

## REPENTANCE

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai, Sunday 21 February 2016

Luke 5:27-32

[MW16-06]

A certain Irish priest, newly arrived in New York City, decided to visit the section known as the Bowery, haven of homeless alcoholics and other derelicts. As he walked along one of the Bowery blocks at night he suddenly felt a gun against his ribs. Then he heard a raspy voice: "All right mister, gimme all your money!" Quickly, he reached for his wallet and, as he did, the holdup man noticed his clerical garb. The thief was overcome with shame. He said, "Forgive me, Father. I didn't know you were a priest." To which the victim replied, "That's all right, Son. Just repent of your sin. Here, have a cigar." The thief replied, "Oh, no, thank you, Father, I don't smoke during Lent."

"Repentance"

- r-e-p-e-n-t-a-n-c-e

it's one of our "churchy" words

you've probably heard it reasonably often

- so what do you think of when you hear the word "repentance"?

what does "repentance" mean for you?

- take a moment or two to think and reflect, discuss even

then we'll see what we come up with ...

[space]

I thought that as "repentance" is an important

- but technical sounding word, I would get some down to earth assistance

so I looked up a book I often find helpful:

*Bruce and Stan's Guide to God – A User-friendly Approach*

- to see what they had to say about this important topic

there is only one entry – short and to the point, it says:

Repentance: A person who is truly sorry for sins will be willing to turn away from them. True repentance means to "turn around" in your heart and mind. You're ready to make a new start, whatever it takes. [p.214]

The key points are

- a person is truly sorry for their sins

a person is willing and able to turn away

a person turns around in their heart and mind

- a person will make a new start – whatever it takes

I read that and do you know what immediately came to mind ... John Newton!

I could explain "repentance" as a theological concept

I could underline the steps we are called to make

I could point out its significance and importance

However I actually think I can do all that much better

- can give real life to "repentance"

by telling you about John Newton

Do you know the story of John Newton?

- he was born in 1725 and his mother died when he was seven  
at the age of eleven he left school and joined his father's ship  
to begin life as a seaman
- his early years were one continuous round of rebellion and debauchery  
leading him to the coast of West Africa  
where he collected slaves for sale to visiting traders

Eventually Newton became captain of his own slave ship

- capturing, selling and transporting slaves to the plantations of the West Indies  
and America
- it was a cruel and vicious way of life

On March 10 1748, while returning to England from Africa

- there was a violent storm and it appeared all would be lost  
Newton's response was to begin reading a book which has become a spiritual  
classic

*Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis who lived 1380-1471

- the message of this book and the frightening experience at sea  
set Newton on a voyage of a very different kind  
a voyage of repentance  
as the Holy Spirit began to sow the seeds of a new life

While Newton continued as a slave ship captain

- he tried to improve conditions for the slaves  
and even held public worship services for his hardened crew
- however the Holy Spirit continued to work in him  
so much so that he could no longer stand the inhuman aspects of the work  
and he became a strong and effective crusader against slavery

But wait! There's more!

- Newton felt the call of God to preach the gospel and began to study diligently  
at the age of thirty nine he was ordained in the Anglican Church  
and worked in the parish of Olney, a little village near Cambridge
- he had a fruitful and influential ministry  
especially useful was his use of the story of his early life  
his repentance and his conversion  
which he told often!

Newton was passionate about sharing his faith and animated in his preaching

- however worship in Anglican Church services at the time  
was neither passionate nor animated
- the singing especially was pretty staid and uninspiring  
Newton wanted hymns that expressed the simple heartfelt faith of his preaching
- along with his friend and neighbour, William Cowper  
Newton produced *Olney Hymns*:  
one of the most important single contributions made  
to the field of evangelical hymn singing

Undoubtedly the most representative expression of John Newton's life and faith  
- is the hymn we know as *Amazing Grace*

Jesus said in our gospel reading:

*"It is not the healthy people who need a doctor, but the sick.*

*I have not come to invite good people but sinners to change their hearts and lives."*

John Newton eventually heard those words and responded to Jesus' invitation

- he repented

he turned his life around

- he wrote in response:

*I once was lost, but now am found*

*was blind, but now I see*

Until his death at the age of 82 John Newton never ceased to marvel at God's mercy

- and God's grace that had so dramatically changed his life

it was the dominant theme of his preaching and writing

- he was a living example of repentance

and encouraged many others to repent and find the gift of new life

Newton died in 1807, the same year that the British Parliament

- finally abolished slavery throughout all of its domain

on his tombstone are the words:

John Newton, clerk, once infidel and Libertine, a servant of slavers in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long laboured to destroy.

The life of John Newton is a powerful testimony to repentance

- he was truly sorry for his life of sin

he willingly turned away

- he changed his whole life – his heart and mind

he made a new start

embraced a new life as a preacher of the good news of Jesus Christ

Jesus called the tax collector, Levi, or Matthew as we better know him

- who responded by leaving everything to follow him

Jesus called other tax collectors and various assorted sinners

who responded by gathering with him

- when the religious authorities complained, Jesus said

*I have come to call sinners to turn from their sins, not to spend my time  
with those who think they are already good enough [Luke 5:32]*

Lent is the one season in the church year when it is not only okay

- to talk about "sin" and "repentance", it is virtually obligatory!

likewise it is virtually obligatory to realise we are all sinners

- not necessarily captains of slave ships, but sinners none the less

Lent is a time for us to take stock

- and honestly consider: is there something I need to repent of?  
a time to examine ourselves, our lives, habits, thoughts, speaking
- a time to ask: is there something I need to turn away from  
in order to receive a new gift of life?

This is not a dark, heavy, sombre, scary thing

- as John Newton discovered to his overwhelming joy  
a joy which sustained him throughout the remainder of his life
- repentance enabled him to stumble upon amazing grace  
we know in verse two of that hymn it says:  
*how precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed*
- Newton wrote a number of verses, which are not always sung  
but we will sing one of them later this morning, which says:

*The Lord has promised good to me, His Word my hope secures  
He will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures*

Repentance is turning and leaving our way

- turning and following God's way  
discovering the amazing gift of life
- this Lent, resolve to spend some time reflecting, then doing this

And there's one more, to me, amazing thing about repentance

- it is perhaps the most precious gift we can offer God

A story from medieval times tells us:

A young woman was expelled from heaven. As she left she was told that if she would bring back the gift that is most valued by God, she would be welcomed back. She brought back drops of blood from a dying patriot. She brought back some coins that a destitute widow had given the poor. She brought back a remnant of a Bible that had been used for years by an eminent preacher. She brought back some dust from the shoes of a missionary labouring in a remote wasteland. She brought back many similar things but was turned away repeatedly.

One day she saw a small boy playing by a fountain. A man rode up on horseback and dismounted to take a drink. The man saw the child and suddenly remembered his boyhood innocence. Then, looking in the fountain and seeing the reflection of his hardened face, he realised what he had done with his life. Tears of repentance welled up in his eyes and began to trickle down his cheeks. The young woman took one of these tears back to heaven and was received with joy and love.

I invite you to reflect, pray, think on "repentance"

- for "homework" consider the thoughts in my 'Wayne's Word' in the Pew News  
is there something you need to turn away from?  
a "course correction" you need to make?
- I invite you to consider this as we listen to the words of John Newton's famous

hymn

a rather non-traditional version  
set to a rather different tune and sung by the Blind Boys of Alabama