

Repent and Believe

Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 25th January 2009.

Texts: Jonah 3.1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7.29-31; Mark 1.14-20 and Psalm 62.5-end

Lord Jesus, call us, that we may follow. Amen.

When I was a student in Cambridge, I did quite a bit of street preaching. I don't think my street sermons ever did any of my listeners any good. But I did learn a number of very important things from the whole experience. One of these was how non-church-goers understood, or more accurately, misunderstood, the words Christians use. So, for example, when we say the word 'sin', what comes into the average person's mind is almost invariably 'sex' – they think, sadly with some justification, that Christians are hung up about that particular department of life. And so when we say 'Repent and believe!', what they will take us to mean is something like this: 'Stop screwing your boyfriend's sister, and come to church for some religion!' And, again, they have some justification in thinking so, because we Christians have succeeded, by and large, in turning 'repent' and 'believe' into churchy words dealing with a 'privatised', 'religious' compartment of life.

But when Jesus said those words at the beginning of his ministry, he almost certainly had something quite different in mind:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

To help us figure out what Jesus might have meant when he said, 'Repent and believe!', and how his first listeners might have understood him, we turn to the first-century Jewish writer, Flavius Josephus. Josephus came from an aristocratic priestly family, and was made commander of Galilee by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem during the so-called Jewish revolt in the late 60s AD that eventually brought down the Temple. Josephus was originally for armed revolt; but he rapidly changed his mind, and thought that the best thing for the Jews was to work with the Romans rather than revolt against them. He was an aristocrat, and had much to lose if the country was laid waste. His agenda didn't make him very popular with the various militia leaders in the region; but it didn't stop Josephus using military and rhetorical cunning to persuade them. Let me tell you what he tried to do in his own words. In his autobiography, which he wrote in Greek, Josephus said this:

I perceived ... that there was a great many very much elevated in hopes of a revolt ... I therefore endeavoured to put a stop to these tumultuous persons, and persuaded them to change their minds ... [I] desired them not ... to bring on the dangers of the most terrible mischiefs upon their country, upon their families and upon themselves.

It is very interesting that the Greek word translated there as 'to change their minds' is the word *metanoiēn*, which throughout the New Testament is translated as 'to repent'. 'To change one's mind' in fact corresponds to the way the word is made up: the noun

metanoia is made up of *meta* – change, and *noia*, mind. In using the word this way, Josephus was following the Old Testament. In fact, quite remarkably, the word ‘repent’ in the Old Testament is very often used of God. Our reading today has an example of that. When the people of Nineveh took Jonah’s words to heart, we read

God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

You’ve probably guessed it. When the NRSV says ‘God changed his mind’, most other versions have ‘God repented’. Significantly, in the Greek Old Testament familiar to Mark and his first-century audience, the word chosen to translate the Hebrew here was ‘*metanoein*’.

Returning to Josephus, let me tell you about another episode in his autobiography that takes us directly to the heart of our Gospel reading today. Josephus had discovered that the leader of an armed band, confusingly for Christians also called Jesus, was plotting to kill him. With considerable military cunning, Josephus managed to corner this Jesus on his own. I will let Josephus take up his own story:

[I told Jesus] that I was not ignorant of the plot which he had contrived against me ...; I would, nevertheless, condone his actions if he would show repentance and prove his loyalty to me. All this he promised ...

‘If he would show repentance and prove his loyalty to me’ could just as well have been translated ‘if he would *repent and believe* in me’. Exactly the same group of words are used here as in Mark 1:14 – “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; *repent, and believe* in the good news.”

As I said at the beginning, if we stand up in the middle of Prince’s Street and read that out, most passers by would think we’re asking them to give up sinning and take up religion. But it is completely clear that in using these words, Josephus was *not* challenging the guerrilla leader to give up sinning and have a religious experience! Instead, he was asking this Jesus to give up his agenda of armed revolt, and put his trust in Josephus’ peaceful coexistence agenda instead. ‘Repent and believe in me’ – give up your agenda and take up mine instead! He was challenging the guerrilla leader to make a U-turn in his whole way of thinking.

I think when Jesus of Nazareth was walking the length and breadth of Galilee some 30-odd years before Josephus proclaiming the Kingdom of God and asking people to ‘repent and believe in the good news’, he meant, and his audience understood, something very similar. Armed revolt was already in the air by then. Like Josephus, Jesus was challenging the Jews to give up the military agenda. But unlike Josephus, Jesus was not offering a compromise. No, he was proposing an uncompromising, risky way for Israel to be the servant of God, a counter-agenda on how to be a light to the nations. While many of his contemporaries, almost certainly including one called Judas Iscariot, were signing up to an agenda of violent uprising, Jesus was proposing an agenda of turning the other cheek and going the second mile, of losing one’s life to gain it. When we hear Jesus say in Mark 1:15, ‘Repent and believe!’, I think that was what he meant; I think that was how his contemporaries heard him.

