

## REPENT : CHOOSE LIFE

Happy New Year! Some of you may have heard the story of the teacher who asked all the members of her class to make a New Year Resolution to read more. After a month she asked the class how many of them had succeeded in spending more time reading. Only one boy said that he had and that he was now reading more. That's great said the teacher. Perhaps you can tell the rest of the class how you have achieved that. It was really easy, replied the boy, I just put the subtitles onto my TV. New Year is, of course, always associated with making resolutions to make our lives better, resolutions that usually don't last long. . How many of you made a resolution? Have you kept it so far?

John the Baptist saw it as his role to get people to make a very important resolution. So our church lectionary readings are particularly apt for the start of a new year. John the Baptist was a first century celebrity who could attract massive crowds. Like many modern celebrities he grabbed people's attention by his behaviour: he wore weird clothes, he ate strange food, he made controversial statements. People flocked to hear him, and again like many modern celebrities, he grabbed their attention with a catch-phrase that no one could forget. It was **REPENT**.

Today we tend to associate the word repent with being remorseful or regretful. And there is plenty for the human race to be remorseful about. Global warming. The ever-increasing gap between rich and poor. The wars and conflict in Gaza, in Ukraine and in so many other parts of the world. And what about our more personal failing that we should regret? The bad things we've said and done. And the good things we've failed to say and do. Each of us if we're honest can come up with a list of things we don't like about ourselves. However, I don't think John's concept of repentance was fundamentally just about contrition, vitally important though that is. His main focus was not on what we should be turning from. It was on **who we should be turning to**. For him repentance meant not just recognising our failings. It meant actively turning to God.

When John called on people to repent through baptism I don't think he was asking them to list their sins. He was asking them to make a public promise that they would always look to God in whatever situation they were in and they would always seek to do whatever God asked of them. **So why did John make baptism a sign of turning to God?** The usual answer given to that is that it symbolised the washing away of our sins. Jews were used to the concept of using water to symbolically wash away all that defiled you. Ceremonial hand-washing was an everyday ritual and many places had purification tanks in which you could immerse yourself completely. Not surprisingly therefore the early Christian associated baptism with having their sins washed away. In our reading from Mark's gospel John's message is described as 'a gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles Peter speaks of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that follows baptism. And in a subsequent verse that the lectionary strangely did not include, Peter goes on to say to the crowd: So rise and be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on God's name.

God does wash away sins but, if John's baptism was just about symbolising that, why did he choose to use the River Jordan? Why didn't he just use the purification tanks? I think the reason for that is because the River Jordan had its own long-standing symbolism. It was the River Jordan that the Israelites had to cross to reach the Promised Land. And this is what the Book of Deuteronomy records Moses as saying about the significance of entering its waters:

God, your God, will cut away the thick calluses on your heart and your children's hearts, freeing you to love God, your God, with your whole heart and soul and [freeing you] to live, really live... And you will make a new start, listening obediently to God, keeping all his commandments... [provided there is] nothing halfhearted here; you must return to God, your God, totally, heart and soul, holding nothing back... [This] isn't too much for you, it's not out of your reach... Just do it!... Love God, your God. Walk in his ways. Keep his commandments, regulations, and rules so that you will live, really live, live exuberantly, blessed by God, your God, in the land you are about to enter and possess.... I place before you Life and Death, Blessing and Curse. Choose life so that you and your children will live.

I think John wanted every person he baptised in the river to be saying in their head: **I WILL TURN TO GOD. I WILL LET HIM CHANGE ME. I WILL MAKE A NEW START. I WILL DO WHAT GOD WANTS. I WILL WALK IN GOD'S WAY. I WILL CHOOSE LIFE. I WILL CHOOSE LIFE FOR MY SAKE AND FOR MY CHILDREN'S SAKE. I WILL CHOOSE LIFE AND ENTER THE PROMISED LAND**

Because John the Baptist's message of repentance was all about turning to God he was obviously surprised when Jesus turned up for baptism in the Jordan, There was no need for Jesus to turn to God because he was the Messiah, the chosen one.

So why did Jesus turn up to be publicly baptised? None of us can know for sure but I think Jesus knew his public ministry would prove exceptionally difficult and dangerous and he knew he was not immune from temptation. I think it mattered to him to make that public statement: **I WILL TURN TO GOD, I WILL DO WHAT GOD WANTS, AND I WILL CHOOSE LIFE.** And in that moment when Jesus declares his total commitment to doing what God wants he hears God's response.: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'. After then Jesus goes straight into the desert and turns to God to help him overcome all the temptations that might make him turn his back on what God wants him to say and do. **GET BEHIND ME, SATAN** becomes his mantra in the face of temptation. When Jesus returns from that desert he starts to preach the gospel. And what was his message? Like John, he called on the people to repent, to turn to God : *'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'* BUT he also adds something that John was unable to say. He says: *'I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it abundantly'*.

