

THE MEANING OF REPENTANCE

Sermon by Rev Colin Chapman at the International Church, Copenhagen

24 March, 2019 – 3rd Sunday in Lent

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

It's good for a visiting preacher to be given texts from the lectionary to speak on because it means that I can't speak on my pet subject! When I first looked at these readings some weeks ago, I thought 'This is a strange collection of texts because I can't see any connection between them!' It was only when I looked at them again later that I spotted the connection: all three of them speak in one way or another about repentance.

So before we try to think about what these passages might mean for us today, I want to spend a few minutes looking at each of the three readings – if only as an exercise in how to read scripture.

In the Old Testament passage, God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah to the people of Judah who have been taken into exile in Babylon in the 6th C BC. The experience of exile must have been extremely traumatic. They were banished from their land; the temple had been destroyed; and the line of kings descended from David had come to an end. They must have felt in total despair. In this situation God says to his people, 'Don't give up hope – I'm not going to abandon you! Don't stop trusting me! If you come to me, you will find in me all the resources to meet your deepest needs and longings.' *'Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.'*

As I read these words through the spectacles of the New Testament, I immediately think of the words of Jesus: *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls'*. In Isaiah it's God speaking, and in the gospel it's Jesus speaking, and showing us that it's through Jesus that we come to God.

Isaiah goes on to assure the people that God is going to keep the covenant promises he has made – like the promise that there will always be a descendant of David on the throne. *I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David ...'* And we know from the Annunciation to Mary that Jesus was the fulfilment of that promise: *'The Lord God will give him (Jesus) the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever.'*

Then Isaiah looks forward to the time when the message will go out from the Children of Israel to reach other nations: *'See you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.'*

You may be interested to know that at that at the conference of the Tvaerkulturelt-Center, the Cross-Cultural Center, which some of us have been attending over this week-end, 30 out of the 100 people who attended were people from Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan – some of them new Danes, and many of them asylum seekers. All of them have in recent years become disciples of Jesus.

This promise about the message coming to the whole world in the future is followed by a call to repentance here and now: *'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.'*

In the second reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul is writing about the 40 years the Children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness and how they failed one test after another. Perhaps this reading is chosen during Lent because when Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, he was, in a sense, being tested in the same way that the Children of Israel had been tested. And since Lent is supposed to be a time of self-examination, it's good to be reminded of Paul's warning that we don't fall into the same sins as the Children of Israel did. *'So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.'* And he follows on with these wonderfully reassuring words about temptation: *'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.'*

The gospel is quite a difficult reading and contains one of the hardest sayings of Jesus. It begins with a discussion about the problem of suffering and evil, when people ask Jesus about the atrocity of *'the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices,'* and the accident in which *'eighteen were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them.'* Perhaps the equivalent for us today would be what happened last week in New Zealand and the crash of the Ethiopian plane.

Jesus asks *'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'* Jesus seems to be saying *'Don't you realise that if you don't get right with God, if you don't make your peace with him, there's something worse than dying in such a tragic and horrible way?'*

So I wonder if we can see how the theme of repentance runs through all these three readings. If Lent is going to be a time of self-examination, perhaps we need to ask ourselves about those areas in our lives where we have inner struggles and where we're being dragged down. And I'm not just talking about the temptation to eat too much chocolate or to sleep in for too long in the morning. I'm talking about the much bigger things in our lives which we know are wrong.

But let me go on to point out that repentance isn't just about saying sorry to God for myself and turning from doing wrong things. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means a change of thinking, changing our minds. And it's not just individuals who need to change their minds about different things – it's whole communities and societies.

Perhaps I can relate this briefly to the theme of our conference: we've been thinking about the experience of the new Danes, of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers in Denmark. And we've been thinking about Christian responses to Muslims and Islam. There are three areas in particular where I suspect we European are being called to change our attitudes:

- Our attitude to foreigners. We've heard so much recently about racism, and white supremacy. As someone from the UK, where we're going through the agony and trauma of the debate about Brexit, I realise that one of the basic issues is the way we think about 'foreigners.'
- Our attitudes to other religions – especially Islam. I don't need to remind you of all the talk about Islamophobia – our irrational fear of Islam. Many people in our western societies have very negative views about Muslims and Islam.
- Our attitudes to our history. We've thought at the conference about the responsibility of the West – especially Britain and the US - in the creation and continuation of the conflicts of the Middle East. It's easy to blame ISIS and extremist Muslims and not to face up to our own share of responsibility.

So could it be that this theme of repentance tells us that it's not just individuals – you and me – who need to examine ourselves before God and to change our thinking, but churches, communities, societies and even nations.