

Sunday, 28 February 2016

[the joy of repentance](#)

[Isaiah 55:1-9](#)

[Psalm 63:1-8](#)

[1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#)

[Luke 13:1-9](#)

In case you haven't noticed, repentance is a massive theme in the season of Lent. It can have a pretty negative reputation. We might imagine people with bad self-image, or monks whipping themselves. Repentance isn't popular in our culture where we are constantly trying to build up our self-esteem. There is a whole industry based on "self-help" that is full of advice to make you feel better about yourself. ... And now in Lent in the church we focus on repentance. We think about the ways we miss the mark. We think about the changes we should make to our lives. It all feels very negative. This is intensified by the fact that Jesus opened his ministry by calling people to repentance and that many saints throughout the centuries have defined the life of a Christian as a life of continuous repentance. That is pretty at odds with our culture.

I've said this before, but it's worth saying again, that repentance isn't just turning away from something bad, it is also turning towards something good. In general, repentance is a continuous turning towards God. Yes, that also entails that we will be turning away from something ("idols", selfishness) in order to turn towards God. But repentance should be primarily positive

because it is primarily turning towards God.

We are mostly looking at Jesus' words in Luke today, but I'd like us to start by looking briefly at the other readings for today. Isaiah speaks about the hunger of our souls. (The Psalm today mentions this hunger too.) Our soul's hunger will only be satisfied as it is rooted deeply in God's love. We get in trouble when we think that something else can satisfy our soul's hunger. The Seven Deadly Sins could be understood as the attempt to feed our soul's hunger with something that is not God. When we try to feed the soul with something that is not God it might seem to work for a moment, but ultimately it doesn't satisfy. We will try to make it work, and so we think maybe I just need a bit more and so we try again to satisfy that hunger with something that is not God and it seems to work for a moment again, but it really leads to a kind of addiction. Gluttony tends to work that way, as does lust, as does greed, etc. God doesn't necessarily desire our repentance so that we will merely be obedient. He desires our repentance so that we will be free from all that would enslave and destroy us.

Turning to St. Paul in the letter to the Corinthians, he is speaking about the ancient Hebrews who left slavery in Egypt and wandered through the wilderness. He again is talking about spiritual food and drink. He might be relating the manna and water from the rock to the bread and wine of communion here- it is spiritual food and drink. He then speaks about the Hebrews as being examples for us. They received God's leading and instruction. They were considered God's people. They received God's food and drink. They were sustained by him.... And yet, God was not pleased. The people continued to grumble, be

disobedient, rebellious, and unthankful. For that reason many of them never made it out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land. Our tendency can be to look down on them as if we are better than them. As if, if we were there we wouldn't be disobedient, and wouldn't grumble, or be unthankful. Paul is telling us to be careful- "if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall" (1 Cor 10:12). He is wanting us to learn from them so we don't fall into the same sins and endure the same consequences.

Now we turn to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is making a very similar point. Someone starts speaking about something brutal the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, did. Even if we didn't have the Bible we would know he was a cruel and oppressive leader from other writings. The event described here might have been an attack by Pilate on some Galilean pilgrims. Galileans were known as being trouble makers. It sounds like while some of these pilgrims were offering a sacrifice in the temple Pilate killed them. If this was during Passover the pilgrims would kill their own sacrifice. And if Pilate killed them on Passover then their blood would mix with the blood of their sacrificed animal.

It was a common belief in Jesus' day that if something particularly awful happened to someone it was because they were particularly sinful. You still see this in cultures that believe in karma. If something bad happens to someone then they are in a sense getting what they deserve. If they are children then it must be because of something they did in a past life. ...There is an element of truth in the idea of karma. It is a Biblical principal that you will reap what you sow (e.g. Gal 6:7). The seeds you

plant will indicate the kind of plant that will grow. So there are consequences to our actions. If we don't deal with our anger, or gossip, or alcoholism, then we will probably deal with certain consequences. However, this is a general principal and can't be applied in every case. The whole book of Job expresses this point- what happened to him was not because of sin in his life. We see this in Jesus' life- it was not his sin that resulted in him dying on the cross. Terrible tragedy doesn't necessarily mean someone was being punished for a terrible sin. But, that was often the point of view in Jesus' day.

At this point Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem with a number of Galilean pilgrims. Earlier in Luke the Pharisees warned Jesus that King Herod wants to kill him. And now they are talking about these Galileans that were killed in the Temple doing exactly what they were going to be doing there. Jesus says, don't feel like you're safe as if they were worse sinners than you and so deserved it. He's saying that could have been you.

He also refers to another tragedy that killed 18 people when a tower fell in Jerusalem. He makes the same point. They weren't necessarily any worse than anyone else because this tragedy happened to them.

