

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 3 Year B 2018

What were some of the life lessons you learnt as a child? Most of the really important beliefs and values we carry through life were imparted when we were quite young. Very early on, parents and teachers know the importance of teaching children to share, to be 'nice', to say 'please' and 'thank you', to not cheat, to tell the truth, to not push in or make fun of people. Often, they are simple, social conventions. But they are really the rules by which we govern our *interactions* with others. They are not taught arbitrarily or simply for the sake of it. They are taught so we can navigate our way *well* through life, *in the company of others*; in society, in community. These early life lessons are really about helping us get on with each other.

And this includes the necessary - and difficult - lesson of saying sorry. It is not just so children can get on with each other in the playground or the class room. It is a lesson for life. And we want those words to be a genuine and honest acknowledgement of wrong doing. You would all have memories of your children - and perhaps grandchildren - stubbornly and defiantly crossing arms and pouting lips refusing to say those necessary words. The trouble is, if this lesson is not learnt early, it can be pretty hard to pick up later on. It's not just that it effects our younger years. It will effect us throughout life.

'I am sorry' can be the hardest words we say at any time in life. But we know it is necessary, especially between friends and loved ones and spouses. We might say those words because we simply want to keep the peace, for a quiet life, and to move on. But when we say them, hopefully those words *do* come from our heart, from a place where we acknowledge we *have* done wrong. Because none of us are perfect. And all of us are responsible for the health and vitality our relationships. And sometimes we just need the humility and honesty and the courage to acknowledge our shortcoming to those who are close to us and important to us. We want those words to reflect a genuine change in heart. Because without that change we are likely to head to greater fragmentation, to greater distance, until the relationship collapses and dissolves. We say sorry to restore relationships, to realign our lives back into that closeness we hope for with those we love and are close to.

At the start of Advent, we had placed before us the opening verses of the gospel of Mark: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God*. We considered how important these opening words are for the gospel writer: how important is the sense of *beginnings*, and how Mark echoes in the opening words of his Gospel the opening words of the Bible, *in the beginning, God created...* Mark wants to convey an idea that in this Good News of God in Jesus Christ is a new beginning, a new creation. The first words of the Gospel sets the tone, the agenda, of the whole book. As do the first words of Jesus, just a few verses later; those first words of Jesus recorded by Mark and set before us today: *The time has come...and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the good News.'*

Perhaps we would want the first recorded words of Jesus to be something like, 'Hey guys. Love each other. Just be nice and kind to each other' which tends to be the extent of the liberal reimaging of Jesus. But no. Instead, *'the Kingdom*

of God is close at hand. Repent...’ But this makes perfect sense. If this Gospel is the story of a new creation, then the old creation must be dealt with. In Mark’s mind, this is done by aligning ourselves with God’s kingdom. Now, we say ‘sorry’ in the hope of restoring our damaged relationships. In the same way, Jesus’ call to repentance is in the hope of restoring our damaged relationship with God. Acknowledging the need to repent reflects that change of heart necessary for that restoration. To share in the life of the kingdom the Lord Christ comes to proclaim, the first lesson we must learn is that we are on the wrong path and need to be brought back, we need to be *reoriented* to God.

Now, we can get caught up in an idea that repentance is only being about sin. Yes, repentance of sin *is* part of how we ought to understand the restoring of our relationship with God. We need to be real about sin. We need be honest about it. But to think of repentance *only* in terms of sin is perhaps unhelpful. The idea of repentance is much better conveyed in the idea of realignment, or reorientation. It carries with it the idea of changing path, changing the direction in which we are headed. Fallen human nature heads us in the direction of idolatry, to worship of the self or of false gods. Repentance seeks to bring us into line with the Truth and the True God.

But just as we tend to think of repentance simply in terms of sin, so we can also unhelpfully think of it only in terms of the personal. We all know the slogan: *I’m spiritual but not religious*. And the variation: *I don’t need to go to church to be a good Christian*. It’s a delusion of course. You can only know Christ through his church. And to love Christ is to love his church. As we see it presented to us in the Gospel today, there is a very clear sense of *the communal* nature of repentance. The Good News Christ comes to proclaim is the Good News of the *Kingdom*. A *kingdom* does not exist isolation! It is experienced in communion, in relation, with a whole lot of others. To speak of a kingdom is to speak of a society. This is the hard work of repentance. It’s hard enough to bring our own selves - to align our own hearts and minds - to the will of God. How much more to reorient a whole society, a community, or a church! But if we want to live the abundance of life God offers, we need to accept the need to change – personally and communally.

The challenge of communal repentance we see at work in the portion from the book of Jonah today, the Old Testament’s most reluctant prophet. We don’t hear much of that story in what is placed before us today. At the point in the story we pick up today, Jonah has (after his reluctant and stubborn refusals) finally submitted to the call of God. In other words, *he’s* repented. And he goes to Nineveh to proclaim to *them* the difficult word of repentance. The surprising part of the story for Jonah (and probably for the reader too) is that the great and debauched city *does* take note of Jonah’s words and *does* repent.

The example of Jonah shows how his personal repentance was necessary before he could effectively fulfil his mission. It’s easy for us to point and wag the finger, expecting our church or society to be something other. The church struggles for credibility, to have its voice heard, in large measures because of recent scandals. It will take several generations to restore any kind of moral authority. It’s the issue of integrity. Our lives – personally and communally – must reflect the life of holiness and grace we profess. Otherwise we merely playing at religion, and speaking to the wind.

The radical demands of turning to God is reflected in the call of the disciples. We are told that *at once* they leave their nets and follow him. There is here – as in much of Mark’s gospel - a sense of urgency, of importance. And of course, there is nothing more urgent than heeding the invitation of Christ! There is nothing more urgent than responding to his word. That’s where we so often get unstuck: trying to protect the institution, trying to be chaplain to the dominant culture, trying to be a social service agency. Sometimes the entire culture of a church needs to repent, to realign itself.

Christ calls us to repentance. As followers of Jesus we seek to reorient our lives back to God. But we also want the world around us to find its way to God, to his way, his truth, his life. It means we may have some hard things to say to those around us. But all that will ring hollow if it is not reflected in our own lives and in our own communities. May Christ’s Good News, then, take hold in us, so that it can be seen to be a truth for all. Amen.