

Repent and believe

Mark 1.14-20

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CS Lewis, that wellknown writer, compared humankind with ignorant children. It seems so hard for humans to believe the Gospel. People are, Lewis says, like “an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

How can someone who has not seen the great Kingdom of God make up his mind, and follow Jesus Christ?

That is truly the core-business of the Holy Spirit. To open our eyes, to change our mind and to change our life. Our gospel-reading today is about this issue of radical change.

1. Good News - the Kingdom is at hand

Jesus had been baptised by John the Baptist. This was a real God-moment - the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus to give him power for his ministry.

But then, John the Baptist was arrested. There are times when good people suffer for being good. He had been too outspoken about the truth regarding the illegitimate wife of King Herod.

John was arrested and eventually killed because in the power of the Holy Spirit he spoke truth to the political powers of his days. In many countries today such honest prophetic voices also have to fear for their lives.

Our Lord Jesus left the area of Jerusalem when John was arrested, probably because he wanted to avoid that he was arrested too. That would have been too early. So He left for Galilee, where the religious and political leaders of Jerusalem did not have much influence. And in Galilee, Jesus could freely continue his preaching.

Jesus proclaimed the good news of God, and this good news was, that the Kingdom of God was very close, it was at hand.

There is no doubt that in his days, many Jews who heard Jesus preach about the Kingdom, confused this with their political views of a restored land of Israel. Had



God not promised this so often in the Old Testament? John preached against King Herod, and was Jesus not also a subversive preacher who wanted to make King Herod tumble down?

But for political revolutionaries, Jesus was a bit of a disappointment. If people took time to listen well to Jesus, they found out that he spoke of something wider, and deeper. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual realm, not a political organization.

The Kingdom He spoke about, had to do with the reign of God in the lives of people, in his church, yes, eventually culminating in the reign of God over the whole world.

This was good news. In a world where people like John get arrested for speaking truth, and even beheaded, we need this vista, this hope on the horizon.

If you are sick and tired. Maybe literally, physically. Then you need this hope that one day, God will make all things new.

If you are sick and tired of injustice in this world, of child labor, of how women are exploited, of lying politicians, hunger and poverty, then we need this hope that God will restore justice.

If you are sick and tired of yourself. You had such great plans to be a better person, but see how you royally mess up again and again. Then we need hope that God will make all things new - including us.

Jesus said 2000 years ago that his Kingdom was at hand. We must take his words seriously. He was not only talking of God's renewal of this world, eventually, but his Kingdom really came after He rose from the dead and when the Holy Spirit entered into the life of the church.

God's Kingdom has come - Jesus has inaugurated his rule over us. You are, today, part of his domain; a temple of the Holy Spirit. And God's Kingdom will come - as He will make all things new.

Jesus came to lead us into this Kingdom of God. The door is open; heaven is open. His voice, even today, sounds loud and clear: repent, believe, and be baptized. And the Holy Spirit is at work to ensure that we listen and that we do it.

Repentance and faith - maybe you think: been there, done that, but bear with me.

2. Repent and believe

Repent, Jesus says, that is the proper response to his announcement that his Kingdom is near. The Greek word for repent is metanoia. This literally means a change of mind.

It means a change of how you look at things.

Have you noticed how many men have lately 'repented' after they were accused of sexual abuse of women? After they were found out, and media began to report, and there was no way they could deny, then they showed remorse.

I cannot look in the heart of those men, but we all know our own heart. We tend to confuse two things - sorrow for the consequences of sin and sorrow for sin itself.

Many people are desperately sorry because of the mess that sin has got them into, but I suspect that, if people can be reasonably sure that they can escape the consequences, they might do the same thing again. It is often not the sin that people hate; it is the consequences of being found out.

This is not the change of heart Jesus speaks about.

Real repentance means that a man has come to hate wrong behaviour because that behaviour is wrong. There is something really wrong with us.

But that is hard to admit. If you do not know that a heavenly Father waits for you with open arms; if you do not know that this heavenly Father loves you in spite of your dark side; if you do not know that through Jesus full pardon is offered; then remorse can be hard, awful, painful.

If you see yourself as you are, without the hope of the Gospel, this may be self-destructive.

This is why Jesus does not only say that we must repent; he also mentions that we must believe.

We have to believe in the hope of the Gospel and in God's plan of renewal for our lives. We have to take Jesus at his word, to believe that God is the kind of God that Jesus told us about, that God so loves the world that He will make any sacrifice to bring us back to himself.

