

Bishop Jonathan writes...

Repentance is something that has fallen well out of favour with preachers for several decades now. There is one very good reason – which is that the preaching of repentance had far too much in it of trying to persuade people that they were sinners, and far, far too much about the punishments God might have in mind. But repentance is not about making people feel bad – most people feel bad enough already; the question is what you do about it. And it's definitely not about punishment: the call to repent is about turning round to embrace the goodness of God. The aim of repentance is not misery, but change. Change is what we face, in our world and in our church. Repentance is practical, costly change. It goes to the very heart of who we are and bears fruit in lives that are lived differently.

As we come towards the end of this phase of lockdown, the question is particularly acute: this is a moment for decision. Is the reopening of churches for public worship to be a going back, or a moving forward? After all the insecurity and exhaustion of the past few months, nothing would be more comforting than to settle back, as far as we may, into what we were used to. There's something genuine in that desire: we all need a break, we all need some sense of security again. As with all the most tempting temptations, it is very nearly the right thing to do. But I believe it is a temptation, and it is not of God. To settle back now would be to turn away from all that we have seen and learned, very painfully, in the days of the pandemic. God is calling us to go forward – in trust that “those who wait in the Lord will renew their strength”, as Isaiah puts it, repenting of those habits and ways which we did not until now realise were blinding us to our calling as disciples of Jesus.

We must repent of the ways in which we – we as a society, as a Church, and often as individuals – have demonstrated both conscious and unconscious bias against people of different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and languages, in the Church and

beyond. We must be much more searching in asking ourselves about how our inherited expectations and systems place different pressures on people – essentially, the more you differ from a white, male, middle-class, university-educated UK-born person like I am, the less easy you will find the Church as a place within which to live and minister. That is not how we reflect the good news of Jesus, which forms a community in which all are equally brothers and sisters of that Middle Eastern man, Jesus Christ.

We must repent of our Church-centredness. Why has it taken the Coronavirus to make churches realise that there are huge numbers of people out there who want to engage with prayer and worship – for the first time, or far more regularly than usually – but can't make it into church buildings at the time we say they should be there? We have become so wedded to gathering people together in one place, that we have been blind to all the other means by which we could be communicating the good news of Jesus and drawing others into discipleship. We are at the beginning of a voyage of exploration: we don't know yet how or in what way we will be able to integrate the different worlds in which many of us have now learned, to live. But God's call to us is to do so, not to shirk or refuse.

I am only too aware of the other accusation levelled at preachers of repentance, that of self-righteousness. I know that I have been complicit in the sins I have just spoken about. But there is always hope. Repentance which has no joy in it is not Christian repentance, but despair. Repentance is always about hope, hope for the new future God promises, and for the strength of his Spirit to walk into that future and discover in it more of the love and power of God.

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