

Sermon Advent 2 Year B

All Saints, Blackheath 4th December 2011

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In our worship we follow a three year cycle of readings each of which follows the text of one of the three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Last week we began the second year of the cycle Year B in which Mark is the gospel followed most closely. The gospel of John in case you are wondering is used particularly in the seasons of Christmas and Easter in all three years and to pad out the other gospels where they don't quite stretch to a whole year. Mark is the shortest of the gospels and so needs quite a lot of padding to see us through until the end of November next year.

Mark was probably the first of the gospels to be written and was probably used by Matthew and Luke as a source for their gospels - although there are scholars who would reject both of those ideas. Mark has a certain brevity and rawness, even the character of Jesus seems much more real and less elevated than in the other gospels. Jesus gets angry, appears irritated and is less smooth in what he says and the way he says it in Mark.

That straightforwardness is also apparent in today's eight verses in which we hear about John the Baptist. John certainly doesn't mess about. The writer of the gospel describes what John does in just nine words. John proclaims: a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

So I want to try to be just as straightforward this morning myself, although I have to warn you now, in rather more than nine words.

There are three key words in what Mark tells us about John

baptism
repentance
sin

On Friday I was preaching to St Andrew's School in Croydon for their patronal festival Mass and they sang a modern worship song which I thought was rather lovely, the words, much repeated focused on the phrase: I want to be holy.

I suppose that's a good place for us to start today. Are we here, have we come because we want to be holy? There might be many reasons we are here, loneliness, habit, a desire for social respectability and probably several more. But let's assume for a moment that every single one of us wants to be holy; to be a saint.

I have to say that I find that a rather daunting prospect. I have been professionally religious, an ordained person for nearly twenty years. I have spent several hours almost every day of my adult life saying my prayers, going to church or reading the bible or other holy writings. Some days I wonder whether any of that has made any difference at all. I don't think you would have to know me very well to realise that you wouldn't be adding me to your list of saints any day soon.

The word repentance is relatively simple: in Greek *metanoia* and in Hebrew *T'shuvah*. Both have the same basic meaning, to change direction.

John is telling his hearers that they need to change the direction of their lives and as a sign of that to get baptised.

Probably like most of us here I was baptised as a baby. In recent years it has become fashionable in churches to renew our baptismal vows every so often, annually at the Easter Vigil, sometimes at all baptisms and on other occasions. Actually there is a much more traditional way in which the church suggests we renew the grace of repentance and that is through sacramental confession.

We often associate confession with the Roman Catholic church but it is in fact very much a part of our Anglican tradition. The rite of confession is to be found in Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer. I made my first confession when I was eight years old and it has been a regular part of my life since then. I have been privileged to hear confessions since then, as confessor to a convent of nuns for some years, at the shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham and in the parishes to which I have been attached.

Traditionally Anglicans have been taught that all may, some should, none must receive the sacrament of confession. So I am not saying that anyone here today has to go to confession but I would certainly recommend it as a possibility for all of us. Father Nicholas is an experienced confessor and Father William with his healing ministry would be an ideal confessor.

I have experimented with different ways of integrating confession into my life; as a child we went as a family every Saturday afternoon. I continued with this

pattern well into my undergraduate days. After that I was recommended as an ordinand to have a spiritual director, someone I saw every few months and to whom I made my confession. In some years I have not used confession with my director and reserved it for times when I felt the burden of sin most deeply.

My current pattern I am slightly surprised to say is to have returned to that of my childhood and make my confession every week. I have given up combining it with spiritual direction and will see any priest I can find. One of the things that put me off going so regularly to confession is that I find myself confessing almost identical things every week. But now I have come to believe that is the main challenge of making use of confession. I am not and God willing not likely to be committing huge sins which would make the front pages of the papers, rather my desire to be holy is eroded by a thousand drops of selfishness. The daily grind of not giving people the attention they deserve and require; of putting myself and my own needs before those of others. Of drinking just too much to be good for my body or soul. Of, just occasionally. Stretching the truth to cover my own weaknesses, to excuse myself and to blame others.

But the foundation of all that sin in my life is self justification. It is rife in our society. None of us really takes responsibility for our actions. We are we believe as much sinned against as sinning. We are broken people, damaged goods. We do demanding jobs and so justify the hundreds of pounds we spend in restaurant, off licenses and for our gym membership. we spend little time with our families and friends and so buy them extravagant presents and luxurious holidays. We justify the pittance we give to charity or to support the work of our church because, after all, we have to pay for the school fees to do the best for our children.

There is no end to our self justification. And we will never be at peace until we give it up.

I believe profoundly that Saint Augustine is right when he teaches about what he called 'original sin' that something deep in our human nature which is skewed. Like a tyre slightly out of alignment which brings the vehicle off course we have within us something that makes us justify our sins and failures and skews the direction of our lives. Repentance, changing the direction of our lives does not necessarily mean selling everything we own. I think repentance is more about what direction we are facing. Are we turned towards God, or do we face only our selves and our own needs.

Christianity teaches us that there is only one who can justify us and that is God himself, born in Jesus. Only when we look to him in everything we do and are will we lose the desire and the biting need to sin.

One of my favourite lines in the psalms is in Psalm 18 verse 20. "He brought me out into a place of liberty".

Being aware of our sin, our responsibility for our lives doesn't make us less free it make us more free. It releases us from the burden of self justification. Of the inner voice which is constantly reminding us that it's OK to have another drink; to flirt with that person at work; to go for another expensive meal; to put fiver in the charity box or collection plate but never dream of paying so little for a bottle of wine.

This Advent if you have never made your confession before think about doing so. Yes, it will be slightly embarrassing the first time. But it is actually quite simple, quite straightforward and immensely liberating.

If on December 25th you feel freer and happier and less burdened you will know as the psalmist knew that God has brought you into a place of liberty and you will have kept a good and holy Advent.

And let me end as the priest does at the end of confession:
Go in peace and pray for me a sinner.