Immediately after Jesus had said that, he called his first disciples among the fisher folk along the Sea of Galilee: 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' In other words, 'Make my agenda your agenda, and I will send you out to recruit others, too.' We are the people today who have answered that call.

Notice there is nothing particularly 'religious' about any of this. Indeed, if I am right, then in the original context, the meaning of the words 'Repent and believe!' was overwhelmingly political. That was exactly how Jesus' enemies saw it, Jews and Roman alike. That was why Jesus was executed as a political prisoner. I think one of the greatest tragedies for the church and for the world alike is that both have tended to reduce the meaning of these words to a narrowly 'religious' sphere. Such 'privatisation' robs them of much of their force.

The Archbishop of Canterbury did not have this 'privatised' sense of the word in mind when he used the word 'repentance' in his pre-Christmas interview on the Today programme on Radio 4 about the current economic crisis. The interviewer betrayed his privatised understanding of the Christian gospel when he remarked how strange it was talking to an Archbishop about economics. But Rowan Williams does not have a privatised faith. The archbishop says that the current economic crisis has its origins in 'the understandable seduction of ... quick profit'. That is why he thinks the language of 'repentance' is appropriate. Archbishop Rowan then reminds his listeners that

When the bible uses the word repentance, it does not just mean beating the breast, it means getting a new perspective.

'Getting a new perspective' – that is another way of saying 'give up your agenda, take up a new one'. In the context of the current economic crisis, we have to give up what the Archbishop calls the 'fairy gold' perspective, and take up a new perspective in which there is, he says, 'a realistic sense of how long it takes sustainable wealth to be built.'

Jesus, of course, did not discuss 'sub-prime mortgages' or 'credit crunch'. But he lived *the* exemplary life to tell us what his agenda looked like in the context of first-century Palestine. To many, this looked like a supremely foolish agenda: it ended up on the gallows – a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, as Paul said. But the empty tomb vindicated Jesus' agenda, and he continues to call us to 'repent and believe', to change our minds and take up *his* agenda.

This will not be an easy task in today's dauntingly complex world. Moreover, the cross alerts us to the fact that the Jesus agenda will, more often than not, turn conventional wisdom up side down. Take a simple example. Conventional wisdom is that we should not give to street beggars, because some of them are cheats, making a living, perhaps even quite a good living, out of our sympathy. So if we give as a matter of course to street beggars, we will look foolish. If we don't, we can, of course, be sure of never suffering the loss of giving to cheats. But if no one gives, then we can also be sure that those who are genuinely needy, those who have really fallen through all the safety nets, will be left out in the cold, sometimes literally. So what is the Jesus agenda for this issue?

There is no easy answer. Implementing the Jesus agenda over the same issue may even mean doing different things for different people. I may be called to the foolishness of liberal giving of money; you, on the other hand, may be called to the foolishness of giving your time for the poor in some way. But the point is that we are all committed to seeking this agenda, individually and as a church – the Bible calls it ‘seeking God’s kingdom’. When we come to the communion rail later on in this service, we are saying that we have heard Jesus’ call to ‘repent and believe’. In other words, we are a people who have pledged to give up our own agenda, and take up the Jesus’ ‘bread and wine’ agenda, the ‘bread and wine’ being a proclamation of his death.

Fortunately, we are not alone in seeking to fulfil this calling, just as Jesus was not alone in seeking his Father’s agenda. Two weeks ago we celebrated the baptism of Jesus. Remember that this was what Mark told us:

Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. (1:10)

The indwelling Spirit – that was how Jesus discerned his Father’s agenda back then. That is how we will discern Jesus’ agenda today. Indeed, it is because we have the Spirit of Christ that Paul could say (in 1 Cor. 2:15) that ‘we have the mind of Christ’. This is the ‘changed mind’ spoken of in the word *metanoia*, ‘repentance’.

How are you and I as individuals, how are we as a church, doing with our repentance? I think that is the question God is challenging us to reflect on as we move towards from Epiphany to Lent. Let us pray.

Lord, we hear your call to ‘repent and believe’. Fill us with your spirit, that we may live out this call, individually, and as a church. Amen.