

HOMILY AT COMMON PRAYER SATURDAY JUNE 5

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Theme of the day: Repentance

Before speaking about repentance, today's theme, we recall the introductory comment at the very start of our prayer together – that repentance is not sad and gloomy, it is rather an honest, grateful standing in the presence of the God of Mercy, and a willingness to accept the gift of forgiveness and all its demands. 'God only loves, as the sun only shines'. It is the nature of God to love. It might be a good exercise today to go outside, stand in the full light of the sun, and reflect on this truth.

I live in an 18th century stone house in the North-East of Scotland. The house is old, the winds are strong, the old floorboards creak from room to room. The house was for years the holiday home of a family with three growing sons – active, energetic, noisy youngsters. One day I asked the lady of the house if she had ever thought of doing something to mend the floorboards. She gave me a wonderful smile and said, 'Oh no! The floorboards were my friends. I always knew where the boys were.'

That was the voice of the parent, listening, reluctant to interfere, watchful for impending crisis, ready to arrive if need be.

We can go back to Israel's stories of the beginnings, as we find them in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. We remember the stories of the Garden, of the crisis time when God came to the Garden and Adam and Eve were hiding. 'Where are you?' called the Creator God, and Adam came out from among the trees and they had a conversation about what had happened. A little further on in the story-telling, God comes again, this time to find Cain out in the field, 'What have you done?' says God, and once more there is the conversation. And then again there is the time when they are building a tower, to reach as high as heaven – instead of getting on with what they were made for (which was filling the earth and subduing it), and this time God comes down to break up the gathering and scatter them out over the earth. And, eventually, we come to that dreadful account in chapter 6 (vv.6-7), where the Almighty looks down and sees how great is the wickedness of human beings upon the earth. God has a pain in his heart, and regrets bitterly that he ever made them. He says 'I will wipe them off the face of the earth. I should never have made them'. But we know that God did not 'wipe them off the face of the earth'. Far from that, when the time had come, the Most Holy Trinity decided to send the Second Person, to bring mercy and forgiveness, and new life, into the very life of humankind. The poet R.S. Thomas has a poem called *The Coming*: God holds in his hand a small globe. 'Look,' he says to the Son. The Son looks. He sees a dried wasted land, with a slimy polluted river snaking through it. Thin people hold up sticklike arms helplessly in the hot air. The Son looks. 'Let me go there', he says. And our story begins.

The Gospel of Luke gives several accounts of the appearance of Jesus to his disciples after his resurrection, of his coming to them with the gift of peace, reassuring them that he, the one they have known as friend and teacher, is really with them. He opens for them the meaning of the Scriptures, he eats with them. And in his final reassurances in this Gospel, he gives them their commission, in these words:

This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:46-48)

And then he tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they receive the gift that has been promised. As in this Gospel his own mission began with the Spirit coming down upon him at his baptism in the Jordan, so the continuing of his mission in the disciples starts with that gift, that confirmation.

And, in this Gospel, where does Luke bear witness to the repentance and forgiveness of sins that the disciples have seen and heard? Where are we being shown the Son doing what the Father wants? When we enter these scenes, the atmosphere is the Holy Spirit. What are the effects? Who are the ones who receive the gift?

We go first to the key moment of the Gospels, to the death of Jesus on the Cross. Nearest of all to the Christ who has had to suffer and will rise again are the two who die on either side of him. We might call them hardened criminals; on the one side so hardened by life that in his last moments his speech is still filled with insults and bitterness. But go there, stand at the foot of the Cross and listen to the conversation on the other side. This one turns to see the face of Jesus, incarnate Mercy, and hears the words, ‘this day you will be with me....’

Step back from the Cross, in this Gospel, to return to the scenes of the Supper, and the Garden, and the Trial. Listen to Peter, brave dear Peter, insisting on his love and loyalty, not strong enough yet to draw on that power and love and self control that is to come (chapter 22, v.61). Luke tells us, ‘The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter’, and just then the cock crowed, and Peter remembered ... and went out. He does not come in again in this Gospel until chapter 24. Then, with the Cross in the background, we hear that he has run to see the emptiness of the tomb – and then that *the Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon*. How kind the Risen Lord is – of course he has gone to seek out Peter who went out weeping bitterly, to let him share his Lord’s own joy, to bring him the healing that comes from the wounds.

Go back a little further in this Gospel and find Zaccheus, small, unhappy, despised, cheating a bit (well, everybody does it!) to be a little better off – but just wanting to see this Teacher. Then suddenly he finds himself called, strangely confronted, all his own natural warmth and hospitality drawn out of the shell of business dealings. The direct look of love and the being asked for welcome, food, conversation, making it easy to return to keeping the Law – ‘I will return my thefts fourfold’ – and to being once more his own generous self.

Go further still, and find the woman in the Pharisee’s dining room, being the bringer of welcome, the washer of feet, the one who understands forgiveness and renewal. Jesus says to the Pharisee, ‘Do you see this woman?’ ‘Do you see?’

These scenes are not given to us only as remembered incidents from the past. Here is the repentance, the renewal of relationship, that we are asked to enable, to experience day by day. The story spreads backwards and forwards from the central story, back to the very beginning, forward to the very end. It is so good for us to meet together in it as disciples, to walk in it as our atmosphere – God’s story, God’s Mercy incarnate,

God's atmosphere. And then to walk in the garden in the evening for a little and let him ask: 'Where are you? What have you done?'