If we have such faith, we are able to also see the truth about our dark side. About our sin. Without such hope in God, to be truthful may be too hard for us.

But if we repent with our heart and believe with our heart that Jesus Christ is Lord - the King of the Kingdom, then we are safe in the hands of the loving Father.

You have been there, done that? Great! We need to be able to look back on our life and say, yes, I repented, yes I do believe, I am part of his Kingdom. Thank God!

But repentance is not a one-off thing and it is not only the beginning of the Christian life. As Christians we continually experience the dialectic of knowing God, repenting, knowing him better, repenting, and so on.

We are never ready with the process because we are not perfect yet. And the closer

we live with God, the closer we are to the light, the better we see the darkness in ourselves.

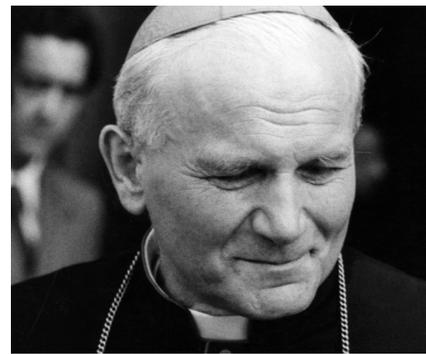
So it is logical that the longer you are a Christian, the more the torchlight of the Holy Spirit makes your dark spots visible to yourself.

Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, p. 13, says about this:

Authentic knowledge of the God of mercy, the God of tender love, is a constant and inexhaustible source of conversion, not only as a momentary interior act but also as a permanent attitude, as a state of mind.

We never stop turning our mind and life to God again.

We have to renew our conversion again and again, even after being Christians for a long time. Today's Eucharist is a good moment to renew your commitment.



3. Empty your hands, drop the nets

Peter, and Andrew, and James and John, they converted when Jesus passed by and called them to follow him.

They had to let go of the nets they used for fishing; they had to let go of the work on the boat; they were asked to leave their father and their family business behind.

On the part of these four men, this needed courage.

To let go of what you hold, is hard enough. And then

there were dangers involved - John had just been arrested; if they followed Jesus, what would happen to them?

Beside that, James and John were cousins of Jesus - they were sons of Salome, sister of Mary, mother of Jesus. Would they really listen to their cousin commanding them to follow him?

But they did and this meant a radical change for them. They gave up their work.

This is not very common for people who are asked to follow Jesus. St Paul tells the believers in Corinth that they should continue in the jobs that they had at the time when God called them.

For our Lord, your job, if you have one, is fine.

The first disciples that Jesus called had to drop their work - they had to follow Jesus, away from the Sea of Galilee, away from their fishing business.

At that time, according to Josephus the historian, who was governor of Galilee at one time, there were about 330 fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee.

Peter, Andrew, James and John now had to leave it, to become part of the small elite of Jesus' stormtroops. They had, as apostles, a very special call.

Jesus calls us too - to conversion and to believe, and we all come with empty hands to him. We have nothing to offer him.

But it is enough if we give ourselves to him, and that is exactly what our Christian life is about. William Barclay, an Anglican theologian, wrote some good words about what happens when Jesus calls people.

Jesus did not say to them, "I have a theological system which I would like you to investigate; I have certain theories that I would like you to think over; I have an ethical system I would like to discuss with you." He said, "Follow me!" It all began with a personal reaction to himself; it all began with that tug on the heart which begets the unshakeable loyalty.

Follow me, Jesus said, and immediately they followed him. Jesus did not give them the option to say no. It is Jesus who chooses them. He interfered in the lives of the apostles just as He interferes in your life, without seeking your permission: He is your Lord.

When we are faced with him, as we are today, we have no other option but to follow him, to turn our hearts to him, away from what is wrong and towards him. And to believe in Him.

Conclusion

And Jesus does then not offer us a lazy chair. He gave his first disciples a task, and not an easy one actually. And 2000 years later, He is still calling people to follow him, and He gives us work to do. What work? To love God and to love our neighbor.

That is not about feelings, but about actions. Sure, love needs motivation that only the Holy Spirit can give - but it must, it must, it must lead to action.

Our challenging task is full obedience.

Let us commit ourselves to following him - again. As we have done so often probably. But conversion is that process of again and again turning our hearts to God.

Let us have our priorities right. Let us turn away from wrong, and turn our hearts and minds to what is right. And believe in him, our Lord and our God who has made our life right with God.

Jesus says: follow me, so that is what we do.

+ Amen