

CHANGING FOR THE BETTER: 15TH SUNDAY B

We have heard Mark say: '... [the twelve apostles] *set off to preach repentance*' (6:12)

What did the apostles mean and what did Jesus mean when they called on people to '*repent*'? In a nutshell, they were asking people to completely change their lives. Right now let's explore some of what repentance involves.

Repentance and conversion go together. They are about change and transformation. Conversion is turning away from something to something else. For every person, it involves turning away from how I live my life now to another way of living - a new, better, more genuine, more Christ-like way!

It happens when I respond to the gift of God to me, the gift of God's love, God's grace. It happens when I come to see and accept that God loves me with an infinite and unconditional love, a forgiving and everlasting love, a love that led his Son to stretch out his arms on the cross to embrace me, and a love that has been with me every step of my life's journey.

This love that God has for me is brilliantly illustrated in the famous story Jesus told of the lost son who runs away from his father and family and their love, and gets himself into one hell of a mess (Lk 15).

As it happened with the prodigal son, the beginning of the process of conversion is marked by a loss of tranquillity, and by feelings of restlessness, dissatisfaction and disillusionment. This is necessary, for without unrest there is no need to change. Further along the path, conversion requires time and effort and struggle to grow and mature. It requires rooting out old habits, bad habits, and establishing new habits, good habits. It requires working at treating others differently, and working at creating a different environment, a more peaceful, harmonious and caring atmosphere in which to live and work.

It requires admitting and facing painful facts about myself: - I have done wrong. I have hurt others. I have let them down. I have deceived myself. I have flopped and failed again and again and again. It requires humbly admitting that I cannot change and become a better person without outside help, that I need to put my trust in the power and love of God to free, heal and change me. Only those can be liberated who know they are enslaved. Only those who have nothing can receive everything. The Word of God says so again and again.

My conversion will be shown gradually in a change in my relationships – in how I relate to the members of my family, to my fellow parishioners, to the people I work with, to the people I pass in the street, to strangers, to the general public, to Jesus Christ in person, and to myself. My conversion will happen in the ways I begin to think about life and people, in the ways I feel about them, and in the ways I respond to them.

My conversion will happen too in my change of values, as I re-make my life-commitments in keeping with the best human values. These are not the values of this world where everything revolves around competition and success. No, my new values will be the values of Jesus –

truthfulness; honesty; integrity; acceptance; affection; friendship; kindness; compassion; forgiveness; generosity; fairness; peace; patience; joy; fidelity and trust. I will remember that God does not ask me to be successful - for success is not a gospel value - but to be faithful, faithful always.

I will show my conversion by deliberately and consistently reaching out to the poor, the lost, the losers, and the broken. Was it not to them most of all that Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom of God? Did he not say that it belonged to them? Did he not say both in word and action that the kingdom of God is above all for the misfits, the *'uglies'*, the sinners, the tax-collectors, the lepers, the lonely, and the prostitutes? Did he not demonstrate over and over again that the kingdom of God is a kingdom for the messy and the losers rather than for *'the beautiful people'* - the rich and famous celebrities of our glossy magazines?

It cannot be stressed strongly enough that conversion is about turning away and turning to - turning away, on the one hand, from selfishness, sin and evil, as well as the golden calves of money, prestige, status and power, and, on the other hand, turning to God, to Jesus Christ, and to our shared values as a church community - truth and integrity, goodness and love, justice and equality, peace and joy. Turning away and turning to, all through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit of God given to us with our baptism!

So, during the rest of our prayer today – with others and alone – let us ask God for the grace of conversion - for one another, for our church community, and for our society and its culture!

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