

Mark 1:14-16; Jonah 3:1-10

Repentance

If you wanted a Remembrance Day Sermon today, I do have a cracking one ready... but I have it ready for 11.15, so you will need to come back then. This morning, for the preaching at least, you are getting the Third Sunday before Advent, which means Jonah and Mark and repentance. Repentance.

Why, someone said to me recently, does every single service here have to begin with confession? Must I always be looking, he said, for something I've done wrong? Some rule I've broken, something I can be sorry before God for? That is what God seems to want. He wants us all looking suitably downcast and guilty and 'I am not worthy', he wants us like the people of Nineveh in the Old Testament reading, all sackcloth and ashes and fasting and lamentation. Even Jesus is the same. Looking for a one line summary of his teaching, what does Mark come up with? The Kingdom of God has come near, *repent* and believe the good news. Sure there's Kingdom, sure there's Good News, but there it is, right at the heart of Jesus' message: *repent*.

So what it is to repent? Does it mean rigorously inspecting ourselves for moral faults, and beating ourselves up about them, bitterly regretting them and committing to change? You can tell by the way I put that that the answer is going to be no, not really. Because even if you had the strongest sense of personal sin imaginable. Even if you were absolutely convinced of the sheer wickedness of how you behaved, absolutely appalled by yourself, and absolutely resolved to change your ways - even then, you still wouldn't really be doing what Christianity means when it speaks of repentance.

So what does it mean? It means, quite simply, turning away from yourself, and looking at Jesus. Turning away from yourself, and looking at Jesus.

Now that certainly does apply when you've done bad things. A fairly good definition of being wicked is that you have an exalted view of yourself: that you live as if your needs, your desires, are more important than anyone else's. Your love for money leads you to pay someone else rubbish wages. Your love of sexual thrill is more important than the poor girl on the video, or your vows to your partner. Your love of power means that others can be ignored, bullied, hurt. You are important. Others are not. The wicked need to turn from themselves and look at Jesus, to look deep into his terrible severity, and to know in the end they will be called to account, that their lives will come crashing down in judgement. Turn away from yourself and look at Jesus.

But what about the not really wicked? Those not guilty of self-worship, who have not used and abused others. The people who can honestly say, by and large, that they did no harm. They even did quite a bit of good. They did their best; they were fundamentally fine. People like most of us like to think we are, most of the time. Maybe we even think it with a fair degree of truth. Well, the Gospel is the same. Turn away from yourself and look at Jesus. You weren't made just to be *fine*. You weren't made to do no harm. You were made to be like *Him* – for every fibre of you alight with joy and beauty and glory; everything about you utter, incandescent, costly love. You need to look at Jesus, to look deep into his overwhelming powerful beauty, to know that you are called to be so much more than you are. You need to be lifted out of your self-satisfaction. Turn away from yourself and look at Jesus.

The self-worshipping, the self-satisfied ... and the self-loathing. The people who are consumed with their own failure and smallness, the people trapped in their own misery. Who can only view themselves with dislike, even contempt, who can only hear the voice of self-condemnation, who think they're stupid and ugly and worthless. The Gospel is the same. Turn away from yourself, and look at Jesus. Look deep into his awesome gentle kindness. Know it as enveloping even you: unloveable, unbearable you. And know him as the Healer, the one who will not leave you wallowing, but will love you out of your prison. Turn away from yourself and look at Jesus.

That's what repentance is. As C.S. Lewis brilliantly put it, not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. Not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. Letting Jesus fill your thinking, your imagination, your heart: the severe, the beautiful, the kind Jesus. Saviour of the self-worshipping, the self-satisfied, and the self-loathing. Saviour, that is, of everyone, because at some point in our lives we all play each of those parts. Often simultaneously. The Gospel is always the same: turn away from yourself, and look at Jesus.

But how? How do you actually look at Jesus, whatever that means? He was here a long time ago; he's gone now. How do you look at him? Is it just a matter of trying to imagine him, or reading and thinking about Him? Well, you could do worse, and that's not a bad way to start. But actually, the central claim of the whole Gospel is that Jesus is alive. He's not just a distant historical figure you try to visualise or imagine: no, he's real, now, and reaches out to deal with people now. Indeed, that really, despite everything I've said so far, it's not first and foremost about us looking at Jesus; it's about Him looking at us. And even more than that, looking for us. Coming to find us, to lay hold of us and pull us out of ourselves.

And how does he come? Well, he promised to do it in several ways. When you spend time in prayer asking Him – not reeling off a list of things you want, but simply asking Him to come to you. Through listening to the apostles he sent to preach his Word and to those who came after them. Through the mysteries of baptism, and bread, and wine. And through the people he makes his own – that is, through each one of us. Think for a moment of how tremendous a claim that last one is. If you are a Christian, you are one of the ways Jesus reaches out and lays hold of everyone else. You become a channel of everything He is. You become, to the people around you, Jesus – the way we experience his utter severity, his overwhelming beauty, his awesome kindness. You're familiar with the idea of the Church as the Body of Christ – well, that's what it means. We give Jesus to each other.

Now you might think, and think quite rightly, gosh. That doesn't sound like the Church I know. That doesn't sound like the very half-hearted, mixed up, flawed bunch of inadequates that constitute St. Lawrence and every other congregation under the sun. And you would be right. There are so many ways in which the Church is not what it should be. As St. Paul said, now we see but in a mirror dimly. In some cases, and as we have seen this week in yet another disastrous, horrendous abuse scandal, very, very dimly. It takes immense faith to go on trusting the promise: that it is precisely through the gift of each other that God is going to save us from ourselves. As Paul also says, we walk by faith and not by sight.

In fact it takes even more than faith: it takes repentance. It takes turning away from ourselves, and from the disappointing reality of our fellow-Christians, and looking at Jesus. Left to itself, the Church is indeed just another tawdry, tired, boring institution. It is worse, in fact, because it pretended to be better. But this is the Gospel: the Church is *never* left to itself. Behind our collective self-worship, collective self-satisfaction, collective self-loathing there is always Jesus. Always His utter severity, His overwhelming beauty, His awesome kindness. We know them now dimly and in part. One day we will know them in all their fullness, and they will make us truly free.

And for that we give thanks to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.