

Repent !

a sermon preached on the

3rd Sunday in Lent

7 March 2010

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **Fr David Moore**

parish priest

Lections: Isaiah 55:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

What are we to make of the call to 'repentance'? We certainly cannot get through Lent without facing up to it. Indeed, there is no conception of Christianity at all without the spiritual motif of repentance – there's just no escaping it I'm afraid, no matter how much we may attempt to rationalise it away. And if there's no escaping repentance, then by implication there's no escaping sin – since repentance and sin are Christian bedfellows, to employ a risky metaphor.

I think the first fact to be acknowledged about this equation is the ascendancy of moralism. I suspect it's simply impossible for us to hear words like repentance, and sin, in any other way except as morality. And there are two things about morality which immediately strike the careful observer. On the one hand, there is the widespread perception that Christianity is nothing but moralising - which is a major factor in the widespread disillusionment with Christian religion in the West. At the other extreme there is a calamitous wholesale disregard for the necessity of a cohesive and coherent moral structure upon which human life is grounded - which has a great deal to do with this generation being so easily enslaved by every kind of unconscious mass-mindedness. For there is no development in human consciousness without moral reason. And if no development, then what is even more likely than stagnation is regression. Yet, partly because of this fixation on moralism, regression into the apparent security of an earlier stage of development is precisely the malaise besetting the church – thus ensuring that many persons who are genuinely seeking to take seriously the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ who leads us into all truth are inclined to walk away from the institutional religion of the church, finding only moralism, regression, infantilism.

Now it will appear that I have gone round in circles – and indeed there is a circularity! There is no Christian religion without repentance. Nor is there Christian religion without sin, the turning away from which is the business of repentance. There is no way of engaging with the idea of repentance except with the capacity for moral judgement. But morality narrowly conceived does not contain the sum of the mystery of sin and repentance. And when religion is reduced to moralism, regression is inevitable into the apparent security of an earlier stage of development. Is there an escape from the cycle of moralism and regression?

Perhaps an illustration might put some flesh on this. Consider the Jesus who emerges from the wilderness. Without doubt, prior to his baptism by John Jesus was already deeply-formed in the religion of Israel, already a man of considerable learning and Torah-inspired morality. But what happens? Almost immediately he is breaking the Torah! And breaking the Torah is sin. And sin demands repentance. So why does Jesus not repent of his sin? For instance, his sin of plucking grain on the Sabbath, or of doing works of healing on the Sabbath, or of consorting with prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, and other unclean undesirables? ¹ Surely he has sinned, according the standard of morality of his religious tradition? Yes indeed! This, of course, is the recurring, and ultimately-insurmountable, scandal for the Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees and other religious leaders.

¹ Luke 6:1-5, 6-11, 7:36-50, 5:29-32

So what's going on here? When confronted by that very human urge to make a hierarchy of sinfulness, Jesus declares that unless they also repent, they will all perish just as the others upon whom they have projected their own sinfulness. Does this not make a mockery of morality, and therefore of repentance and sin? In the gospel we hear his warning twice, no doubt for emphasis: "Unless you repent you will all perish just as they did."² How can the man who has broken the morality of the religion of his day then tell others that unless they repent they will all perish by violent brutality or 'natural tragedy'!³

It strikes me that there is a vital missing key here somewhere, which, when we are drumming morality into our children, we tend to overlook. Repentance, and the sin from which it is a turning away, cannot be a narrowly- moral equation. Or, perhaps more precisely, it cannot be mere moralism. For in Jesus it is clearly not the case. Repentance certainly has a moral aspect – and God knows that for all of there us there is some form of moral failure. Furthermore, it is our capacity to be able to make a moral judgement that enables us to recognise sin for what it is without fudging it or minimising it – the critical step in breaking with our addiction to sin. But clearly repentance is more than mere moralism. What else is it, then, if it's not slavish adherence to legal proscriptions?

Well, it strikes me that the break through the impasse can be found in a great deal of Jesus' teaching, but most succinctly expressed by Matthew: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil (πληρωμα *plērōma*)."⁴ Fulfilment of the Torah does not consist in moralism. Rather, it means breaking through to even higher standard of morality! Thus, Jesus' command to repentance is the call to turn away from regression into the apparent security of moralism, to an earlier stage of human development. Or to say it again in different terms, repentance is the call to turn away from unconsciousness. For it is unconsciousness, regression to moralism and legalism, that is the kiss of death to the fulfilment Jesus desires – the same fulfilment (πληρωμα *plērōma*) Luke tells his readers in the very first verse of his gospel which he intends to narrate.⁵

Jesus' call is to fullness of life, to completeness, to wholeness, to reconciliation of the opposites, which requires deepening consciousness, evolutionary development. Because regression is so tempting, repentance, turning away in the direction of consciousness, is the key to development – which in theological language is salvation. All our attempts to grade the sinfulness of others are regressive – and thus thwart salvation. Similarly, all our attempts to constrain "the Spirit who blows where she will",⁶ who heals on the Sabbath and who consorts with undesirables is regressive anti-salvation.

Evidently, for Jesus to turn back to an earlier moral stance of Israel proposed by the religious leaders would constitute sinfulness requiring repentance – for it would thwart the purposes of the Divine salvific urge. Thus, he calls upon us to turn around, to repent from this sin into regression and unconsciousness. For we, too, are precious trees in the garden of the Divine economy, made for the fulfilment which is the fruitfulness of consciousness – and it would be a cosmic tragedy that the soil of our lives should be wasted.⁷ Moreover, we are given this time, 'one more year',⁸ the only time we have and the only time we need, to become conscious – that is to say, to bear the fruit of consciousness, development, evolution, salvation.

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

² Luke 13:3,5
³ Luke 13:1,4
⁴ Matthew 5:17
⁵ Luke 1:1 **πεπληροφημενον** *peplerophophmenon* "having been fulfilled"
⁶ John 3:8
⁷ Luke 13:7b
⁸ Luke 13:8a