

John the Baptist proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” to the crowds from Jerusalem who came to see his odd ministry at the Jordan River this was a shocking message. The hardest thing to do in life is to maintain our integrity. Sin has entered the human soul precisely at this point. We are not, most of us, evil people. We’re rather nice, aren’t we? There’s much that we do that’s good, fine, noble, kind, and wise, and no one can deny that.

Here’s the problem: Whatever else sin might do in our lives, it first and foremost perforates the lines of our hearts and lets us tear off a piece here and a piece there until we find ourselves segmented, fragmented, torn apart in separate snippets of self. It isn’t that we become blackened by sin in one large stroke. It isn’t that we turn into hideous monsters of pride and cruelty. It isn’t that we dissolve the Dr. Jekyll’s of our personalities into dastardly Mr. Hyde’s. Instead, we keep most of our goodness intact, but we make small allowances in certain little areas. We become overly precious, picky or possessive about something... Or we turn our angry judgment eyes from someone we could help... Or we compromise our communication so badly until we speak from only our mouths instead of our souls. We relegate sins of pride and elevate sins of weakness, for we are a stiff-necked people who even judge God as the Psalmist reminds us. The fragmentation of our lives makes us less than we should be, less than we could be. It makes us less than the people God made us to be. It is precisely because we and our world have lost our integrity that the great prophet of God must come and set things right.

There is a powerful scene in Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*. The story is that of Sir Thomas More, loyal subject of the English crown. King Henry VIII wants to change things to suit his own devious plans, so he requires all his nobles to swear an oath of allegiance that violates the conscience of Sir Thomas More before his God. Since he will not swear the oath, More is put in jail. His daughter Margaret comes to visit him. “Meg,” he calls her, with affection. She’s his pride and joy, the one who thinks his thoughts after him. Meg comes to plead with her father in prison. “Take the oath, Father!” she urges him. “Take it with your mouth, if you can’t take it with your heart! Take it and return to us! You can’t do us any good in here! And you can’t be there for us if the king should execute you!” She’s right in so many ways! Yet her father answers her this way: “Meg, when a man swears an oath, he holds himself in his hands like water, and if he opens his fingers, how can he hope to find himself again?”

You know what he means, don’t you? When our lives begin to fragment, it’s like holding our lives like water in our hands, and then letting our fingers come apart, just a little bit. The water of our very selves dribbles away. We may look like the same people, but who we are inside has begun to change. This is why John comes pointing the way to another kingdom. Here there will be no separation between the impulse of the heart, the thought of the mind, the word of the mouth, and the action of the hands. Somehow, everything about the coming kingdom is integrated. That’s the meaning of the word “integrity,” isn’t it? Pure in heart!

When the one of integrity arrives, this world must change. This is why we celebrate Advent over and over, until the coming again of God’s anointed one. Jesus raises the banner of heaven’s royal

claims over Gentile and Jewish territory, and thus is the source of political allegiances that supersede temporal boundaries. This is very good news during Advent, when the nations of the earth conspire against one another, where the Christian church can effect a transnational celebration of the politics of grace; the peaceable kingdom.

Who are the sort of people who seek to reform themselves, even with the tenacity of sin that clings down deep. Who are the people who attempt to better society, in spite of the fact that it stubbornly refuses the challenge? It is hard to work out a way to summarise them neatly in some framework. I think they are people on the whole who are not full of pride. Quite often they are far from perfect, vulnerable to the all things that weigh us down. In fact, the people themselves often have a hard time defining what it is that makes them tick. I can remember as a young priest being asked in a classroom, by street-smart students, weary of self-righteous “do-gooders,” who put the question to me. “What’s in it for you?”

What I could say for myself and others after some thought was that sometime earlier in our lives, each of us ran into a crisis situation, a situation that tested our identity and our willingness to do something about it, and in that crisis situation, each us encountered someone who put his or her life on the line. Someone who taught us the meaning of service: someone who gave of himself or herself in a way that bucks the trend of pride of selfishness and self-preservation. And the influence of that someone else made it possible to be greater than each of us had previously considered. Enter the peaceable kingdom, where things change because we have brushed against the holiness of God, and Jesus becomes our Saviour and mentor.

But all that is easily lost on us. When a friend of mine, Tim Hunnisett the Head of Business Studies at Newington College was teaching business management he asked his Yr. 12 students to draft a personal strategic plan. He said that “with few exceptions, what they wanted fell into three categories: money, power, and things - very big things.” That’s the fragmentation of our lives taken to the extreme.

So here we are, in a sense, on the brink of another year, the liturgical year, the year of expectation of God’s doing something good once again, the year of the coming of the kingdom announced by John.

As they say, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life!” Let’s imagine that there are 365 new days thrown back onto the credits side of the ledger. What do we do with them? Each day in the year ahead 952 babies or more will be born; 473 people or more will die; 4 or more traffic fatalities will occur, 221 couples or more will get married and 136 or more will divorce. And each of us will be challenged in one of the three great crises of life: The Identity Crisis: Who am I? The Influence Crisis: What does my life mean to those around me? The Integrity Crisis: How deep is my soul?

And the ultimate question for all time: Do we know the hope of the coming kingdom and the one who has the capacity to restore our integrity because of his own? Amen.

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