

Sermon for St. John's March 7th 2010

I would like to begin this sermon with the following prayer:

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

In today's reading Gospel reading from Luke, people who were present before Jesus told him about some Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus emphasised to them "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you."

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This is in contrast to Jewish custom which his listeners would have been familiar with. For them, they would have been led to believe this was their fate because of some sort of sin or sins they committed against God.

However, even though Jesus says the Galileans who were killed were not sinners, he does emphasise to those present that unless they repent, they will all perish. During his ministry, Jesus' message does contain apocalyptic overtones in it, which reinforces his message unless you repent, you will perish as the Galileans did in the last days which were upon them.

Let us not be too concerned about Jesus' apocalyptic message here, but let us look at repentance. What significance does repentance have for us today? I would suggest true repentance means that we as Christians can enjoy a better quality of life than if we are not repentant. To be repentant means to be contrite as well as turn away from sin.

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For the ancient Jews, one had to live according to the Jewish law and one was justified according to this. However, now Jesus uses an escape clause for his listeners. For him, to be repentant one must believe, that is, have faith in God to be justified before him. For Jesus if there is no faith, then there is death in the last days, thereby inaugurating the Kingdom of God.

So, what is our interpretation of this message? One theory is that we should behave as if the Kingdom of God is upon us and yet to come. This eliminates the time-line which may come into our thoughts. Not only should we act as if we are going to be at rest with God maybe tomorrow, the day after, next month, a year, a decade or whatever. We should act as if we want to be at rest with God now!

Do not worry though folks, for now we live in Christ, not just in God as in the Old Testament. So, I think we can say that Luke's Gospel is not a Gospel of good behaviour, which seemed to be of paramount importance in living according to

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the old covenant. No, according to the new covenant if we are truly penitent before God and Lord Jesus, we are accepted into the Kingdom of God.

The second part of today's reading from Luke seems somewhat paradoxical to the first part. For just as Jesus exhorts his listeners to repent or perish in Luke 13: 6-9, he talks about The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree. He says a man who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard came looking for fruit on it but found none. He tells the gardener that because he has not found fruit on it for three years, he must cut it down. The gardener replies let it alone for one more year as he will dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit the next year well and good; but if not, the owner can cut it down.

One would think that God is going to be a gracious God if he waits for us all to bear fruit, even the most unrepentant. But that is exactly what he does. How many times have we heard stories of Christians struggling with their faith and haven't we seen them become better Christians for it?

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I know I struggled with my faith for many years after I was baptised in 1982. It took me until 1985 before I attended church regularly. I suffered many setbacks and did not always do God's will. And you know what? I reckon all those unfruitful years made me a better person for it.

Returning to Jesus' message "Repent or you will all perish" I would like to refer to the contexts of interpreting it. That is, in the context of when Jesus spoke to his listeners and in the context of how we live as Christians today.

What was he on about when he told his listeners repent or perish? Perhaps he was trying to say if we don't watch our steps we can all end with a disaster. You will perish, not as persons decay and perish, but the soul or personality can become diseased and disintegrate.

Jesus is saying that without repentance, one is certainly on a disaster course. It is not certain what Jesus meant by **all** perishing.

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He may have been referring to them **all as Jewish people**.

The nation was on a disaster course, if they did not repent. This interpretation would be consistent with many other teachings and parables of Jesus during the last period of his life. Given the political skulduggery of the priests and the self righteous irrelevancy of many Pharisees, Jesus feared the future. It came forty years after they crucified him, when Rome annihilated Jerusalem and butchered and scattered its population. However, what would have happened if Jerusalem was repentant and the Romans still annihilated it?

Let's look at it from another perspective. He may have been warning them **all as individuals**. Spiritually each was on a disaster course, unless they repent and turn to God and his way of love. Like the Prodigal Son. Christ' listeners were in the process of destroying themselves the further they wandered from God. To turn away from God is to turn away from one's true home, one's true nature, one's authentic destiny. Spiritually people all around Jesus were in the process of perishing.

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Maybe he means **both of these things**? Both communally as a nation and spiritually as individuals, they were in danger of perishing.

For us today both of these meanings have a powerful relevance.

Corporately, unless you repent you will likewise perish.

Individually, unless you repent you will likewise perish.

As a nation and a world we are in danger of mass suicide. It is an era of mass nuclear and biological weapons and an awesome array of options available to terrorists. No city, no passenger plane, no major sporting event or cultural event, is safe from scheming destroyers.

Internationally and nationally, unless we repent of our greed, arrogance, injustice, racism, bigotry and thirst for settling old

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scores, the future of humanity is not bright. The same applies to the way we are polluting the planet. Ecologically, we are all on a disaster course.

The warning also comes to **each of us individually**. It is still tragically easy to lose your own soul while you are busy grabbing at life with both hands. As individuals we are all capable of perishing and disintegrating as persons. None of us is exempt.

Repentance is a radical shift, a drastic turning away from the negative to the positive, from evil to good, from your own face in the mirror to the face of Christ. It is a **costly about turn**. A change in the direction of one's life. Repentance is hard and painful. And remarkably liberating.

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I would like to conclude this sermon with the following prayer:

O Lord our God,
you have given your word
to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.
Grant us grace to receive your truth in faith in love,
that we may be obedient to your will
and live always for your glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.