

2 Advent A / 4 December, 2016  St John the Evangelist, Oxford
Isaiah 11:1-10 / Psalm 71(72):1-2,7-8,12-13,17 / Romans 15:4-9 / Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

 In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— **Amen.**

I can tell that the Church of England is in terrific shape, because the *Church Times* and the *Church of England Newspaper* constantly headline columns by bishops and experts — two distinct sets — who know *all about* how the Church thrives. With such expansive command of well-informed leadership, one can hardly doubt that the Church will continue to flourish well into the future just as much as it flourishes today. Why, practically *every week* I learn a different way to bring vitality, youthful ardour, generous giving, and peace, harmony, and more praise music to the contemporary church.

Among the almost infinite prescriptions for remedying practically everything wrong with the church, however, I have not noticed that repentance figures prominently. Repentance apparently phones in its apologies when the list-makers compile their clickbait nostrums for church growth. Repentance depends on an acknowledgement that we are not all doing *just fine* already, thank you very much; it raises the spectre of ecclesiastical nosy parkers finding fault with everybody else, and perhaps the worst transgression of all, making people *feel guilty*. Now, you *know* that’s bad.

On the other hand, John the Baptist (neither a bishop *nor* a leadership expert) seems to think that repentance is a *necessary* preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven — which means, if we take John seriously, that those of us who aspire to being associated with God’s victory, God’s holy reign, need to be willing *at least in principle* to repent, to take stock and reach the conclusion that our will power and our big brains and pious hearts and correct ideologies don’t qualify us to take a break from striving. Repentant church leaders would have to admit that we have not reached the very pinnacle of human expertise. And since it seems as though *Jesus* took John seriously, since we see that *Jesus himself* accepted a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, maybe those among us who cannot claim to have surpassed *Jesus’* righteousness ought to start thinking things over and repenting our own selves.

The pundits of parochial proliferation may well resist that conclusion, since many people, perhaps *most* people suppose that genuine repentance must be an unpleasant experience. We might have to swallow the bitter pill of repentance with a swig from the gall of guilt and self-deprecation — a discipline that would only make most of us gag. Certainly such a cocktail sounds to me so comprehensively vile that I would probably not even *try* to swallow, but would look for some drain, some potted plant, into which I could spit out my repentance after taking a big ecclesiastical draught of that rancid elixir. Is that the only way to repent? In what everybody knows to be a holiday season, do we have no alternative but to accept the bitter with the sour?

You will anticipate that I am *not* on the verge of denouncing repentance. I have manifestly been setting up a pejorative view of repentance in order to expound a true, sound, life-affirming version that really *might* contribute to healthier, more lively parishes. It's an old rhetorical trick, and you (being very astute practitioners and critics of homiletical discourse) have seen right through me.

Before we rush onward to *the good bit*, though, the part where sound doctrine puts callow demagoguery to shame, we ought to linger for a moment with the perception that repentance is bad, or at least is bad *for our image*, because it's unpleasant, the *castor oil* of spirituality. We know, for instance, that people voluntarily undertake unpleasant tasks *all the time*, when they perceive the beneficial result of such exercises. They spend hours in physical exercise that makes them sore and tired, because they perceive that calisthenic exertion bears the fruit of stronger, more attractive bodies. They practice wearisome scales and arpeggios in order to attain proficiency as musicians; they adopt restrictive diets and abstain from culinary self-indulgence in order to reduce their weight a little. The assumed fact that penitence *stings, hurts, rankles*, ought to be considered in the light of our willingness to venture on any number of unpleasant pursuits *if* we perceive the value of so doing.

So the *point* of the penitence to which John calls us is not to make us feel bad. Feeling bad about ourselves does indeed tend very easily toward making us feel bad about our faith, to feel bad about the people whom we associate with penitence (our clergy, our sisters and brothers and teachers in the faith,

John Calvin) (not that I would protest anyone feeling bad about John Calvin) — and feeling bad is ultimately quite the opposite of the gospel. Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly, not that we might make ourselves miserable with self-hatred. God looked at all that had been made in the Garden of Eden and said, ‘Lo, it is very good!’, not ‘Uh oh, they’re having altogether too good a time down there’.

If the Kingdom of Heaven is anything like the way Isaiah (and Jesus) talk about it — if it’s characterised by peaceableness and equity, by generosity and abundance — that’s going to take *getting used to* for many people. Those of us who have gotten accustomed to the benefits of living in a what we politely, obliquely describe as a ‘developed’ nation will have to come to terms with a heavenly economy which doesn’t support the habit of self-indulgence. Those who benefit from the comforts and security that come from our being protected by the vigilance of armed forces will have to get used to the idea of naked vulnerability. We who slaughter others of God’s creatures for savoury food will have to adjust to a different diet when the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together. And those who resist the generous, open-hearted, peaceable way of the Kingdom of Heaven may have to come to terms with their chosen resistance having cast them into a fiery exile from the fount of all-sufficient blessing that springs up before the throne of God.

John’s message of preparatory penitence implores God’s people to begin *getting used to* the Kingdom of Heaven now, while we have time to learn to bear

the fruits of honest repentance, to experience the *relief* of stepping out of super-size consumerism. The herald of the coming of the Lord has come not to offer growth tips for padding the numbers of bums in pews, but to warn us of the peril of neglecting repentance, of presuming on our own eminence, of accommodating wickedness while neglecting charity.

Repent, because although the exercise of self-examination now stings and aches, entering the Kingdom of Heaven *feels good*. Repent, because the bad habits and selfish temptations to which the human heart so readily falls prey aren't satisfying anyway. Repent of the obstacles that keep you at a self-imposed arm's length from the limitless riches of God's grace — and then draw near to the root of Jesse on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come so very near that you can *taste* it, *hold* it, *breath* its fragrance. Repent, and enter the kingdom of grace where flourishes the church of God, purified of self-importance and condescension by Christ's sacrifice, holy with the purity that comes only as God's perfect and imperishable gift, and made righteous by the indwelling Spirit — the kingdom where there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more, where they will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Amen