

A Sermon for Advent 3, Year C – Luke 3. 7-18

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Speaking to someone this past week about what it means to make personal confession, I was reminded of how I felt when I first considered making my own confession to a priest.

I remembered being utterly horrified at the prospect of saying out loud to someone else all the things I'd thought and said and done that I shouldn't have, and all the good things I had, through laziness or selfishness or indifference, failed to do.

Making confession in cathedrals in big cities where a metal screen provides a cloak of anonymity could make us braver.

Kneeling in chapels or churches in open view could make it more difficult.

Speaking out publicly would be even worse.

Yet, when John the Baptist appeared, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, people went out to him to be baptised, confessing their sins.

This almost certainly meant public confession, the saying out loud, in front of other people, what you had done wrong.

Think about that for a minute.

If it is your tradition, it can be hard enough to go to confession privately, to a priest who is forbidden from ever speaking of what you've said again, even to you.

John expected people to confess their sins in front of one other, and this was a practice the early church continued: we read of it in the letter of James, for example, and in the book of Acts.

Later on, it was common for sins to be confessed publicly before the church community, under the authority of the bishop, after which reconciliation and restoration to the community could follow.

We have retained the practice of confessing our sins collectively in our liturgies, although we are let off the hook with specifics.

But each time the Eucharist is celebrated we start by acknowledging that we have sinned against God, our heavenly Father, and against our neighbour.

This is a good start, because it acknowledges that sin is in here, not simply 'out there', and if we have been too busy judging others' sins to recognise our own, that's one of the things we need to bring to God to ask forgiveness for.

So what are we doing when we confess?

What was John doing when he proclaimed a baptism of repentance, and Jesus when he announced the start of his public ministry with the words 'Repent, and believe in the good news'?

What does it mean to repent?

Repentance is to do with a change of mind or heart, a turning – from sin to God, from darkness to light. In this season we are particularly called to turn towards Christ, who comes as Saviour and Judge.

John the Baptist, that strange, wild figure of the wilderness, his body sculpted by austerity and his words fierce as the desert winds, proclaims repentance because of the coming of the Messiah. 'You brood of vipers!' he says, 'who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'

There is urgency in his proclamation: time is not infinite.

Do not put off for tomorrow the repentance required today.

Get your lives in order in the light of the judgement that is coming upon the world.

So here is one strand of repentance: the truthful examination of our lives in the light of Christ's judgement, knowing that at his second coming the inner thoughts of all will be revealed.

Now that can sound quite a frightening prospect, and is certainly capable of producing a lot of very anxious Christians.

If the occasion for repentance is fear of coming before Jesus the stern Judge of all, whose two-edged sword of truth examines our lives with forensic precision, then repentance can become a way of trying to win him over and earn his favour.

Happily, this is by no means the whole picture of repentance in the scriptures. Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, as we confess in the Creed –

but a lot depends on what kind of Judge this Messiah that John the Baptist proclaims is.

When Jesus talks about repentance he tells stories of prodigal sons, lost sheep and lost coins.

He commends Zacchaeus, the corrupt tax collector, who after meeting Jesus repents and makes amends.

He calls into friendship with him those whose lives polite society had judged to be sinful, who by keeping company with him find their lives transformed.

And he calls out the hypocrisy of the religious who think they have no need of repentance.

At no point does Jesus just leave people in their sin, and tell them it doesn't matter.

He judges, but his judgement is not about writing people off but giving them life.

So often we keep our sins hidden because we fear condemnation.

In the company of Jesus, people discover that they can bear the truth, that it sets them free.

And this is where repentance really starts to happen, as we see our lives in the light of the love and goodness and truth and holiness of Jesus Christ, as he draws us ever more deeply into relationship with him.

Repentance is about being real.

When Jesus meets Zacchaeus, he doesn't call him out for his extortion of money.

He eats with him, and by coming into relationship with Jesus, Zacchaeus has a change of heart.

He sees his life truthfully, and decides to put it right.

He repents.

The sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet in Luke 7 doesn't cower in expectation of his condemnation.

She risks further public shame to go to Jesus, and he receives the perfume she pours out, along with her repentance and gratitude and love.

True repentance happens when we are drawn into relationship with Jesus.

It is already an act of God's grace in drawing us closer to him.

And that's really important: we don't repent and confess in order to earn God's grace.

Because God is already at work in us, turning us around, changing our hearts.

My younger self could not conceive that my sin would be met with anything other than condemnation.

But in all my experience of going to confession I have never once found it to be anything other than an encounter with the gentle mercy of God, and required me to respond with gratitude.

Repenting of and confessing our sins is about being truthful: it stops us colluding in the fantasies either that our sin is not serious or that we are unredeemable.

When people asked John the Baptist what they should do about repentance, he gave them some examples.

True repentance leads to changes in the way we live, even if sometimes we lapse and have to turn back to God all over again.

So John says: share what you have.

Don't extort money from others.

Don't abuse your authority or position.

In other words, translate your repentance and your desire for change in your life into concrete action.

Don't just say you're sorry for your greed or your treatment of the poor.

Give away your spare coat.

Donate to the foodbank, or cook for the homeless project.

I'm conscious that this is Gaudete Sunday – meaning joy Sunday – and I've preached a whole sermon on repentance and confession.

But there is more joy in heaven, says Jesus, over one sinner who repents than over 99 who need no repentance.

There is joy, real joy, in knowing the forgiveness of sins and the freedom of life in Christ.

We rejoice because of what God has done for us in Christ in drawing us back to himself.

We are not left in our sin without hope.

We do not have to pretend we are perfect and all is well.

God's grace can work even where old habits have grown deep roots, and Christ is at work making all things new.

That really is good news and something to rejoice in.

Amen