



Second Sunday of Advent

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 5 December 2021

READINGS

Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 1: 68-79; Philippians 1: 3-11; Luke 3: 1-6

Repent to prepare for Christ's coming

Warmest greetings to our online worshippers as you join us on this second Sunday in Advent. Today we look at repentance as the way to prepare ourselves to receive our Saviour, and our need to turn away from what is keeping us separate from God. One of the results of greater communication and access to ideas has been a challenge to many previously firmly held beliefs, and Christianity is no exception to this. It is no bad thing either. Life is about change and growth and development and each age will have to look again at what informs its faith and how best to hear God speaking to the current generation.

One of the areas has been the whole subject of sin, repentance, forgiveness and judgement. Previously it was all quite straightforward. Sin is wrongdoing, and in order to come into the presence of God – probably after death, you need to confess you sin, ask God to forgive you your sin, and accept his pardon and you are in the right relationship with God, and all is well – except that, being human you will sin again and need to go over the whole process once more. We go through this penitence each Sunday, for this and other reasons. We cannot accept the gift of the body and blood of Christ if we are not in a right relationship with God and our neighbour.

But there have been a lot of questions around this. Is it sin if a hungry child steals food from a shop? It's wrong, but is the child a sinner because of it? Abused women who out of desperation kill their violent husbands – is this wrong? The courts these days tend to be a little more lenient, but there are those who will judge the deed – “Why didn't she get out?” Addiction and the crimes, often theft, that go with them, is the perpetrator someone to be condemned, or are they just coping (destructively) with severe mental and social pressures? That's before we get into “what about those who have never heard about Jesus – other religions and children brought up by atheists and so on?” Some contemporary thinkers are looking more from a universalist perspective, and seeing perhaps in a relative way – good and evil are not absolutes but all considerations must be taken into account, and others feel a loving God in the person of Jesus who died at the hands of humankind, would look at judgement rather as restitution and restoration rather than an eternal punishment, and it is felt this is more in line with a God of love as presented in the Bible and in the traditions of the church.

Both of these approaches illustrate more the attitudes of people than what may or may not be what God expects, and both have to be considered. The psychiatrist and academic Iain McGilchrist has, amongst many other things, researched and concluded the left and right brain hypothesis is not what we thought. A somewhat simplistic version of his conclusions state that, left brain, which we always thought of as the seat of reason and logic and language, is not quite that. It is where we deal with facts, facts which exist in

isolation from other things, and in that hemisphere, we manipulate facts and manage them. An example of this is when we learn to play a musical instrument. The early days are made up of the facts of the notes on a page, the facts of the notes on our instrument, and the fact of the techniques we use to get that note played accurately. It is a function of intense, exclusionary focus. Anyone who has endured the practising of a small child learning to play will know it's a necessary part of the process, but there is no music at that stage.

Once the facts have been arranged, the right hand brain comes into play. Again, this has traditionally been thought of as the creative side, but it is more than that. It is where we see things as fitting the bigger picture. It is where the notes and the characteristics of the musical instrument are made into a melody and are placed in the film score or the advertising jingle so they do the best job they can do. We all do this juggling in our occupations and our lives, and move back and forth between the two brain functions depending upon what is needed at the time. It isn't a question of which brain when, but both parts need each other and work together.

So what about sin? Here we see that, in a left-brain environment, sin is a sin, and people who do the wrong thing have committed a sin. Police work, forensic accountancy, trauma surgery, these focus more on facts, and they have to. That doesn't mean those doing this work are people without compassion, or they don't have their own opinions as to why these things happen, but their job is to deal with what is in front of them and get rid of the evil they have been trained to deal with. We have just come through local government elections, and one of the issues is that of corruption. There is theft, mismanagement, and wrongdoing at all levels of government in our land. There are women, beaten up and killed in our land. There are people living in houses, deriving cars and wearing clothes they haven't earned and their debt will follow them for the rest of their lives, and they lie to keep ahead of their creditors. We drive like lunatics, we drive when under the influence and are unafraid of an ineffective police force. We are unconcerned about the ravages of Covid and couldn't be bothered to get vaccinated and don't care about the variants that develop. Whatever their origins, these are sins of one sort or another, and no amount of soft talk or negotiations or re-interpretation will change that. It is sin, and people are hurt as a result.

