

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Second Sunday of Advent

Readings: [Baruch 5](#), [Philippians 3.1-11](#), [Luke 3.1-6](#)

8 December 2024

We don't make life easy for our politicians. On the one hand we berate them if they have views that differ from us and are closed to argument. On the other we don't like them changing their minds. We demean it as weak and unprincipled. They simply cannot win.

The recent debate on the Assisted Dying Bill saw some of the best of Parliament in a long time. We heard MPs speak from their experience of loved ones living in pain and of family and friends coping with caring for those who are in pain. MPs also spoke of their own deeply held beliefs, whether based on faith or not. Interestingly, some spoke of how they had changed their minds over the years. With this Bill they are facing an extraordinarily difficult decision; I am not going to go into the issue itself today but am of course happy to discuss it with people. We should, however, be glad that there are many MPs who are willing to change their minds based on experience or rational debate. We should beware of creating a climate where it is seen as a weakness to admit you were wrong and have changed your mind because of new evidence, better arguments or lived experience.

Turning around is a thoroughly biblical principle. Time and again in the Hebrew scriptures the prophets call on the people to repent. In their different ways and contexts the likes of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Jonah call on the people of Israel and beyond to repent of their sins and to live in righteousness, holiness and justice. They urge the people to abandon their idols and to live in obedience to the living God. In today's first reading Baruch tells the people to change their clothes and turn to the east to see what God is doing.

In today's gospel we find John doing the same. But he makes it clear that if they repent and are baptised they can be forgiven their sins. And like his predecessors his call to repentance is a warning that God is about to act and they do not want to find themselves on the wrong side of God's judgement. As George Caird writes in his lovely, if now dated commentary on Luke, "John's baptism was a symbolic act of [the] prophetic kind, the purpose of which was to convey to [people] not merely what God was saying to them but what he was already beginning to do with

and for them.” [G B Caird, *Saint Luke*, Penguin 1963]. But if he calls on them to abandon their ways, John also offers baptism as a cleansing from sin and an amnesty from what had gone before. His hearers are given the opportunity to draw a line in the sand, to put the past behind them and to ready themselves for what God is doing. God was about to come into their midst in a decisive way and they needed to be ready to receive his salvation.

Repentance can be understood in a variety of ways and the situation is complicated by the number of languages involved between John the Baptist and us. While the Old Testament prophets spoke Hebrew, John, like Jesus, most likely spoke Aramaic, the main language in the Eastern Mediterranean in the first century of our era. The gospels were written in Greek and we are reading and reflecting on them in English. We are making our way through several languages between John the Baptist and ourselves, and, as we know, the sense of words changes every time they are translated. In the New Testament the Greek word *metanoia* is translated as repent but is fundamentally about turning around, going a different way. We need to get away from the reductionist tendency to see repentance as about being sorry and giving a grovelling apology so that we can be forgiven. It is about turning around, changing how we are living, doing things differently. Eduard Schweizer puts it like this: “Repentance leads to forgiveness of sins. For Luke it is not just the act of faith but rather the associated turning from ‘everything’ old, ‘conversion’ or ‘turning’ from wicked works to good.” [E Schweizer, *The Good News according to Luke*, SPCK 1964].

Repentance, preparing for what God is doing, must be seen in concrete actions in our everyday lives. This will of course differ according to our different situations and our particular shortcomings so I can only pick up on two examples which are pertinent to this moment.

We are currently hosting *The Souls of our Shoes* installation which exhibits the shoes of those who suffer gender-based violence. Each pair of shoes has a short message by them such as “You would not like to walk in my shoes.” or “It happens to grandmothers too.” or “At uni I fell in love, but my mum was right about him all along.” Each pair of shoes gives a hint of different situations in which women are being subjected to violence in their own homes. We are now approaching the end of 16 days of activism to raise awareness of violence against women and girls, and we should be grateful to the Mothers’ Union for its part in promoting this important campaign. The facts are brutal. We are living in a world where a woman is killed every ten minutes, and in around 60% of cases by their partner or a close family member. Many more, of course, suffer domestic violence

routinely; one in every three women. While we take part in this morning's service several women are dying at the hands of someone close to them. And in this congregation, there will most likely be women who have suffered domestic violence. There is **no** excuse for domestic violence.

The women and girls who suffer domestic violence are not looking for a grovelling apology. They need those responsible for it to turn around, to change, to stop hitting, beating, or killing women and girls. It is worthless to say sorry if the violence continues.

But our sins and shortcomings are not just about what we have done. They can also be about what we do not do. This is, of course, something which the Church of England is in the news at the moment. Our repeated shortcomings as a church have resulted in children and adults suffering abuse at the hands of those who exercised some level of power in the church. We continue to lament with those who have suffered such abuse and stand in solidarity with them, listening to them, pressing for redress and taking steps to ensure such abuse cannot happen in the future. But as we are aware, the recently published Makin report has highlighted the failure of some people within the Church of England to do what they should have done in dealing with a particularly notorious abuser. Because of what he and others failed to do our Archbishop has resigned. His shortcoming is about what he did not do, rather than what he did. And we hope this will be the trigger to ensuring the right steps are taken so that our safeguarding is robust going forward with clear, effective and accountable procedures. And thank you to all of you who have done your bit undergoing safeguarding training and following the correct procedures. Please God we all learn from this and do **all** that is asked of us to safeguard others and to report concerns.

All of this is a reminder that sometimes repentance is needed for what has not been done, rather than for something that has been done. And that of course will apply to all of us albeit in very different ways depending on our situations and the opportunities presented to us. All of us are likely to have things we have not done for which we need to repent.

With just two weeks to go, we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the decisive act of God in human history, and we are looking forward to all things being gathered up in him at the end of time. In the meantime, we hear again the call of John the Baptist to repent of what we have done and of what we have failed to do. Let us pray for grace to turn around and follow Jesus in all things.

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