

Sunday 9th December – 9.45 am – Liam Cartwright

ADVENT 2

Malachi 3. 1-4

Luke 3 1-6

What does the word repentance mean to you?

Most of us probably associate it with being sorry in some way. Perhaps apologising to other people, or to God. We might associate it with particular parts of our church service, such as the lighting of the Advent candle this morning, or perhaps with specific times in our church calendar, such as Lent. Or - some of us might even associate it with a particular type of hell, fire and brimstone preaching in which people are threatened with all manner of unspeakable unpleasantness if they do not turn from their wicked ways immediately!

A quick google search throws up a variety of synonyms for repentance, including remorse, contrition, sorrow, regret, ruefulness, pangs of conscience, shame, guilt, self-reproach, self-condemnation and compunction.

On the face of it, it's all a bit doom and gloom!

In our gospel reading this morning, we hear that John, having received a word in the wilderness from God, immediately travels throughout the region of Jordan announcing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He instructs the people to prepare a pathway for the Lord to return to them, and he delivers his message with quite some urgency.

It's pretty unusual behaviour. So what was the big emergency? And why such emphasis on repentance?

Luke begins the story by giving us a fair amount of detailed information about the state of the region at the time, and the names and places he refers to don't paint a happy picture. The first Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar, had died in the year 14 AD and his place had been taken by the ruthless Tiberius, who was being worshipped like a God in some Eastern parts of the empire. Herod and Philip were nominally ruling the north of the country with Roman permission, but were self-appointed, ruling, like Rome, through fear and oppression. The High Priests we hear mention of in the reading wielded their authority in much the same way.

People longed for revolution and an escape from this misery. The Jews had long hoped for a new word from God and the old prophets had spoken of a time of renewal when God would return to them. So when John turned up with the big announcement that this time was now, he got their attention.

But what did John mean, when he told them to repent? What did they need to be sorry for? Or was the message more nuanced?

Repentance in this context has two primary meanings. The first comes from the Hebrew word in the Old Testament, meaning 'to turn' or 'to return'. The second comes from the Greek, meaning 'to go beyond the mind that we have'.

So - to return - and to go beyond the mind that we have.

John's message of repentance goes far deeper than simply apologising for wrongdoings. He's heralding the start of Jesus' ministry by telling the people that they must turn to God, and to see things in a new way. To repent is to embark on a journey of return to God and to be open to viewing things in a way which is shaped by God.

Of course, we must repent of our sins too – but the focus is on turning from them and returning to God. Repentance is about change. Repentance is about transformation.

Fast forward to Advent 2018 and this message is just as relevant and urgent today as it was in the region around the Jordan 2000 years ago.

We live in troubled times. Millions of people have been forced from their homes by war and oppression, desperately seeking refuge in other parts of the world. It's the time of fake news, where the words people speak are disconnected from reality; only this week we saw politicians posing at food banks telling everyone how wonderful it all is, acting as if there is no relationship between the policies they implement and the predicament those with nothing to eat find themselves in. Look to America and we see that the leader of the free world is a vain, misogynist, racist bully, who speaks of building walls and uses language associated with vermin to describe immigrants. In our own country Brexit looms, homelessness is at a record high, the gap between rich and poor widens, the United Nations reports that austerity has inflicted great misery, and BBC headlines tell us this week that one million children face 'Dickensian poverty' this Christmas.

The parallels with the times described in the gospel are uncanny and I think many people in our world, our society, and amongst us here today must feel like they're in a wilderness much like the one John emerged from when he received word from the Lord. Perhaps you even feel like that yourself.

So what can we do?

Well - like the people John was delivering his message to 2000 years ago, we need to hear this revolutionary message of repentance, of returning to God, and going beyond the mind that we have.

This can be hard to do. Amongst all the business, the anxieties, our responsibilities, and the problems we see in the world around us, it can be hard to stop and turn to God.

Equally, going beyond the mind we have is a tall order. After all, the mind we have is shaped by our own experiences, our personality, the things that have influenced us historically, the way we've been socialized in our particular place, time and context.

But to be open and intentional about doing both of these things, hard though they may be, is to discover a greater spiritual depth, both personally and corporately.

In our first reading from Malachi, we hear that the Lord will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; that He will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

It's such an evocative image, that. The idea of refining people – of removing the impurities or unwanted elements, and making changes so as to improve or clarify them. And it dovetails brilliantly with the idea of repentance which we've been looking at in the Gospel.

What would *our* lives look like if we went beyond the mind that we have and were open to God refining us?

It's so easy to get stuck in a rut spiritually, or to become tribal or even defensive when it comes to our faith. We know what we like and we like what we know. But how would it be if we explored different styles of worship? Went on some courses or conferences? Read more widely? Got involved in some community projects? Went to different churches occasionally or even attended different services within our own church – even those we think we wouldn't like, or haven't liked before?

It's when we're open minded – and brave enough – to do these things and allow God to refine us that our faith starts to mature and we journey deeper with God.

And what could our society and the wider world look like if we corporately returned to God and went beyond the minds that we have? Would there be greater compassion, equality and fair treatment of others? Would we take greater care of our environment? Would we think of other

people as our brothers and sisters, believe their problems to be our problems, think beyond man made borders and other things which divide and polarize people, and start to see others as Jesus sees them?

In Malachi 3 Verse 7 – which is just beyond the passage we heard this morning – the Lord says ‘return to me and I will return to you’.

I pray that this Advent continues to be a season of repentance – that we return to God and go beyond the minds we have - allowing Him to refine us, and preparing the way of the Lord, as we await His coming this Christmas time.

Amen.