But then if we go into the other side of the brain and look at the contexts of these things, we see that there is a "why" to all these sins, and we don't always know who is the sinner and who is sinned against. Corruption happens when there is no accountability. Leaders can do what they like, because the electorate won't hold them to account, at least one reason being the electorate is very afraid of going back to what was there before. Prejudice, white against black and black against white is a source of fear and informs who we choose and why we do what we do. It's another form of evil probably not properly dealt with, but it allows for a lot of sin. Men who abuse women are overwhelmingly from abusive upbringing, and society doesn't deal with young men in danger to prevent this developing. Uncontrolled access by teenagers to alcohol and drugs makes for early addiction which exacerbates toxic attitudes of social media-fed teenagers. Abused little girls find men like their abusers, marry them and the abuse cycle continues. Is the sin in the actions only, or are the perpetrators victims who were wrongly led and uncorrected? I could go on. Debt from a greed is fed by a feeling of inadequacy, so appearances are too important. Where is this lack of self-esteem from? Vaccine indifference, like irresponsible driving is from a loss of the sense of community and a regard for oneself only which developed from a society indifferent to the needs of those who don't care. And, let's be honest, even our church-going can be from selfish motives because of our inadequacies rather than for love of God.

But now, as we come into this season of Advent, and we look today at the subject of repentance. What does it mean? Do we condemn ourselves and others as hardened sinners who deserve punishment unless

we turn radically towards God? There is room for that concept. Sin is hard and ugly. Or are we misguided people formed and nurtured by imperfect parents in a faulty society, and while we do our best, we mess up often in spite of our best efforts? I think we would recognize this concept too. So where do we start on this Second Sunday looking at repentance?

All three of our readings call for repentance. Malachi sees sin as needing to be washed out with very tough soap, or as being burnt, in the way furnaces isolate the pure metals to be used, and the impurities go on to slag heaps. That's fact. Sin is very dirty stuff! Paul urges the Philippians to love so as to keep the faith. Sin is pervasive stuff. John's repentance calls are definite warnings, not suggestions. Sin is dangerous stuff.

But all three call for repentance for a definite, similar reason. In Malachi, the people are called to repent and be refined so that their sacrifices are acceptable to God. Paul demands that they love more and more so that they will be blameless on that day when Christ comes again. John calls for repentance so that the people will see the salvation God is bringing. So repentance is not actually about making us into good people in a nice society, although that is important. It is making us turn away from those labels and actions which we use to cover up our inadequacies to make us look better to those who we feel we need to impress. Repentance is about getting closer to God. God loves us whether we are expensively dressed, whether we are addicted to substances or behaviours, and his love is all the power we need. But if we are caught up in our issues, we can't see that. Repentance, meaning turning away, means we have to risk giving up our precious self-identities and our respectable or power-making behaviours so that the light of Christ is not hindered in any way.

Do you realise how much God loves you? Every molecule in your body and every neuron in your mind is there because God knows what you need to live your allotted lifetime here in fulfilment of God's purposes in your life. And everyone else is equally designed in the same way, and if we were all cleansed and perfect, and we could all understand clearly what God wants us to do, would that not be a world where God reigns, and Jesus is followed and not betrayed and crucified?

Let us draw close to God this Advent, and in the light of the love of Jesus look closely at ourselves and allow those things which are so precious to us, but are so damaging, be stripped away because we willingly give them up. And let us, at this Christmas time, meet Jesus and allow him to be as much part of our lives as any newborn baby. May he change our world and everyone in it, to create the perfection envisaged by God. May nothing we do or neglect to do, spoil what God has planned.