

Acts 11:1-18

19.05.19

Repentance that leads to life

Our reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles this morning is a favourite for good, broadminded, liberal people like me. It's all about inclusion, and there are few things more dear to the hearts of good, broadminded, liberal people like me than inclusion. Think of the story: it is set in a world that – at least in Jewish eyes – was deeply divided. On the one hand there were God's chosen people, children of Abraham, children of Moses who were blessed as God's chosen people. And then on the other hand there was everyone else, the Gentiles, who were a race apart. And that boundary between Jews and Gentiles was fiercely policed by Jews. That's not the way God planned it but that's how it became. So Jews had certain marks that set them apart as chosen and different – circumcision and sabbath-keeping – and especially dietary laws and rules about who you could and could not eat with. As a good Jew you watched your diet carefully and there was no way you could sit down at table with an uncircumcised Gentile. And that's how Jews maintained their distinctive identity – by separation and exclusion. And then this happens. Peter has a vision one afternoon of unclean, unkosher animals coming down from heaven in a sheet and a voice commands him to eat and he is repulsed and revolted at the thought and questions the command. But back comes the voice, 'what God has made clean, you must not call profane.' And next thing Peter is sent to some Gentiles in Joppa to whom he preaches and the Holy Spirit falls upon them and they believe and Peter breaks bread with them even though they remain uncircumcised.

There is trouble, however, at church headquarters in Jerusalem. What is going on down there in Joppa? And a crucial issue is being addressed here: do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to become Christians? Do males need to be circumcised and to obey food laws? Or in other words, is Christianity going to remain a Jewish sect or is it going to become a global faith? And everything would have been different if Peter had not over-ruled the church leaders. So this story can be read as a triumph for inclusion as walls are being broken down and the formerly excluded are now being welcomed in unconditionally. And this is message that has to be heard time and time again because the church is

notorious for excluding certain people and putting up walls and barriers and making conditions. And so we liberals love this passage.

There is, however, one problem. That reading of the story missed out one key component. It ignores one little key word that almost manages to slip out of the passage as it comes right at the very end - and that word is 'repentance'. So the conclusion to this passage is not 'everybody is welcome to come on in'. The conclusion is not, 'now even the Gentiles are included', but rather, 'now even the Gentiles are included in the offer of repentance that leads to life'. And this is a reminder that entry into the realm of God is always through repentance. As Jesus himself put it, as John the Baptist did before him, 'repent, for the kingdom of God has drawn near.' And here in Acts Gentile inclusion therefore hinges on Gentile repentance.

Now, I can hear some of you saying to yourselves: 'on no, here we go. REPENT!! This is not the kind of faith we've signed up for and we've had more than enough of it. Do us a favour.' And I get that. The way the need for repentance has been preached has often been legalistic, moralistic, and joyless, and has lost all contact with its biblical moorings. Repentance has been proclaimed with a pointed finger, and by people who are very good at telling everybody else what's wrong in their lives, and it's usually pre-occupied with certain particular sins – usually anything associated with fun, pleasure or weakness. But all the more reason to retrieve a right sense of repentance for when it is preached in the service of the Gospel then it leads to life and liberation and is to be celebrated.

So what is repentance all about? And I would suggest to you that it is not about saying sorry for things you've done. And it's not primarily about changing your behaviour and eradicating certain sins from your life – that may come, but it's not the first thing. Repentance begin with a change of perspective, with learning to see and to imagine the world differently. And without a change of vision, a new way of seeing, the summons to change is legalistic and dreary and deathly.

So the issue here between Jews and Gentiles comes down to how Gentiles were seen, how they were viewed. I am reminded of the struggle to abolish slavery back in Victorian times in Great Britain, when in support of the abolition cause a great industrialist called Josiah Wedgewood produced pottery medallions. These medallions featured a slave with manacled hands outstretched and underneath the words 'Am I not a man and a brother?'. Now

the mass production of that medallion had a significant effect on the abolition cause because it enabled people to see slaves differently. No longer were they semi-human, inferior beings - the way Jews had come to see Gentiles - but they became human brothers and sisters. And given the vested interests of the powerful who benefitted from slavery you could argue on rational or moral grounds for abolition until you were blue in the face with no impact. But radical change, repentance, came from viewing slaves differently, from seeing them as human.

