

**HOMILY ADVENT SUNDAY 2-A**  
**“Repentance - Key to the Kingdom”**  
**(Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85; 2 Peter 3:6-15; Mark 1:1-8)**

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A dishonest painter thinned the paint with water and painted a church. As long as it didn't rain right away he would be okay, he thought. That night there was a big storm. He ran to the Church in the morning and saw that the paint was running down the walls and forming letters. As he got closer he could make out the words and read, “Repaint, you thinner, and thin no more!”

There is a difference between repentance and sorrow. A question that we can ask ourselves is the following: “Are we truly repentant, or just habitually sorry?”

According to today's readings, humble repentance is the key to the kingdom.

The Church that I grew up in put a great emphasis on confession. In fact, that still is the situation in some of our missions. The practice of confession before going to communion was quite strong, which kept the priests busy in the confessional. As I look back, however, I am left with the question: Was I truly repentant and determined to change and heal, or just sorry and wanting a clean slate to start over until the next confession?

This question has serious implications. I remember once being asked to help guide a young lady who had been sexually molested at the age of eight by an older man. At one point on her healing journey, she was coached to confront her abuser with love. She did well and even tried to understand why he had molested her by asking him at the end of her statement why he had done that to her years earlier. Was it because something like that had happened to him as a child? His reply was disappointing. He actually blamed her for what he did to her, saying it was because of the way she was dressed. When pressed for an apology, he did manage to mutter the words “I am sorry if I hurt you.” That is more of an excuse than an apology. I was very disappointed in his response.

A few days later, I visited him and pleaded with the man to be more sincere and caring and to extend an apology to help the girl to heal. His response was to wave his arm in a dismissive way and say, “I took care of it in confession.” Sad to say, there was no reconciliation possible with such an attitude. On the positive side, however, she felt free to move on because he at least had listened and now knew how she felt about what he had done.

Biblical repentance goes by the Greek word *metanoia*. The word means to change, to turn around 180% and go in a new direction. It implies a transformation and involves healing of negative thinking, negative attitudes and painful emotions. It also must manifest itself by behavioural change. The natural first expression of genuine repentance, of genuine *metanoia*, would be an apology. One takes responsibility for one's hurtful behaviour, goes to the one who has been hurt, and apologizes. The best way to render an apology would be to listen to the hurt feelings of the victim, and then extend an apology.

A genuine apology should include a declaration of the intention to never do that action again, leading to real behavioural change. Nor does it end there. One who is truly repentant will ask himself or herself why they did that hurtful action in the first place. This question takes them into an inner journey exploring the motives; the hidden roots of their behaviour; the flawed thinking; the painful emotions and at an even deeper level, the negative attitudes that undergird the behaviour and that now call for deep healing.

Today's first reading speaks precisely about that healing journey. The prophet proclaims that to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, the road must be made straight, mountains laid low, and valleys filled up. He is speaking of *metanoia*, of the need to turn around and take a new path. He is also alluding to the mountains of false pride that must be taken down and the valleys of selfishness that must be filled up if we are to be genuine followers of a loving God and agents of peace and serenity in our world.

To describe genuine repentance, I like to use the metaphor of weeding a garden. Genuine repentance involves awareness of wrongdoing, an apology, forgiveness and healing. We are the seed that is planted in the garden of life. When we ourselves are hurting from unresolved past hurts and carrying a lot of anger and resentment, we tend to act out of our pain and hurt others. That is the weed that grows in our garden, made up of all kinds of sins, or wrong-doing, hurtful actions, for which we need forgiveness.

Those misdeeds, however, flow out of deep buried roots of anger, insecurity, jealousy, stubbornness, false pride, need to control, self-pity, etc. These are our defects of character, our shortcomings. They are painful emotions and negative attitudes deep within our being that cause us to sin; to do wrong, to hurt others. These are not our fault – they just are. For those shortcomings, we don't need forgiveness as much as we need healing. For that healing to happen, we must acknowledge these defects, pray over them and ask God to remove them. God will do that by filling us with his Spirit of forgiveness and healing, and replace these defects with virtues such as patience, forgiveness, love, peace and joy.

The 12 Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous is a powerful tool that helps people to repent, to change their lives. Steps 4 and 5 are all about confessing one's sins and receiving forgiveness from God, ourselves and one other person. Steps 8 and 9 are all about apologizing to those we hurt, experiencing their forgiveness hopefully and offering to make amends leading to reconciliation. At the centre of the program, Steps 6 and 7 are all about naming our defects of character (our painful emotions and negative attitudes that make us sin) and asking God to heal us, to fill us with God's spirit and to replace those negative aspects of our lives with the virtues needed to live a new life of happy, free sobriety.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is an experience of forgiveness and healing. Through the prayer of the presider and the community, through Word and sacrament, bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus so that we who receive it can also be transformed into the Body of Christ and begin to live in the kingdom of God here and now.

So, remember, humble repentance is the key to the kingdom of God. May God bless us all as we continue our healing journeys.