In 2 Corinthians Paul explained what he thought Jesus meant by life abundant. He wrote this: It means **God will give you what you need in all you face and and at all times, and you will abound in every good work.** So life abundant is about much more than just forgiveness. **It's about receiving God's GRACE.** It's God's grace that equips us and empowers us.

Most of you know that I'm an expert in early Methodist history. I've recently been reading some of the issues of a quarterly magazine that John Wesley produced in the eighteenth century. The aim of the magazine was to publish items that might encourage the reader's faith - it contains not just articles, sermons, and hymns, but a wealth of personal testimonies contained in letters and extracts from diaries. It was these personal testimonies that I found compelling. Individuals from all walks of life, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, simply telling their story, talking about why and how they turned to God and what a difference that had then made. It made me realise just how wonderful God's grace can be in a person's life. Not just for a day or a week or a month or a year but for an entire lifetime. Among the letters in one issue were some written by a 21 year old called

Mary Boasquet. Here, for example, is Mary describing the moment when, having turned to God, Jesus fully entered her life:

I felt a calmness overspread my spirit..I said in my heart ‘Thy will be done! Thy will be done! and the love of God brought an unspeakable peace into my soul...My love to all changed... [Now] I know I am in Jeus’s hands and I want to be what he would have me be...I want to walk in his way...so that every breath I draw, every word I speak, every drop of my blood, and every grain of my strength may be holinees to the Lord... I want Jesus to be all in all.

Mary’s subsequent history is a fascinating one as she responded to what she felt God wanted her to do. When she inherited some money she used it to open a home for young destitute girls. She literally picked them off the streets of London, dirty, vermin-ridden and diseased. And gave them a home and love and an education that would enable to find work. Then later, again in response to God’s call, she broke all society’s conventions and became a woman preacher in Yorkshire travelling across the bleak moors from village to village and working also in some of the big towns like Leeds. At the age of 42 she became a vicar’s wife in Madeley in Shropshire and she felt called to share in all his work - she visited the sick, taught in the church school, led housegroups , and preached at five to seven meetings a day. When her husband died from typhoid just four years after their marriage she stayed on in the parish and dominated the religious life of the area till her death thirty years later. Listen to this: it a morning prayer that she wrote for herself to say. Its Mary daily turning to God :

O Lord Take my soul and body’s powers and let them be at your disposal this day. I renew my...[promise] to be obedient to thy will. .. Give me this day to watch every moment that I may not lose one oppportunity .. of doing good either to the souls or bodies of men..Let me strive to offer happiness or comfort on everyone ...May I lie at thy feet and, listening to thy voice, have power to obey it...May I discern the deep truths... and comprehend the length and breadth and depth and height of incomprehensible love.

The people she served regarded her as a saint but Mary knew she wasn’t - she knew her failings and her weaknesses. She said all she had dome throughout her life was say: I’ll use the little I’ve got and I’ll let God make it into something bigger if he chooses to do so. Our New Year resolutions usually fade and fail because we just rely on our own strength. Life abundant is a life in which we are never just dependant on our own strength. We are offered, as Mary found, a God-given joy, a God-given sense of peace, a God-given love, a God-given sense of hope - gifts that the world cannot take from us. If have life abundant we will really want to say and do good things, we will really love our neighbours. This kind of faith is transformational and it remains transformational throughout our lives. And indeed beyond. Because all that we have experienced is just a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Here’s a final extract from Mary’s writings Its the very last words she wrote before her death at the age of 76:

I seem very near death but I long to fly into the arms of my beloved Lord. I feel his loving kindness surrounds me.

Resolutions you know don’t have to be confined to 1 January. We can make a vow whenever we choose. My prayer is that all of us at St Luke’s will make it our vow to make sure we heed John the Baptist’s call to keep turning to God in all that we face, in all that we do. That each of us will vow,

as the people who were baptised in the Jordan, vowed: I WILL TURN TO GOD. I WILL LET HIM CHANGE ME. I WILL MAKE A NEW START. I WILL DO WHAT GOD WANTS. I WILL WALK IN GOD'S WAY. I WILL CHOOSE LIFE.

With that in mind I've produced a piece of paper for you. I invite you to pin it up somewhere in your house. It has on it the word : REPENT and I've simply used the letters that form that word to act as a reminder of what both John and Jesus recommended us to do if want to live our lives to the full:

- R - Reach out to God
- E - Embrace his love
- P - Pray for him to enter your heart
- E - Experience his forgiveness
- N - Never turn your back on what God wants
- T - Trust God to give you joy, peace, hope, love - life abundant

May we all turn to God in whatever situation we find ourselves. May we all be recipients of God's forgiving love. May we all walk in the steps of Christ. May we all be blessed with the gifts of his grace . May we all, like Mary, feel surrounded by God's loving kindness.

**GMB 7 Jan 2024**