

Remorse or Repentance?

How many times have we heard the quotation, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt 3:2)? What is this repentance?

The prophet King David answers this question in Psalm 50. It is "a prayer of Repentance" and is about God's mercy. It is also a prophesy about Salvation through Baptism, and a teaching about worship in the Spirit and Truth. The Psalm does not express sorrowful feelings towards any other person, but it is a realisation and a measure of David's sinfulness or inadequacy in the presence of God.

The Psalm depicts David's true Repentance and contrition, and his turning to God to ask for His mercy and forgiveness.

Similarly, the prodigal son, when he finally understood that his father always loved him, said to himself 'I will arise and go to my father and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you..." (Luke 15:18). The prodigal son realised that he sinned against his father. This parable tells us that God longs and patiently waits for the return of all sinners who ask for His forgiveness; and in His mercy He receives them with open arms. Christ proclaims that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel".

What are we to repent of? Christ is telling us to stop in our selfish ways and to turnaround to face God, because the kingdom of God is a reality and exists now. He is telling us to start a new life's - journey remembering or understanding that Christ our God is in our hearts. This is a life that does not remain fastened to the letter of the Law in any legalistic way, but is centered around the Love of and for Christ. This is the life that follows the Law out of Love for God and Mankind.

The chief priest and elders asked Christ, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" (Matt 21: 23), when He cleansed the temple in Jerusalem.

Christ refused to answer by Whose authority He cleansed the temple, but told them the parable of a man and his two sons. The sons were asked to work in the vineyard. The first son refused, but repented and went to work. The second son said that he would but did not.

How many times have we witnessed this parable replayed in our lives? It seems that the tax collectors and harlots repent whereas the chief priests do not recognise Christ's divinity. The so-called 'holy' people in their very commitment to the temple say 'I will go to work in the vineyard', but remain blind to Who Christ is and hold tightly to the Law; whereas the sinners repent and are welcomed by God's merciful embrace.

The law-keepers were the leaders of God's chosen people, yet as they faced God Incarnate their concerns were in their own security and position. They fasted, prayed and were charitable, but did not stop in their tracks and turn to God. Are we like them?

Jesus tells us about two men who went up into the temple to pray (cf. Luke

18:10-14; the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican). One was a highly respected Pharisee who was a very devout and religious man. The other was a tax-collector and regarded as the outcast and robber by those around him.

"The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men-extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess". He stood upright, looking upward toward God, thinking he was righteous and at the same time despised others. He did not present himself before God, but rather stood there for the sake of display, seeking admiration from others; he prayed with himself and not to God. This is not a turning to God or repentance, but a self-congratulation or self-exaltation.

The tax-collector, who was the outcast in his society, stood alone in shame not even raising his eyes to heaven. He prayed with penance saying, "God, be merciful to me the sinner!" He saw himself as the greatest sinner in front of God Who sees behind all pretenses; in contrast to the Pharisee who saw himself as the only holy man in the world.

In the end the humble man who knew he was far from God was the one who came closest to Him. This man only asked for God's mercy, and thus sets an example for us to follow. In fact, these words, "Lord have mercy" are often repeated in the Divine Liturgy or as "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner" in the Jesus Prayer by Orthodox Christians.

Feeling remorse is not repentance.

Judas Iscariot was remorseful for betraying Christ, but he didn't turn to God asking for forgiveness. He lacked repentance preferring to hang himself (cf. Matt 27:3-5).

Conversely, the Apostle St. Peter wept bitterly when he remembered Christ saying "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times" (Matt 26:75). St. Peter began the process of repentance with a 'broken and contrite heart' (cf. Ps 50:17).

Earlier, he professed the divinity of Christ, he was chosen to witness Christ's Metamorphosis and professed that he would die for Him, yet in weakness and fear betrayed Him (cf. Matt 26:6). However, he repented to God with bitter tears and faithfully ended his life in Rome with martyrdom and love for Christ at about the same time as St. Paul.

It is with this Repentance and Faith that the Church is built on. We must not stand in-front of God asking for what we deserve, but come to Him pleading for mercy (Kyrie Eleison). The miracle granted to us is that God is merciful and embraces us in love.