

Repent ...

... a change of mind is required

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, on 26 January 2020, in Beverley Minster.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

I wonder, when was the last time you changed your mind? I don't mean when did you change your mind about something trivial, like whether to have chips or salad with your supper. But when did you last go through a major change of direction, like changing a job or moving house because you had outgrown whatever it was you were doing before. Here in the church, we talk about change quite a bit, but we're not really that good at doing it. I think the reason for that is because we're always trying to be nice to each other (with varying degrees of success), we try not to rock the boat too much, and many of us are so conscious of the chequered history of the church that we don't want to say anything to the outside world that sounds judgmental or authoritarian or heavy handed - there's been too much of that sort of thing in the past. So when we present ourselves to the wider world, we try to be as non-threatening as possible. We emphasise how much we want to help people: can we baptise your baby or prepare you for your wedding? We try to make ourselves useful by offering activities or events that folk can make use of: mums and toddlers group; a family fun day; games afternoon. We hope that people will find us attractive and want to join us and maybe decide to follow Jesus for themselves.

And that, of course, is the snag. Because at some point, the person who looks at the church as the provider of a service, who comes with the attitude of a consumer, wondering what sort of deal they can get that will reinforce their sense of well-being ... at some point, such folk will face the challenge of what we call discipleship: the challenge of a change of mind. And in this morning's gospel reading from Matthew, we see the very beginning of Jesus's public ministry. He's just been baptised by John the Baptist and been tested and prepared in the wilderness. And now he's left home to go to Capernaum and begin his work. And what's the very first thing he says? "Repent. Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." There's

nothing here about how can I help you? How can I meet you where you are? How can I affirm you exactly as you are? Jesus's very first word is actually quite confrontational: "Repent."

People sometimes misunderstand repentance because it's not a judgemental kind of word. When we say you have to repent, it's not saying we think you're especially bad or a wicked kind of person. It's simply a summons to change direction, to change your mind at a fairly fundamental level. Long ago, the Jewish historian Josephus wrote a history of the war between the Jewish people and the Romans, in which he took part as a military commander. And at one point in his history, he describes how he uncovered a plot to murder him. And he confronted the ringleader, had him arrested and brought before him, and challenged this man to "Repent and believe in me." Those are the words Josephus used of the ringleader of a plot. Josephus clearly wasn't inviting the leader of this plot to have some sort of religious experience. Rather, he was challenging the man to change his mind, to stop fighting against Josephus and instead to join him to change direction. And that's what Jesus is doing when he calls people to repent, to submit to him and embrace HIS programme instead of their own. The programme represented by the Kingdom of God, with its emphasis on peace and justice for all.

And for you and me to repent for the sake of the Kingdom of God is to change direction radically. Jesus is inviting us to give up our own programme, our own way of deciding how to live, and instead to embrace his priorities. Elsewhere he puts it in terms of taking up our cross and following him; in the Epistle reading this morning, Paul uses the language of the foolishness of the cross. We are being invited to come on a journey which will be hard and outwardly unrewarding, but will ultimately make us more human, more real and more loving. But this is not really a message most of the world wants to hear, and it probably never did. But it jars especially in the modern world, where we expect everything to be laid on for our own benefit. And it's not a message that the church, if we're honest, is very good at delivering. One of the great theologians of the late 20th century was a man called Lesslie Newbigin, who spent most of his life as a missionary in India. But when he came back to the West, he said that the church has been very good at sharing Jesus's summons to 'come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.' But he said we've been rather less good at sharing Jesus's command to 'Go ye, therefore, and make

disciples of all nations.' At some point on our spiritual journey, if we are to go any further, we have to be willing to flip over: to stop being religious consumers demanding to be fed with comforting and familiar experiences, and instead to become committed and faithful disciples following a vocation, venturing out of our comfort zones because we sense that our spiritual health and our own integrity demands it. The religious consumer is concerned only with their own desires and needs and preferences. But the disciple of Jesus Christ is hearing the call to repent; to change sides; to respond to something beyond; something other; something not of ourselves, but much bigger. And doing that is really exciting, not least because it feels so real: it places us alongside those first disciples who heard Jesus's call to "follow me, and I will make you fish for people." They wouldn't have done that by themselves - it was in response to Jesus who drew them forwards into something new, but which is still in continuity with their old lives: they were still fishermen; still using the old skills; drawing on past experience, but in the service of a new master. And Jesus still calls you and me today - to leave behind our old independence and self-sufficiency, and to repent: to change our minds; to change direction. Because by doing so, we shall find fulfilment and humanity and grace, and in the process, we shall also be making his kingdom a reality and bringing it nearer.

Reading Texts

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

¹⁰ Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹² What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 4:12-23

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵ "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ²³ Jesus went

throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.