

Proper 21 Year A 2020

"Son, go and work in the vineyard today'. He answered 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went."

He changed his mind and went. I think we can call that 'repentance'. And all today's readings are about repentance. The psalm stands out. Sometimes the verses seem to be in the wrong order, but that is because this psalm is an acrostic - each of the verses begin with the letters in correct order of the Hebrew alphabet - so if we were to rearrange them a little we could have - 'Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; lead me in your truth and teach me'. In other words, I know that in the past I have got things wrong, but with your help I can do better and walk on the right path.

This psalm is said, at least in my Office Book, every Sunday morning in Advent and every seventh Tuesday in 'Ordinary Time', that long green season from Trinity Sunday until All Saint's Sunday - and I say the whole psalm, not just the nine verses we have today.

This psalm is the prayer of someone whose life seems to be unravelling; it is a real prayer from a real person, not the concoction of a skilled poet or liturgist. It comes from a broken heart, from the heart of someone whose life is crumbling to pieces. The person who wrote this psalm is alone, afraid and perhaps even ashamed. 'Do not remember' he cries - but then he wants God to remember - 'Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, of your steadfast love'. Backwards and forwards he (or

she) goes; 'according to your steadfast love, remember me'. - like the thief on the cross next to Jesus - 'remember me, when you come into your kingdom' - so alone, so afraid, begging not to be forgotten or forsaken.

The psalmist doesn't want God 'just' to be merciful and remember him - he wants God not to remember the sins of the past - like the lady Fr Mel talked about last week - 'I distinctly remember forgetting that' - that is what the psalmist asks for - not just forgiveness, but forgetfulness. That is a huge ask of a God who presumably knows all, sees all, remembers all- and a huge ask of all of us. Forgive and forget, we are told. Sometimes the forgiving is easier than the forgetting - where things can continue to simmer. But with God all things are possible. In the prophesy of Isaiah he says 'I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sins'. But will he forget the sins of our fathers, which we are told in the book Exodus (20.5) are visited on the children to the third or fourth generation? If you have been listening to the news recently you can imagine that coming true. Who will inherit our reckless use of fossil fuel and its effect on the climate - our grandchildren and great grandchildren? Who will inherit the excessive sinful overuse of the planets resources - our grandchildren and great grandchildren? Who will be deprived of the joys of the boundless species of wild life now facing extinction - not only our great grandchildren, but even this

generation? And isn't Covid 19 a result of the way we have treated - and mistreated - our planet - no, not our planet, but God's planet. We can only say 'Do not remember the sins of my youth' if we are also prepared to say 'Make me to know your ways, o Lord, teach me your paths'.

Repentance has consequences. We can't simply stop doing what is wrong; we have to start doing what is right. Like the Christians in Philippi we have to pull together, recognise the 'encouragement in Christ, the consolation from love, the sharing in the Spirit, the compassion and sympathy' There is clearly a problem in the church in Philippi - isn't there in every church? In fact, all of the New Testament letters seem to have been written in response to problems, We hear this particular NT reading every year on Palm Sunday - every year, not just one in three - so that gives us an indication of how important it is - not just for the glorious hymn of emptying and raising which Paul quotes - but for the encouragement it gives as we look at the way the church falls out with itself and yet, in spite of that, God can use a broken church, imperfect as we are. It was this same church in Philippi that was used by God to help those suffering in Jerusalem, to be a witnessing church in Philippi, to help Paul in prison. In spite of all the flaws of disunity and division, God made - makes - use of such a fellowship. Even though this letter has to deal with very real problems in the church, the letter is warm and heart-warming; it encourages,

uplifts and calls for repentance. 'Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus'.

And so we are back to repentance - 'he changed his mind and went'. Back to the beginning. Jesus offers the chief priests and elders of the people the opportunity to change their minds, to look at the evidence - the baptism of John, and its consequences - and repent. But they will not. Their belief in their own importance, their own authority, prevents them looking at events from a different angle and seeing Jesus - and themselves - in a new light. Where does the authority of Jesus come from? We know of course that it comes from God - but do the Jewish religious authorities know that? Indeed, are they afraid that that might be true? For if it is, it will threaten their authority and their status. They have to be right, even when they know they are wrong. That is to sin knowingly.

The sin they are being accused of here is hypocrisy, the hypocrisy of judging others by the standards they profess but do not keep; they pay lip-service to God but refuse to accept the evidence of their own eyes when they see the tax-collectors and prostitutes receiving John's baptism for repentance. They are the second son in Jesus' parable, the one who does not do what he says he will do. Secure in their exalted position, they close their ears and so have no ability to hear the word of God, whilst the tax-collectors and prostitutes, the lowest of the

low, know their lives are a mess and recognise their need of God; they listen to his voice.

And today's readings are a call to us to listen to God's word, his call - his call to repentance. To say we have no need of repentance and forgiveness is to be like the chief priests. We all know we are not perfect, but we cannot be changed unless we are honest and open with God and with ourselves, so that God can work with us to help us become the people we are meant to be. Like those who came to John in sorrow and need, we are invited into a life-giving, life-changing relationship with God. 'Get yourself a new heart and a new spirit' says the Lord God. 'Turn, then, and live'.