

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year (B)
(Jonah 3:1-5.10 / Mark 1:14-20)
25.01.2015

Repentance

At the beginning of his Gospel, St Mark tells us that his goal is to share with us the “Good News of Jesus Christ” (1:1).

However Jesus’ first words which we have just heard are about repentance. Do we spontaneously associate Good News with repentance? Allow me to believe say that in our spiritual traditions, the call to repent has rarely been seen as a cause of rejoicing. When we hear the words *repentance*, *penance*, *conversion*, we do not think first of good news but more of sackcloth and ashes, of humiliation and shame.

Because repentance is an essential aspect of our faith, it is important to clarify the situation. The first point which must be made is that we do not repent in order to calm an angry God, we do not repent in order to lighten the punishment we deserve for our sins, we do not repent in order to buy God’s forgiveness or to earn some vouchers for paradise.

As long as we remain caught up in such a vision of repentance and in such a relationship with God, we can be sure that we are not talking about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

God has forgiven us before we ever do anything. In Jesus Christ, we have been forgiven.

Like the prodigal son in St Luke’s Gospel, repentance happens when we realise that because of our words, deeds and decisions we have strayed from the path of life. Repentance is the result of our awareness that shame, guilt, isolation, disconnection from God, from others and from ourselves are not our homeland but a place of exile and death. Repentance is precisely the decision which leads us back to where we belong, to God who waits for us with hope and love. For God, nothing we have ever done or said can lead us beyond the power of his forgiveness. As there are no limits to his love, there are no limits to his forgiveness.

This explains why God, through his Church, cannot stop calling us to repentance. For God to stop calling us to repentance would mean that he has given up on us, that he has despaired of his creation, that he no longer believes that there is a future for us, that we are prisoners for ever of our sins, failures and mistakes.

The call to repentance and conversion should be Good News to our ears because it manifests God’s unbounded hope for each one of us. On our side, our hope is not a vague optimism but it is rooted in the victory of Christ over the power of death.

For all of us, to repent is to affirm boldly and humbly that, with Christ, we are greater than anything we have done or anything which has been done to us. Trusting in God’s promise, we can stand up after a fall, we can move on after a failure, because ultimately we are made for life. Repentance and conversion are our best weapons against sin and against the spiral of despair which is the consequence of sin.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told that the first Christians from Jewish background were amazed that God had “given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (11:18). It is vital for us to remember that the goal of repentance and conversion is to lead us to life, to new life, over and over again.

As Since today is the last day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, it is may be important for us to remember that the call to repentance and conversion is addressed to all our Christian denominations, ours included. The visible unity of all Christians will not be the result of all others repenting and joining the Catholic Church. We all have to repent and we are all engaged – we should be all engaged – in an on-going conversion to Christ and his Gospel.

We cannot be complacent and settle in a kind of *conversionless* Christianity. As persons and as communities, we have to believe that, through repentance and conversion, it is possible for us to be holier, to be more conformed to Christ and to reflect more brightly his gentle light to the world.

In his Encyclical Letter on Commitment to Ecumenism, St John Paul II reminds us that the Second Vatican Council “calls for personal as well as communal conversion”, adding: “there is an increased sense of the need for repentance: an awareness of certain exclusions which seriously harm fraternal charity, of certain refusal to forgive, of a certain pride, of an unevangelical insistence of condemning the ‘other side’, of a disdain born of an unhealthy presumption (...). No Christian community can exempt itself from” the call to continual reformation (*UUS* 15-16). In our lives and in the lives of our Churches, there are many attitudes and actions which need to be evangelised, to be converted to the Gospel. For us to continue to cling to them is to condemn ourselves to wither away and to die.

The call to repentance, conversion and reformation is a sign of our hope that with God everything is possible.

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The challenge for us is to persevere and not to despair. Bishop Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, declared that ecumenism “requires a spirituality of Christian hope and courage” (*Searching...*, p. 167).

Hope and courage are required of us so that we may engage ourselves on the path of repentance and conversion. May we not forget that we are made for life.

The words of the Lord are addressed to us today: “Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Turn, then, and live” (Ez 18:30-32).