

Trinity 15 – Repentance

St James, Colwall, 12th September 2010

The theme of our readings today is repentance and you could hardly get a greater contrast between how that subject is approached in the Old and New Testaments than our first two readings. In the Old Testament reading, Moses has gone up to Mount Sinai to learn from God what their religion should be, and to bring down the tablets of the law. As you might imagine he was gone a long time, and the Israelites grew restive. They made a golden calf to worship rather than God. God sees this and threatens to destroy them all, but is dissuaded from this by Moses. In effect God repents as a result of Moses persuasion. In the New Testament reading on the other hand, Paul is convicted of his own sin as a result of the vision on the road to Damascus. And Paul has no doubt that he must change his life if he is to be obedient to that vision. In the dialogue between God and man, it is man who must change, not God. The gospel reading adds to this by making clear that God does not seek vengeance on the sinner but rather is there to help us repent.

When we talk about sin, it is important to distinguish between repentance and guilt and it is repentance which is important. If you feel guilty then that is almost certainly because you are aware of sin, but have not repented. Repentance implies change of life and is an action. Feeling guilty is just a state of mind which does nobody any good. So repentance is what matters, not guilt.

But we do need to be aware of sin, to do anything about it and here I think we do have a problem today in as much as we often feel it is quite hard to see what we should repent of. After all, we don't do much harm to anybody, we go to church and we give to charity – what more should we do?

I can answer this at two levels one personally and the other for our society as a whole. To answer it personally I think I would use the same words that Jesus used to the rich young ruler. "You know the commandments..." and of course, like the rich young ruler, we all do. But like him, we don't necessarily reflect on them as much as we ought. We can always do something more to make goodness the centre of our lives; we can always question our image of God to make it more compatible with our Father in heaven; and we can always look at our behaviour in the light of the other commandments to make sure that we are always acting with the utmost integrity. And remember that the point of this is not to make us feel guilty but rather to change our lives so that they follow Jesus more closely. Repentance not guilt!

But I want to talk mainly today about repentance within the context of our society as a whole. And in many ways we have a similar problem to that at the personal level, because we have seen so many changes for the better in the last 50 years and today's world seems a pleasant place. When I was a child we had an outside toilet and it was quite a step up in the world when we finally acquired a house with a bathroom and I don't think that situation was at all uncommon. In the same 50 years we have seen a tremendous increase in the expectation of life and the reduction of disease and this increase has been felt not only in this country and the developed world but throughout the world in general. Almost everyone, almost everywhere, is better off and healthier than they were 50 years ago and we should really give thanks for that.

But this is not yet the kingdom of God. For a start there are those two "almosts" I just used. There are plenty of places where war, famine, pestilence and death still reign and we must not give up efforts to stop them. The progress which has been achieved over the last 50 years has happened because people were not content with the *status quo* but were prepared to do something to make things better and we should carry on that good

work. There is sin in the world which is not easily laid at anyone's doorstep but that does not mean that action to make things better is not required from us.

Apart from the obvious places where there is war or natural disaster people suffer from malnutrition or illness or a lack of education simply because they are poor. Most people's problems can be solved by giving them money. They may need assistance but generally people are quite well aware of the problems they face and what needs to be done about them. Poverty is an evil, in this country as well as overseas, which stops people improving their lives and it should have no part in the kingdom of God. Curing it is a question of politics: for overseas the issue is one of trade justice, while in this country it is a question of taxation and benefits, which I hope the Chancellor is bearing in mind at this very moment. We need to look at the world and ask ourselves, is it just? Is it fair?

We surely want everyone to share in the benefits of development. It seems only fair that benefits that we have in the West should be available to all. But there is a problem. The population of the world is estimated to grow from 6 billion now to 10 billion by the end of the century. So apart from the increasing demand on resources caused by improving the standard of living there will be an additional 4 billion mouths to feed. This will only be possible with an intensification of agriculture which must have profound effects on the environment. This is something that is so important that we within the church must come to terms with.

Let me give you an example of the many issues which will arise. Some months ago I was in the gym pedalling away on my exercise bike, listening to the conversation on the next door but one bike between a lady and her fitness trainer. They were arguing about free range chickens, the lady arguing that all chickens should be free range while her trainer said that it did not matter because it was "only a chicken". Do we want to counter that point of view? And if we do how do we counter it? After all we have been able to feed the world's current population as a result of breeding high yielding cereals. Why should we not selectively breed chickens to withstand battery farming and to mature very rapidly, with a large quantity of breast meat, even if it does mean that such chickens could not live to a normal maturity?

I feel that our religious beliefs should naturally lead us to respect the environment and not to depart too widely from its natural state but I think this will present us with problems when there are conflicts between feeding the world and maintaining the natural state. And of course there are any number of other potential conflicts such as the pollution of the marine environment caused by deep sea drilling which we are all well aware of.

These problems seem remote from us and very difficult for us to change. But difficult does not mean impossible. People working together can change things, so let me give you a three point plan to get started.

1. We should all be aware of the problems and think how we should react as stewards of God's creation.
2. We should be open to suggestions about possible cures. It is very easy to dismiss people's ideas simply because they are new and we haven't encountered them before.
3. We should be willing to engage with our society with whatever tools we have. There are lots of ways in which you can make your views known to the powers that be and we should use them..

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." "Love your neighbour as yourself." We have to reconcile these two commands: may God give us the wit to do it.