

Homily – 08 December 2019 - Advent 2

This weekend's Gospel reading (Matthew 3:1-12) has the powerful figure of John the Baptist calling people to 'Repent!' because he believed the Kingdom of Heaven had come near. Lean, unwashed, and hairy John would have been a dramatic sight accentuated by his clothing, strange diet and uncompromising faithfulness to God. I imagine, probably unfairly, sophisticated political and religious leaders shaking their heads in derision... and yet it seems that the people flocked to him.

John affirmed that God wanted people to do better with their lives and that through Baptism there would be a new beginning for them. 'Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near...' he roared!

The dictionary definition of repentance is 'sincere regret' or 'remorse' and this is a helpful start, but I think it can be developed further so that it includes a real intention to do something differently. In Melanesian Pidgin there is the wonderful phrase, 'Yu noken tok sore tasol, yu mas wokim sore!' which means you can't just say sorry, you have to do it!

This is where the symbolism of Baptism is powerful for, at least in adult baptism, a person goes under the water into an environment where they cannot breathe or live, and then is lifted out of the water into a new chapter of life. And in this new chapter there is a determination to keep a clear focus on God, trusting that this will positively change character and behaviour.

As Christians we'd go further to affirm that the focus on God allows God's Spirit, literally God's grace, to work in our lives and it is God's Spirit that brings about this transformation.

Now 'repentance' probably sounds like an old-fashioned word that's not used much everyday conversation. But, in a wonderful service at St John's Cathedral yesterday we were reminded that it is an important part of ministry in our time.

It was thirty-nine degrees, and over one thousand people were present to witness and celebrate the Ordination of six Deacons, and six Priests. Before the Archbishop Ordained the Deacons he read the position description for Deacons outlined in the Prayer Book. Part of this reads... 'Proclaim the Good News of God's love, so that many may be moved to faith and repentance...'

So, clearly repentance is not just for people long ago listening to a prophet beside the river Jordan - it is something to take seriously in our time.

As you and I prepare for Christmas - and as we consider the call to repent - we might helpfully look back over the last year and prayerfully ask what it is we sincerely regret. Maybe we don't have to look back too far? Maybe there has been something that we regret from recent weeks?

This may include something that we've done: like words that were unkind, or untrue, or unwise... Or, something that we haven't done that would have been a blessing to another person: like a visit, or a phone call, or a letter...

I think it'll be helpful to go back to the Deacon's job description that the Archbishop read because after saying 'Proclaim the Good News of God's love, so that many may be moved to faith and repentance...' he continued, 'and hearts be opened to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly in the presence of God.'

This is a helpful reminder about why we should sincerely regret certain attitudes and behaviours. Because when we do - and usually they are rooted in self-interest or laziness - when we do, we are better able to do justice, be kind, and walk humbly. If you think these words sound familiar it is because they come from the prophet Micah and are often quoted: 'He told you O mortal what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? But, to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

So, as you and I prepare for Christmas and the coming year of 2020 what are some things that get in the way of us doing justice, being kind, and being humble? Have we allowed pride and cynicism to develop such that we expect nothing good from certain people or groups? Have we allowed apathy and indifference to develop because we recognise it will demand much of us to bring about change, or the sheer scale and complexity of an issue seems overwhelming? Have we become addicted to something such that we can think of nothing else but satisfying the craving that comes from this?

'Repent!' for the Kingdom of Heaven is closer than we think...

Let's pray...

Holy God, we give thanks for the vision of how we might live better lives with you and with one another. Guided by your Spirit, help us to recognise what we need to let go of, and what we need to sincerely regret. Please fill us with your Spirit so that our attitudes, activities, hopes and dreams make justice and kindness real... while recognising that we are ordinary people, and not Messiahs. We pray in the name of the One we call 'Emmanuel - God with us.' Amen.