

One way to prepare properly for the Coming of Christ is to serve time in the penitentiary. The word penitentiary originally meant something different than our usage today. For a long time there was in the church a strong emphasis on the need for repentance. A person working on repentance was given some form of penance to perform. Maybe it was a 3 day fast, or a period of prayer. It was understood that it would be difficult for the penitent to do the penance within the context of his usual routine. Consequently, churches were equipped with a special room where penitents could be apart from their usual routines and concentrate totally on repentance. The room provided for this purpose was called the penitentiary. Maybe we need a penitentiary in today's church/

Normally we think of Lent as the time to think about repentance. But we are true to the gospel if we see that it is also true to the Advent season. The first chapter of Luke is a long chapter: 80 verses. It is the opening of the story of Jesus. Yet one segment of this chapter is not about Jesus, but about his cousin, John the Baptist.

Luke felt that the coming of John was very important in the preparation for the Christmas story. And an understanding of what John said and did can be important to our preparation for the coming of Christ. Indeed, we cannot receive Christ, we cannot experience the Christ presence until we have moved through the experience which John makes available to us. And what was

that. John was the prophet of repentance . . . the preacher of repentance par excellence. From the beginning to the end of his ministry that was his message. In today's gospel, Luke tells us that "He went about the entire region of the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance which led to the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah:

A Herald's ~~voice~~^{voice} crying in the wilderness, crying
 'Make ready the way of the Lord,
 Clear him a straight path...
 And all mankind shall see the salvation of God'"

A few verses later, Luke tells us that the crowds asked John what to do. What did repentance mean to their lives? Then John replies, "Let the man with two coats give to him who has none. The man who has food should do the same".

When Jesus begins his public ministry, what is his first word to the people? It is the word "Repent". All thru his ministry he continues this. The parable of the prodigal son, for example, revolves around repentance of the younger brother and the refusal of the older brother to repent. God's grace was available to both of them, but it is repentance that makes the difference. In that we had ought to find deep meaning in the story.

Many of you are caught up, or soon will be, with the outward preparations for the festivities surrounding the Christmas event. Many of you have all your Xmas cards written, Many are making plans for dinners, parties, special visits with relatives or entertaining them. Many are concentrating on Xmas shopping.

There is not any word in the NT about that kind of preparation for Christmas. The word of instruction that is there for us to pick up on is to prepare inwardly for the coming of Christ. The carol captures it quite well:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let earth receive her king
Let every heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing

Lacordaire was the name of a famous French preacher. He has been recognized as one of the greatest. In many seminaries, students are required to study his style in their homiletics courses. He preached thrilling sermons. 1000's of people would come to hear him. One time he was attending a worship service in a small rural parish. The sermon was preached by a little known curate. When Lacordaire was asked why he, a great preacher, would go to hear an unknown preacher, he replied: "When I preach, people swarm into the church, and it becomes ~~so~~ crowded they even climb atop the confession boxes in order to see me. But when this humble man preaches, the people go into the confession boxes...and that is what the world really needs".

Repentance. What is it? It begins very simply with the willingness to admit we have done things to ourselves and to others that has caused us to become estranged from God. Many can't even make that beginning step. They want to rationalize, to make excuses, to blame others . . . anything but to say "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner".

A little girl had been misbehaving. Her mother sent her to her room saying, "Pray to God and tell God what a bad girl you have been". The little girl went to her room, but came back down almost immediately. Her mother said, "Did you tell God how bad you have been?" She replied, "Yes, but God told me to come back downstairs because there are a lot of little girls worse than I am".

The fact is, of course, that none of us ^{here} ~~hear~~ are that bad. We're a collection of fairly decent people. And if we compared ourselves with all the bad little boys and girls in the world it would be easy to rationalize. But what about when we compare ourselves to the holiness and the purity of God.

Repentance is serious, ..and freeing, business when we move down deep, beneath rationalization and excuse making. It can begin when we acknowledge how deeply we have hurt others... thru insensitivity, thru selfishness, thru manipulation, thru indifference, thru pride. It begins when we acknowledge that while doing that we have hurt ~~ourselves~~ ourselves...emotionally, physically, spiritually. It begins ~~when~~ when we acknowledge that we possess the power and the resources to help others who are really hurting, and we are not doing it. If you cannot think of a single thing that you need to repent, then repent of that.

Part of the stereotype of repentance is that Christians 'repent' and go out and live as before. That is not repentance in the biblical sense. The scriptural words of repentance carry

with them a strong warning to change. The truly repentant person wants to think differently, speak differently, act differently. Honest repentance means a new way of living and relating to others.

A doctor came to see a very ill woman in her home. Her husband was waiting outside the sick room to await the doctors directives. After about five minutes he came out and said: "Give me a corkscrew" The worried, puzzled husband did as he was told. Soon after, the doctor came out again, and said, "now, give me a screwdriver". This upset the man even more but he did as he was told. When the doctor came out the third time and said: "give me a hammer and shisel" the frantic husband could stand it no longer. "What is wrong with my wife?" The doctor replied: "I'm not sure yet, I can't get my bag opened.

If, in the words of todays gospel lesson, we want to "see thesalvation of the God", if we want the rough places in our own lives to "be made straight", we have to open up our spiritual bag and reach deep inside and see what's wrong. Not with a corkscrew, or a screwdriver, or a hammer and chisel, but with humility.

That is the key. Repentance begins . . . and healing begins ...when we acknowledge, and then act upon, our need to repent.

Repentance begins when we acknowledge our need to spend some time in the pentitentiary.....