

For Christians around the world, Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. It was the practice among early Roman Christians for penitents to begin their period of public penance on this day. They were sprinkled with ashes, dressed in sackcloth, and obliged to remain away from fellowship with other people until they reconciled with fellow Christians on Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday and three days before Easter, the day of resurrection.

A man woke up in the morning deeply repentant after a bitter argument with his wife the previous night. He noticed with dismay the crate of beer bottles that had caused the falling out. He took it outside and started smashing the empty bottles one by one onto the wall. He smashed the first bottle swearing, "you are the reason I argue with my wife". He smashed the second bottle, "you are the reason I don't love my children enough". He smashed the third bottle, "you are the reason I don't have a decent job". When he took the fourth bottle, he realised that the bottle was still sealed and was full. He hesitated for only a moment and said "you stand aside, I know you were not involved".

Lent is ultimately about one of the biggest words in the Bible. That word is not a great big word in terms of its length for there are many longer words both in English and in New Testament Greek. This word is big in terms of its depth of meaning. It was the theme John the Baptist preached and we read: "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matthew 3:1-2). The same word is found in the opening line of Jesus' first sermon: "Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matthew 4:17). Again in our Gospel of Mark this morning "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.'" The same word and the idea it conveys and the action that it calls for were at the heart of the apostle Paul's preaching: "I declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance" (Acts 26:20). That word that Jesus, John the Baptist, and Paul preached appears 75 times in the Bible. You have worked it out by now, I trust, that I speak of the word "Repent!" Lent is primarily about repentance.

Last joke for the sermon: The Vicar told his congregation, "Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Isaiah 66. 25-28 and Mark 16. 21-24". The following Sunday, as he prepared to deliver his sermon, the Vicar asked for a show of hands. He wanted to know how many had read the verses from Isaiah and Mark. Several went up. The minister smiled and said, "Mark finishes at chapter 16.20 and Isaiah 66.24. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying."

The primary Greek New Testament word for repentance brings together two Greek words. The first means "to turn around" and the second means "your mind." Hence, the Greek word for repent means "turn around your way of thinking." Holy Writ calls for a process of four steps to make that a reality.

The first step is regret. Paul writes, "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Regret means a recognition that something wrong has occurred or that something right has not occurred. Regret is the intellectual admission that you did something you should not have done. Regret forces us to admit to ourselves, "I was wrong."

The second step is remorse. The emotion of grief has its place in repentance so now we have regret, which is intellectual, and remorse, which is emotional. Remorse happens when intellect and emotion unite in shame.

It is that emotional sense that I not only know intellectually that I am guilty and I feel a sense of deep shame for who I am and what I have done, but in my soul I feel my guilt and the consequences of my sin. That is remorse, the second component of repentance.

The third component of repentance is a return to God. St Paul quoted in Acts: “I declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God...” (Acts 26:20). This is the heart of Ash Wednesday and Lent.

Imagine that you are on the road to a destination and you realise that the pathway you have traveled, rather than taking you toward where you want to end up is actually taking you away from your desired destination. Your GPS keeps directing you to “make a legal U-turn when possible” This is the absolute essence of repentance; it recognises that you are headed the wrong way and need to turn back around. Lent is the great turn-around season on the Christian calendar.

Repentance calls for our return to the ways of the gospel of Jesus and for the removal of focus on ourselves. For Christians, true repentance is more than an annual mark on the head. It is a daily mark on the heart. Are you prepared to acknowledge where you have been wrong, to demonstrate true remorse, and to change your ways and return to the ways of Jesus? That is the essence of repentance. Repentance is what Lent is all about. In Isaiah’s words, “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:6-8).

Finally, repentance calls for a return to the ways of Jesus. “I declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should... do deeds consistent with repentance” (Acts 26:20).

Repentance is about choosing a new life pathway and setting out in a different direction from the way we were going before. It is bigger than one day. True repentance is demonstrated over a lifetime.

When King Uzziah died, Isaiah entered the temple and saw the Lord of glory there, and he was immediately conscious of his sinfulness: “And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts!’ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out’ ” (Isaiah 6:5-7).

In that encounter, the old Isaiah died and the new Isaiah came to life with a mission that would touch God’s people forevermore. We hear the joy of his call in these words: “I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ ” (Isaiah 6:8). The old Isaiah had a new life and a new mission. That is what repentance does.

When Saul of Tarsus did business with the resurrected Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road, he could never return to his old paths. The old Saul died that day and was reborn as the greatest apostle of Christendom.

Zacchaeus is another example of true repentance in action. Scrambling down from his sycamore tree perch to Jesus, Zacchaeus said, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:8-9). Zacchaeus knew that the cost of making his sin right would forever be less than leaving it wrong. What is true for Zacchaeus is true even now for you and me.

Hear the greatest news we can ever know: "Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7). It is still gloriously true and that is the wonder of Lent. Amen

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