

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand – Lent 1, 2018: Mk.1

How would you put Jesus' central teaching into as few words as possible?

I suspect most of us would come up with something like: love the Lord your God, love your neighbour as yourself. Or, 'God is love'. Or, 'Be kind to each other.'

This was the challenge St. Mark faced in the opening lines of his Gospel, which we've read this morning. How do you summarise what Jesus wanted to say? And the words Mark came up with were these: 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has drawn near. Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near.'

Repent is a word that doesn't sit easily with us today. If it has *any* connotations, they're probably not great – perhaps we imagine dour, authoritarian, killjoy men in black robes and red faces, shouting at the world to behave, judging and condemning all who fail to live up to their rules. It's a word, we think, about guilt and punishment, a word to make us feel bad about ourselves, worms that we are. I was at home in Northern Ireland this week and still, there, on occasion you see signs on the lampposts warning sinners that God is coming to get them. Repent while there's still time, is the message, 'prepare to meet thy God.'

Look though how Jesus uses it. Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. The Kingdom of Heaven has come near.

In other words, don't you see? This world is not what you think it is. This world is not always going to be how it now is. *Now*, this world seems to operate on the principle that being strong, being successful, being right is what life's all about. Most of the world seems to worship money, or power, or glamour. And even the bit that doesn't, that says it worships God, often seems to be *really* about something else: really about feeling superior to those other, wicked people, really another kind of worship of power: the power of the smug and self-righteous. So many of us are playing games – with money, with power, with sex, with religion – to make ourselves look and feel good. Ego-games. The world's a competition, and we've got to win.

But this world, says Jesus, is not what you think it is. The Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near, and that means that one day – one day soon – you'll see that life is not really a competition. That it's not about pushing ourselves forward, exercising power over others. It's about being like God. It's about being like He was in Jesus: making our lives not about the struggle for achievement and victory, but about others' lives – about loving them, serving them, setting them free. Live as if life is really about that, as if that's really the point of your existence – because, guess what, *it really is*. That is the meaning of the universe, the King's law, and one day soon He will establish it.

So to repent really means to start living in a way which chimes with the new world coming. You'll have to abandon some old habits. Most of us, for instance, will have to become to become way more generous with our money than we ever have been before – because in the new world our priority really is the good of other people. Most of us will have to become a lot less concerned than we are with people thinking well of us, because in the new world ego doesn't really get a look in. Most of us will have to become much more like servants to everyone around us, whoever they are, because Jesus said becoming like that, becoming someone who washes other people's feet, is the way into the new world.

So repent not necessarily because you're a dreadful person who should feel guilty about all kinds of terrible crime. You might be a lovely person, a wonderful person by all human standards, by the way this world works. No, repent because there's a new world coming, and because very few of us really behave, all the time, as if we really believe it, as if we

really believe that generosity, humility, and serving others are not just nice ideas but the energies that will one day run through the whole world and change it, that these things are our *destiny*, that the Kingdom really is coming. How many of us can really say that generosity, humility, and service have sunk deep down inside us, right into the heart of all our thoughts and actions? Maybe some can – there is, after all, such a thing as holiness – but I know I can't. I know I have only begun to tiptoe round the edges, to play at being at a citizen of the new world. Generosity, humility and sacrifice have got a long, long way before they control my heart.

And that's why we have Lent, and why this Gospel right at the start of Lent. Are you really a citizen of the Kingdom, this season asks us? Does your life look like, is your life deep down, the life of someone who believes that the Kingdom is coming, that it is the deepest, truest, most powerful reality of all? Have you begun to understand the depth of the change the dawning of that Kingdom will make to your life, and have you begun to welcome it in? Whatever you're doing for Lent, whatever little gestures of effort or change you make, those are the great questions behind them. Make sure, in the next five weeks, that you make time to address them.

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