

Epiphany III

I am thinking about words and a word in particular, the word “repentance.”

We live in a world in which words are somewhat up for grabs.

“Alternative facts” came off the lips of a high governmental official about a year ago, and we had a presiding bishop a while ago who spoke of “pluriform truth.”

A former President is remembered for asking someone questioning him just what the meaning of “is.”

When we are feeling conservative, we want to insist that words don’t change their meaning, that they aren’t up for grabs.

Indeed, a chair is a chair, a rock is a rock, and a puppy a puppy.

But, we also know that meanings change.

“To send someone to the chair” means something very different from a dining chair.

Jesus called Peter the rock, on which he would build his church, and he did not turn him to granite.

And “house” can be the casino when you are playing blackjack, restaurant lingo used by servers and cooks, or a basketball arena.

Because we talk so much, write so much, because we are always innovating in our language, words do change.

Part of a lively Christian faith, then, is figuring out what you mean when you use the Christian vocabulary.

What are you speaking of? What does the preacher mean by that word?

Does the historic meaning still work?

Does it snap through our consciousness and bring a certain picture or concept to mind?

If it does so for us, does it do so for enough others as well,

to make the word powerful in something like a community of faith?

Do we have a common language of Christian faith that binds us together?

“Repentance” is the particular word I have in mind.

What does “repentance” look like to you?

What do you picture, what does your mind’s eye see, when you hear the word?

Inclined, perhaps, to see someone on his knees, beginning for forgiveness, full of contrition, bargaining with God, insisting he will make a new start.

Sin is what we repent of.

Unless we’ve been on our knees in such dramatic repentance, it is likely someone else we picture when the word comes to us.

Repentance, we tend to think, or act as if we think, is something for someone else.

And liturgically, repentance is something we think of when Lent comes around.

I fear we gave it its own season so we wouldn't have to think of it at other times!

But in the best understanding, repentance is not just stopping sinning,
necessary though that is.

It is the beginning of a new life.

Think of the people of Nineveh, portrayed as corporately accepting a new life.

If real, here we would see them living in a new way, together.

And what great news that would be;

that they were practicing the love of God and of neighbor,

as Israel was meant to do,

instead of conquering and pillaging,

as had been the Ninevehites' long preference.

And the good news that Jesus proclaimed to Peter and James and John included
repentance.

While Nineveh had a reputation for an aggressive wickedness, these guys did not.

They were respectable fishermen,

helping their fathers,

supporting their families.

Repenting for them meant an end to one way of life,

not even, it seems, a bad one,

and the beginning of a new life,

one with a surpassing joy and a commitment to God in it,

in the following of Jesus.

Some elements of that repentance;

 Jesus said the Kingdom of God had come near.

 The near presence of God's purposes and power had changed them.

And then the charge, assurance, that they would now fish for people.

 They would be deeper in relationship with others.

So repentance is what happens when God comes near,

claims us,

and puts us in right relationship with others.

This is a step forward to me in one of my preaching/pastoral theology problems.

I have had, in the church at times, people who needed to repent of grievous sin.

Of adultery, racism, and a disregard for the Scriptures and the Sacraments.

But more of the people I have preached to and spoken with have been
observers of the tenets and practices of the Gospel.

Does the person who lives in great personal holiness need to repent?

Yes, in the sense that repentance is the beginning of a fuller following of Jesus Christ.

Until the kingdom comes,

everyone of us is called to a greater love,
a deeper fidelity,
an upward step in our following of Jesus.
And that is repentance, a meaning for the word you might need to grab hold of.

So when you picture repentance,
think not so much of broken person, groveling to a distant God.
But picture God coming near, as Jesus did to Peter and Andrew, to James and John,
extending a spiritual embrace, arms wide open as extended on the Cross,
and drawing you, from your own purposes and into a greater story.
And giving you beloved companions for a new journey toward a kingdom.

Repentance is full of joy.
It is light and life, a perfect word for our Epiphany season.
Do not wait for Lent to repent.
Beat the rush and repent, in the full joy of the Lord, every day.