

**Sermon: Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2019.**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:1-12.**

**Title: The Treasure House within You**

Our gospel reading this morning began with the words... 'In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea'<sup>1</sup>. He was, I think, in the wilderness both physically and metaphorically. Physically, he was on the desolate, barren, eastern slopes of the Judean mountains, with little to sustain him but 'locusts and wild honey'<sup>2</sup>. Metaphorically, he was in a place where he had realised the desert within himself, that liminal wasteland of searching, confrontation and transformation, a threshold where everyday life is set aside and new possibilities can arise. For John the Baptist, the new possibilities were personified in the one who is coming after him, the one who's sandals he deemed himself unworthy to carry<sup>3</sup>.

John is telling everyone who would listen to 'repent', but what is repentance and how do we repent? Psalm 51, that great prayer of contrition and renewal, speaks of repentance and its opening lines set the scene well...

Have mercy on me, O God,  
    according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
    blot out my transgressions.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:1 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:4 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:11 (NRSV)

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,

And my sin is ever before me.<sup>4</sup>

So, repentance is often taken to mean that we need to recognise our sins; express regret and remorse; seek forgiveness; and undertake not to repeat them in the future. It all sounds straightforward enough...but, there is just one small problem...the words 'repent', and 'repentance', are translations of the Greek word '*Metanoia*', and metanoia doesn't really mean that at all. It doesn't mean that we have to live our lives in a constant state of remorse, contrition and penitence, being full of sorrow, guilt and shame for what we may have done, or not done. To quote from one of Mary Oliver's poems, 'You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting'<sup>5</sup>.

Now, before I continue, I want to make it very clear that nothing I'm saying here is meant to suggest that that we shouldn't, to quote Carl Jung, 'know our own darkness'. That we shouldn't identify that within us that distances us from God and seek, where necessary, to modify our thinking and our behaviours. This, I believe, is a fundamental characteristic of growing and developing as a person and a human being, and is an integral part of being people of God, the God who is love. As the great [Sufi](#) mystic and poet Rumi says...our 'task is not to seek love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within (ourselves) that (we) have built against it'.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 51:1-3 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Wild Geese. Available from: [http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver\\_wildgeese.html](http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_wildgeese.html)  
Accessed 02.12.19.

So, with this in mind, let's explore a little more fully what this word *Metanoia* might really mean and what implications it might have for us...

The word *Metanoia* breaks down into 'Meta' and 'Noia', where 'Meta' can mean 'after', 'changed', or 'beyond', and 'Noia' originates from the Greek word '*nous*' which refers to the intellect or the mind. So, when the meaning of 'meta' is taken to be 'changed', *Metanoia* is often interpreted as 'to change one's mind', or perhaps 'to convert', meaning to change our motivation and our direction in life. This is why John the Baptist was compelling people to be baptised, as a public act that demonstrates their intention to change their lives, to move from their old way of being and living, to a new way of being and living. But *Metanoia* can mean so much more and is indicative of radical transformation and rebirth. Cynthia Bourgeault is an Anglican priest of the Episcopal Church in the USA, and a writer who has written extensively on the Wisdom Tradition within Christianity. She has also written about repentance and our understanding of *Metanoia*. For Bourgeault, meta means 'beyond' so, for her, *Metanoia* doesn't just mean to change your mind, it means to 'go beyond the mind'<sup>6</sup>; to bring about a 'radical transformation of consciousness'<sup>7</sup> so that we move beyond our small, self-centred, self-interested, worldly mind and, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul, we renew our mind<sup>8</sup> and put on the mind of Christ<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Bourgeault, C. (2008) 'The Wisdom Jesus'. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., p37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p47.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 2:5

The writer John Davidson suggests that such a radical transformation 'signifies' the need for a 'redirection of the attention from the world towards God'<sup>10</sup>. John the Baptist alludes to this need to redirect our attention when he tells us that 'the kingdom of heaven has come near'<sup>11</sup>, or 'is at hand'<sup>12</sup>, or 'is upon you'<sup>13</sup>, depending on your translation. Luke finally makes this crystal clear for us when he tells us that 'the kingdom of God is within you'<sup>14</sup>. God is within us, so, if we wish to experience this radical transformation we need to redirect our attention within, to the interior journey, the journey to the centre, to the source, that 'inmost centre in us all, where truth abides in fullness'<sup>15</sup> to quote Robert Browning. It is in a return to this inmost centre where we will discover truth, and our true selves in God, and Father Bede Griffiths explains that 'this is...metanoia - the discovery of the real Self, of eternal life'<sup>16</sup>.

So how can we do this? Well, I don't claim to have the definitive answer, but what I can say is this, personally I am persuaded that, with the grace of God, we need to engage with a spiritual path and live that path deeply. We need to incorporate within our path an achievable, and sustainable spiritual practice that enables us to withdraw into our inner room<sup>17</sup>, still our minds and open ourselves to the sustaining presence of God. We have to engage with practices that can move us from superficiality to depth, from belief to encounter, from speaking to listening, from self-centeredness to

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<sup>10</sup> Davidson, J. (1995) 'The Gospel of Jesus: In Search of His Original Teachings'. Shaftesbury: Element Books Limited, p468.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 3:2 (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 3:2 (RSV)

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 3:2 (REB)

<sup>14</sup> Luke 17:21 (KJV)

<sup>15</sup> Robert Browning: From 'Paracelsus'

<sup>16</sup> Griffiths, B. (2003) 'Return to the Centre'. Tucson, AZ: Medico Media Publishing, p44.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 6:6 (Knox Version)

God-centeredness, from division to unity, and from being full to becoming empty. Indeed, it is this process of self-emptying, or 'Kenosis' in Greek, that the Apostle Paul identifies in his letter to the Philippians as being essential as he implores us to put on the mind of Christ<sup>18</sup>. Jesus 'emptied himself'<sup>19</sup> he tells us, and, in order to have the 'same mind'<sup>20</sup> in us, we have to empty ourselves, letting go of attachments, clinging to nothing. In the words of Cynthia Bourgeault, 'divine love is infinite and immediate and will always come to us if we don't cling'<sup>21</sup>...it is when we 'learn...to let all things flow in that great river of kenosis...(that) we come to know...the river itself, which circulates through all things as the hidden dynamism of love'<sup>22</sup>.

So when John the Baptist speaks of repentance we can take it to mean knowing our own darkness and changing our motivation and our direction in life. But we can also understand it as an infinitely more profound transformation of our consciousness, a transformation that opens us to a direct encounter with the divine; that opens us to Christ, to God. Isaac of Nineveh, the 7th century Syrian [bishop](#), theologian, and monk, talked of the 'treasure house that is within you'. It is by going within, into this 'treasure house', that we can be transformed. So I'll end with his words...

'Be at peace with your own soul  
then heaven & earth will be at peace with you.  
Enter eagerly into the treasure  
house that is within you,

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<sup>18</sup> Philippians 2:5 (A Paraphrase)

<sup>19</sup> Philippians 2:7 (NRSV)

<sup>20</sup> Philippians 2:5 (NRSV)

<sup>21</sup> Bourgeault, C. (2008) 'The Wisdom Jesus'. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., p73.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p74.

and you will see the things that are in heaven,  
for there is but one single entry to them both.

The ladder that leads to the Kingdom  
is hidden within your soul...

Dive into yourself and in your soul  
you will discover the stairs  
by which to ascend.'

Amen.