On one level Jesus might be making a very practical and historical point here. If they are going to rebel against Rome in a violent uprising, their fate will be like those who had their blood spilled and who were crushed by falling buildings. In fact, there was a violent uprising against Rome and Jerusalem was destroyed along with the temple in 70AD. It was a terrible massacre. Jesus may be saying if you repent and adopt his ways

of peace that you might avoid this coming destruction. Unless you repent, the same will happen to you.

So Jesus' words might have a very real historical warning for his listeners, but there is also a deeper spiritual principal here that goes beyond the specific historical situation they were facing in Roman occupied Israel.

We are continuously warned about being unfruitful in the Bible. Jesus' parable is another warning about being unfruitful. We aren't sure if we should see Jesus as the vineyard owner or the gardener, but the overall lesson is really the same. The owner of the vineyard comes to check on his fig tree. The mature tree is supposed to produce figs each year, but it hasn't produced figs for 3 years. The idea seems to be that the tree is living a selfish existence. It is using up the nutrients and water of the soil and not giving anything back. The owner wants to cut the tree down, but the gardener asks for one more year to give it one last chance. He will break up the soil around the roots and fertilize the tree, but if it still doesn't produce figs then they plan to cut it down.

It is a parable about God's patience with us. He is giving us chance after chance to amend our lives. I wonder if we sometimes presume too much on God's mercy and forgiveness and use that as a reason not to take our sin seriously. Just because God is patient with us, doesn't mean God doesn't take sin seriously, or that there aren't serious consequences to our sin. God's patience is the difference between us and the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness who received the consequences of their sins. God's patience won't last forever. At

some point we will run out of time. We should not delay. Right now is the time to repent and produce fruit.

Paul's point about our spiritual ancestors wandering in the wilderness is that we could have been them and could have received the same consequences. They likely made the same excuses we make. They looked to their neighbour for determining if they were doing okay or not, rather than to God's instructions. We should be careful about looking down on them. Instead we should learn from their mistakes.

The question we are left with from Jesus' parable is, "are we producing fruit for the kingdom of God?" How do our life and words show the goodness and beauty of God? How does our faith have an effect on the people around us? We should maybe look at this not just as individuals, but as a community. How does this speak to us as a church- as St. Mary's and St. Timothy's? Are we producing fruit for the kingdom by our life as a church- by our words and actions as a church? If we were the only Church someone ever walked into what would they think of Christianity and Christians?

This can be an awkward lesson to teach. Some of us have hearts that are pretty hard and we need a hard teaching to crack our hearts open. On the other hand, some of us are so tender that we feel crushed by any reference to our sin because we are so aware of our own sinfulness.

For those that tend to feel crushed I read something that might be helpful. It's by a man called Matthew the Poor-

“God desired to endow repentance with double the honour, happiness, pleasure, and joy so a sinner would not be despondent or bashful at coming to the bosom of Christ [Lk 15:8-10; Lk 15:4-7]... Although a repenting sinner could hardly be noticed by the world, the Bible says that the whole heaven welcomes a sinner’s repentance and rejoices... The sinner who feels within himself a total deprivation of all that is holy, pure, and solemn because of sin, the sinner who is in his own eyes in utter darkness, severed from hope of salvation, from the light of life, and from the communion of saints, is himself the friend whom Jesus invited to dinner, the one who was asked to come out from behind the hedges, the one asked to be a partner in His wedding and an heir to God. God has promised not to remember any of his sins but to drop them into oblivion as a summer cloud is swallowed up by the glare of the sun. ... Is it not for him that He has crucified himself and has borne misery and dereliction? ... without the sinner we are able neither to comprehend the love of Christ, nor to measure its depth, nor can it show itself in an action... Divine love appears as most dignified in our sight when we come to know it in its condescension to us while we are fallen into a state of misery. For the sake of the sinner the mysteries of God’s love have been unveiled and the richness of Christ has been opened to us... it is solely the extreme destitution of the sinner that draws out the richness of Christ... Christ never enriches the one who is rich, nor does He feed the one who is satisfied, or justify the one who is righteous, or redeem the one who relies on his own power, or teach a scholar! His richness is only for the poor and needy, to those who are cast away, the contemptible and in their own eyes wretched; His food is for the hungry, His righteousness for sinners... in [the sorrowful sinner] He finds a field for compassion, mercy, and

tenderness, ... If only the sinner knew that all his trespasses, transgressions and infirmities were but the point of God's compassion, pardon, and forgiveness, and that however great and atrocious they might be, they could never repel God's heart, extinguish His mercy, or fetter His love even for a single moment. If only the sinner knew this, he would never cling to his sin or seek isolation from God ... who is trying to show love toward him and who is calling them!" (The Communion of Love, p91-95).

We should not be afraid to repent. God has paved the way and has shown he will joyfully receive us no matter what. Repentance is a good thing- it is to turn to God and turn away from what will enslave and destroy us. God wants our repentance because he loves us. Like a parent who wants their child to stay off the street. So we should turn away from what will not satisfy our souls and turn towards God's love which is really the only thing that can ultimately satisfy us.