

**Repent, for the Reign of God has come near.**

*An elder from the desert hermit monks said, "We used to get together and speak of spiritual things, until we rose higher and higher, even unto heaven. But now we get together and complain about everything and drag ourselves down into the abyss."*

This morning I want to preach a sermon that falls into two parts. First, I want to reflect with you on repenting, considering it in a new way. Later, I'll suggest some things best left behind as we enter the reign of God.

**Repent, for the Reign of God has come near.**

Are these words simply Jesus' challenge to his followers? Yes, but they are more. Jesus is **quoting** these words directly from John the Baptist, the Forerunner. Today's Gospel begins with the Baptist's arrest, and after withdrawing for a time, Jesus leaves his hometown, and appears to preach like John did. Notice that this proclamation has two parts: **Repent** and **God's reign is near**.

John the Baptist stressed repentance from sin, the need we have to turn away from activities and habits of mind that prevent us from seeing what God is doing! This approach can keep the focus on the negative, on what we do wrong. Sometimes a believer can succumb to an obsessive kind of repentance, by which one can't get past looking at his or her own individual spiritual scorecard and how one's own ego is doing.

If you, or someone you know, is caught up in a self-centered kind of repentance, it might help you to reflect on a verse like this [from the Letter to Hebrews, 6:1]: *Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works.*

Why then does Jesus, who surpassed John the Baptist, return to that same message, *Repent, for the Reign of God has come near*? I believe what's different about the approach of Jesus is his stress on the *second half* of that sentence: God's reign is near! Jesus' call for repentance is to return to relationship: a turning toward God, a turnaround, converting, showing a change of heart and mind.

Why should we turn around? Because there's more happening in this world than our own personal issues. God's reign is arriving, slipping between the chinks in the armor around our hearts, smuggling itself in past our mental defenses, sidestepping the suspicions of our hurt emotions and wounded pride. There is something so compelling about the promise of God's

love breaking forth in this world of spiritual starvation that our souls will be attracted to turning around, just to notice what's new.

There is a sign that the reign of God is bursting in upon people: **healing** happens! One doesn't speak of "sinful people" anymore; that's terribly *out of fashion* and seems so *judgmental*. People use the word dysfunctional. But isn't it the same? It's OK to say that a person or a family or a group of people is dysfunctional. And the cure just may be identical to the old-fashioned way of calling someone to repent from a course of action, to turn away from addiction and harm. In this way, repentance leads to healing of a divided psyche.

The Christians in Corinth were dysfunctional. They indulged in petty party politics in place of living out the Good News which was given to them. It's oddly reassuring for modern Christians to hear that things were also confused in the early church. In place of "Apollos, Cephas or Paul" we could put Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or Anglican — the main branches of Christianity. When we fight each other, we betray Christ's message and need to repent. Christ wants us to work with and learn from people whose faith differs from ours, or whose polity (the way of structuring church bodies) may be different. For the Corinthians and for us, repentance leads to healing of a divided community. We may have differences from our brothers and sisters in the Central Valley or in different provinces of Anglicans, but we are also called to keep in communion.

### **Repent, for the Reign of God has come near.**

Now that we've reflected on repenting, I'd like to point out some things left behind when we turn around and change our focus to the spread of the reign of God. We hear in this morning's Gospel that the disciples leave three things behind. I once heard a sportscaster talk about the two happiest days in the life of owner of a boat: the day he buys the boat, and the day he sells it. In our culture, boats are a luxury, a hobby — even for kayak owners like me.

But when the disciples leave their boat, they're leaving their occupation, at the least! And how else would they get around? They had no chariots, no horses. They left behind a means of transportation and the livelihood they knew best. Other values — those of the reign of God — will take the place of the boat. And each of us has something symbolic like a boat we've left behind already, or will someday.

The second thing they leave behind is their nets — I've always liked this rich image. Nets work for catching literal fish, but fishing for people is done freely. Too often Christians have not trusted the power of God's spirit to work on people. Too often Christians have compelled people to sign on a dotted line, insisting on a certain formula to be repeated, or asking for certain standard actions. The best evangelism means leaving the nets behind, letting go an attachment to measurable success. We share what we have to share, & trust God to do the rest.

The final thing they leave is their father: the toughest, and yet the most liberating! Hardly a week goes by that I don't talk to a parishioner about parents, living or not. Now, Jesus doesn't tell his disciples to ignore the commandment (honor father and mother). Rather, repenting for the reign of God means that we leave behind old ways of relating to **all** authority figures: parents, teachers, governments and nations. Only after breaking old ways can we relate to them with the authentic love which drives the fourth commandment, and all the other commandments as well.

So:   leave behind the confines of a little boat –  
      abandon the efforts to trap others in nets and subtle snares –  
      walk away from childish relationships and lives as adults.

As we do these things, the peace of God which passes understanding will increase in our hearts, in our communities, and in the world around us.

**Repent, for the Reign of God has come near.**