

Advent 2, Year B
7 December 2008

Isaiah 40:1-11
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

First word uttered by John Baptist in ministry: 'repent.'
First word uttered by Jesus in ministry: 'repent.'

Some of us were brought up to think this means having to bear something unpleasant, even painful. A punishment. John B a rather fearful figure: camel's hair, leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. You might think this is to reinforce the message that repentance should be unpleasant and distasteful.

Absolute rubbish. This was not to show us how to 'do penance'. It was to identify himself as a prophet in the Elijah tradition – 'a hairy man, leather belt around his waist' (2 Kings 1:8). Elijah opposed the kings of Israel who did evil in the sight of the Lord, just as John Baptist opposed Herod (Mark 6.18). His food and clothing are, as Jesus recognised, a rebuke for those who wear soft, luxurious clothes and live in palaces (Luke 7:25).

John didn't expect people to imitate his choice of food and clothing. When people asked him what they should do in response to his preaching, his replies were mild: if you've two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have one (you don't need to kill yourself to give them one); don't over-tax, don't rob by violence or false accusation, and be content with your wages (Luke 3:10-14).

John's repentance doesn't mean doing unpleasant things to make up for past sins. In fact, it's not concerned at all with the past, but rather with the future.

Penance, repentance, simply means turn, change. Penance means resolving to change the way we see ourselves. From that change, all else will follow. If we say we're unwilling to change, then, we're not Christian.

If we think of ourselves as people who should be wearing luxurious clothes and living in palaces then we'll be anxious about it all, and we'll busy ourselves with relieving these anxieties. Idolising self. But if we think of ourselves as seeking the kingdom of God that is within us, then we know that life is more than food, and the body more than clothing; and that the Lord who feeds the beasts

This giving up of anxiety about tomorrow is the beginning of repentance. It's a good message for people of my generation, when our pensions are likely to be worth nothing. Why worry? What can I do in the face of the corporate corruption and institutional iniquity that surrounds us. And not worrying about what I did in the past, and what might happen in the future, means I can be more attentive to living in the here and now. And this, boys and girls, is Jesus' message. *My kingdom is not of this world*—or the next—but an inner kingdom in which this world and its toys are illusion: here today and gone tomorrow.

John's message is that we need to do this for ourselves, personally. I need to be watchful and awake. I need to take responsibility for myself. Yes, community action is important in Christianity, but surely it has to spread from personal responsibility. It's my responsibility to participate in the life of church and community as well as I can. It's my responsibility to look after myself as well as I can. It's a refusal to take responsibility for one's actions that is at the root of all the evil in the world. In Dewsbury. In Haringey. In Zimbabwe. The notion that all that matters is my instant gratification, never mind the consequences for other people. And however much we may be horrified at the behaviour of those in the news at the moment, it hurts to acknowledge that their behaviour is but an extreme version of breaking the speed limit, for example. It all comes down to supposing that my wishes are more important than anyone else's. Sure, my wishes are as important as anyone else's: love your neighbour as, not better than, yourself. But the neighbour's wants are as important as ours. Maybe I need to remember that when I'm sitting at Loundsley Green traffic lights and cursing some old trout in the car in front who seems to be waiting for a particular shade of green.

This is the sin of the world. This is the sin of the world that living according to Our Lord's command can take away if we ditch self. *And if you want to know the way, be pleased to hear what he did say.*

Which takes me back to John Baptist and the prophets, and I've gone on long enough.

Let me finish by asking you a question. Elijah opposed the corruption of the Kings of Israel. John Baptist opposed the corruption of Herod. Who are today's prophets? Dennis Skinner?

Amen