without first of all thinking about what we are turning from. At least we can say that we don’t want to go there. But even this is difficult, because it involves that black word, sin. Tell me, when did you last sin? Difficult to answer, because I suppose none of you have robbed, murdered, committed adultery or coveted your neighbour’s ass – or even your neighbour’s Lamborghini! The trouble is, the commandments do not cover everything and we are often not aware of where we fall short.

That of course reminds me of the rich young man in the gospels who went up to Jesus, wanting to know what to do to be saved. Jesus said, “Keep the commandments.” And of course he had obeyed the ten commandments from his youth, what more should he do? And Jesus said to him, “sell what you have and give to the poor”. And the young man went away sorrowing. But I wonder what did happen to him in the end? I think Jesus meant to jerk him out of his rut and really think where he was going, and that should apply to us too. I had exactly that experience recently when talking to my financial adviser about ethical investments and charitable giving. We were talking about what we needed to live on and then he said, “Why not give the rest away?” Well, he didn’t say quite that, but he did mention a sufficiently large amount to take my breath away. I can tell you, I was flabbergasted.

And it is that sort of change, when someone takes the wind out of your sails and makes you think about where you are going that we really need at Advent. And as it happens, what we are doing about our charitable giving is a good, positive thing to think about. The future is uncertain we all know, but that doesn’t mean you have to keep all your money and you can probably afford to give away more than you are doing at the moment. The world is not coming to an end, or if it is, your money is not going to be much use, is it? But charities are feeling the pinch and that is limiting the good they can do. At the same time the need is increasing. Homelessness and war and conflict, food and water shortages, poverty and disease are in many places on the increase and in no country are they vanquished. Invest in a charity now and your giving will be more cost-effective than ever. How can you say “Peace on earth and goodwill to all men”, and not help those in need? What better gift can you give at Christmas than shelter to those without a home, food to the malnourished, water to the thirsty and health to the sick?

Now I hope you will forgive me, while we are talking about our actions in the world, from adding to this by going on about climate change. It seems to me that it is no

good giving money for flood relief in Bangladesh, while not doing something about our contribution to the causes of that flooding. Almost all of the problems in the world are made worse by climate change and we must do something about it. But that's a change of lifestyle isn't it? And we do hate change and find it difficult to believe that change could be for the better but changing to a more sustainable lifestyle has lots of positive benefits. But people don't believe it.

It seems to me the situation is very similar to the abolition of slavery. I am sure people then said, "How can we manage without the slave trade, which is so important to our economy? The city of Bristol is dependent on the slave trade." And those large fortunes which play such a part in the novels of Jane Austen were often based on Caribbean estates dependent on slave labour. Sir Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park* had his estate in Antigua, run with slave labour but which didn't stop him from adopting a very high moral tone at home. Hypocrisy of course, but we can all be guilty of that. And Advent and Lent are times when we should question our lives and where we are going, to find out where we are coming short of the gospel. It is a time to jerk us out of our preconceptions and start to think about how our actions can change the world.

And change to a more just and sustainable world *will* be for the better. You don't think that God is urging us towards a miserable existence, do you? The problem of climate change is soluble, if we put our minds to it and do something about it. And when solved, the world will be a better and more enjoyable place. Waiting until events force our hands on the other hand may lead to a pretty dismal world of shortages and wars.

Now here I think is where we, as a church, are not doing enough. At our Colwall Greener meetings, we have one or two church stalwarts, but we have been getting more people from outside the village than from within it. We need more help to spread the word within the village and to take up our initiatives. Climate change is a moral issue, which the church ought to be taking a lead on. And we ought to be thinking about our own carbon footprint from heating and lighting the church, Ale House and Rectory – and this is becoming urgent as our current boiler is not going to last much longer.

But let's not get lost in actions and causes and effects. Jesus' reply to the rich young man was meant to act as a shock, to actually change him. Advent is a time for us to come face to face with Jesus and then compare our lives with His. And we need to take this seriously if we want to call ourselves Christians. One of my favourite verses in the bible expresses what should be the outcome. It's Galatians 5:22: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." By Christmas, we should be different people, expressing these qualities. Quite a tough assignment for four weeks!

One thing I will add to that, is that we tend to think of these fruits of the Spirit within the context of the church community but we should be thinking of doing that within the world of which we are part and which is affected by our actions. It's more than just being nice to each other. So here's one final positive thing to imagine: a world where people cared for others, no matter how far away; a world where people were helpful, not impatient; a world where people had integrity and could be trusted; a world where justice prevailed. It's a wonderful vision – it's the Kingdom of God, a pearl of great price. But it can only come about through our actions and example.

May God give us the grace to do this.