

Repentance

A witty poem written at the beginning of the twentieth century includes the lines:

“A Christian is a man who feels
Repentance on a Sunday
For what he did on Saturday
And is going to do on Monday.”

That is a cynical view of the idea of repentance, which is our theme for today, a suitable subject for the middle of Lent. Repentance is the translation for several words with a variety of meanings, ranging from feelings of regret or remorse to its specifically religious meaning of turning away from sin and back to God. This is much more than remorse; it is to accept God’s judgement upon us and to confess that in His sight we are sinners, whatever our own feelings may be. As Ecclesiasticus puts it :

To those who repent God permits return,
and he encourages those who were losing hope.
Return to the Lord and leave sin behind,
plead before his face and lessen your offence.
Come back to the Most High and turn away from iniquity,
and hold in abhorrence all that is foul.
Who will praise the Most High in Sheol,
if the living do not do so by giving glory to him?
To the dead, as to those who do not exist, praise is unknown,
only those with life and health can praise the Lord.
How great is the mercy of the Lord,
his pardon on all those who turn towards him.
Ecclesiasticus 17: 24-29

Choir: Turn back O Man – Holst

Francis Thompson, in his poem *The Hound of Heaven*, describes the way in which we try to avoid the claims of God’s Love which Thompson pictures as a hound relentlessly pursuing us, in spite of our twists and turns, ceaselessly seeking our response:-

Reading: The Hound of Heaven - Francis Thompson

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated.
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy
They beat - and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet –
“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

And centuries before, St Augustine described in his Confessions the power of Divine Love to draw us back from all that separate us from God.

Reading: Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee: for behold Thou wert within me, and I outside: and I sought Thee outside and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that Thou hast made. Thou wert with me, and I was not with Thee. I was kept from Thee by those things, yet had they not been in Thee, they would not have been at all. Thou didst call and cry to me to break open my deafness: and Thou didst send forth Thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness: Thou didst breathe fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and do now pant for Thee: I tasted Thee, and now hunger and thirst for Thee: Thou didst touch me, and I have burned for Thy peace.

Choir: **Pater Peccavi – Clemens**

And now a prayer by Origen, a third century Biblical scholar and spiritual writer.

Reading: O Jesus, my feet are dirty. Come even as a slave to me, pour water into your bowl, come and wash my feet. In asking such a thing I know I am overbold but I dread what was threatened when you said to me, “If I do not wash your feet I have no fellowship with you.” Wash my feet then, because I long for your companionship. And yet, what am I asking? It was well for Peter to ask you to wash his feet, for him that was all that was needed for him to be clean in every part. With me it is different, though you wash me now I shall still stand in need of that other washing, the cleansing you promised when you said, “there is a baptism I must needs be baptised with”.

Choir: **Wash me thoroughly – S S Wesley**

Reading: **Hymn to God the Father – John Donne**

Wilt thou forgive that sinn where I begunn,
Which is my sinn, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive those sinns, through which I runn,
And doe them still, though still I doe deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
for I have more.
Wilt thou forgive that sinn, by which I have womne
Others to sinn, and made my sinn their dore?
Wilt Thou forgive that sinn which I did shunne
A yeare, or twoe, but wallowed in a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
for I have more.

I have a sinn of fear, that when I have spunn
My last thred, I shall perish on the shore;
Sweare by thy self that at my Death thy Sunn
Shall shine as it shines nowe, and hereto fore;
And having done that, thou hast done,
I have noe more.

Choir: O Let me at Thy footstool fall – Peerson

Reading:

And here are words put into the mouth of Christ and inspired by a Normandy Crucifix of 1632:-

I am the great sun by Charles Causley

I am the great sun, but you do not see me,
I am your husband, but you do not free me,
I am the captive, but you do not free me,
I am the captain you will not obey.

I am the truth, but you will not believe me
I am the city where you will not stay,
I am your wife, your child, but you will leave me,
I am that God to whom you will not pray.

I am your counsel, but you do not hear me,
I am the lover whom you will betray,
I am the victor, but you do not cheer me,
I am the holy dove whom you will slay.

I am your life, but if you will not name me,
Seal up your soul with tears, and never blame me.

Choir: Drop, drop slow tears – Gibbons

Drop, drop, slow tears,
And bathe those beauteous feet,
Which brought from heaven
The news and Prince of peace.

Cease not, wet eyes,
His mercies to entreat;
To cry for vengeance
Sin doth never cease.

In your deep floods
Drown all my faults and fears;
Nor let his eye
See sin, but through my tears.

O thou great Chief, light a candle in my heart, that I may see what is therein, and sweep the rubbish from thy dwelling place.

An African schoolgirl's prayer.