And no wonder therefore that Peter's command to reach out to the Gentiles begins with a vision - that sheet coming down out of heaven - as change, repentance, is processed through vision and imagination. And no wonder Jesus' message of repentance was associated with the healing of the blind. And no wonder that a few chapters previously in the Book of Acts we have read of the conversion of a fierce enemy of the early Christian Church called Paul and it was accompanied by a vision and a light that blinded him, because the move from Jewish zealot to the missionary to the Gentiles that Paul became involved his eyes being wiped clean and reset. And the cry of repentance from the heart of the Christian is not therefore primarily 'woe is me, I am such a miserable sinner!', but 'Lord, open my eyes that I may see!'

And of course great art can help us here – music, poetry, painting, dance, sculpture. This week I have had the pleasure of seeing the exhibition of the British artist David Hockney at the van Gogh museum, where Hockney acknowledges his great debt to van Gogh. And Hockney extols the way van Gogh saw – the way he envisioned the world through a sunflower or a chair or a blade of grass. And I'm no art expert but I find myself deeply moved by the way van Gogh views the world. The figures in his paintings are invested with a dignity and nobility even in their poverty. There is something loveable about them and his use of colour and his attention to detail seems to me to envision a world where even Solomon in all his pomp is cheap and tawdry compared to the glory of a cornfield on a Summer's day. It is a world suffused by God's grace and until we learn to see the world that way we will not understand repentance and things will not radically change.

So how do we come to re-envision the world? Well, let me suggest this to you: a change of perspective, a change in vision, comes from changing the story we live by. Stories, not arguments, change lives. And so Jesus' message of repentance was accompanied by those odd stories he told – they're called

parables – and a parable is a story that results in seeing the world differently, in the light of God. And Peter of course in our reading is immersed in a story, the biblical story of Israel. But that story needs now to be changed in the light of the extraordinary twist that it has now taken with the coming of Jesus. The old story needs re-reading and this was the struggle of the early church and the leaders in Jerusalem – to read the story afresh. And if I can return to theme that I preached on at Easter, the world today is in dire need of a new story, or rather a new and fresh reading of an old one. We have cut loose from the biblical story that shaped our civilisation for centuries – not always well, for we have always been guilty of serious misreading. But instead of retrieving it and reclaiming that story we have jettisoned it and replaced it with a godless, human-centred story that is trumpeted as being very enlightened but which simply does not have the capacity to sustain human life. Without the narrative of a divine parent we have lost the basis for seeing the other as a brother or sister as Josiah Westwood did, and with only the story of evolution to live by we struggle to resist the triumph of the strongest and fittest, and without the story of a creator God we plunder nature and eliminate species and even the deepest darkest depths of the ocean are littered with plastic bags. The pseudo-story we live by is killing us.

And the crucible of repentance, the engine of change, is not the soap box where sins are denounced. The crucible of repentance is liturgy, worship, what we are doing now. Here, in worship, these old, strange stories are retold again and again, and life breathed into them – often odd and disturbing stories; and here rituals are performed that embody these stories; and here they are transposed into songs; and through all this we find ourselves glimpsing a strange new world pervaded by a strange God who has created us in love and redeemed us by grace and who we never fathom but who we learn to trust. And when liturgy does its work then we leave this place with our eyes cleansed, and refocused, our imagination refreshed, and we are changed and the world can be changed. That's how repentance works.

In a moment we will sing an old hymn from a bygone era whose words came to mind as I was thinking about this sermon: 'Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine'. It's a song that speaks of vision and of story: 'visions of rapture burst on my sight', it proclaims – and then the chorus, 'this is my story'. The good news is that God gives us a new story that purges our imagination and with it a new

vision of the world. That is the heart of the repentance that is now offered to all, Jew and Gentile. And God knows our world needs it. Amen.

O holy and blessed God,
We praise and worship you
invisible God enthroned on high.

We praise and worship you
who have become flesh in Jesus Christ
taking upon yourself our skin and bone,
embodied amongst us.

And we praise you, the living God
who have become flesh in your Church,
the Body of Christ.

We praise you that here in the Church
every human being is equal before you,
here every man, every woman every child
is afforded equal worth;

We praise you that here the lines
that divide and separate and exclude
are redrawn to welcome all.

O God forgive us that we have defiled the Body of Christ
by making it inaccessible to so many.

Forgive us that all too often our love has been limited,
that we have preferred to remain comfortable
with the familiar rather than opening up
to the stranger, to the different, to the
ones who do not fit.

Forgive us that the narrow way we follow
has made us narrow people,
your church a narrow community.

O God hear us as we confess to you our sin and shame...

O God whose Spirit of the risen Christ
turned the ancient world upside down and inside out,
breathe your breath of new life upon us.

Invade us, unsettle us, change us
and make us like Jesus.

We [ray in his name and in his words we pray together, saying...