

**Metanoia (Mark 1.9-15)**  
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And Jesus came into Galilee saying: *'Repent and believe the good news'*.

With this traditional exhortation, we begin again the season of Lent. The gospel readings on the Sundays of Lent (taken mostly from John's account) take us ever closer to the climax and culmination of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. But on this first Sunday, we go back to a story from opening chapter of Mark, where Jesus is depicted as being radically given over to God, profoundly obedient through temptation and trial.

As you've just heard, Mark's account of his testing in the wilderness is brief and raw. In Mark, Jesus is *'ekballei'* – 'cast out' by the Spirit. In Matthew and Luke, it's 'led out', it sounds gentler. Here in Mark, the dove-like Spirit seems suddenly fierce and forceful. On the surface, it sounds incongruous, but what's being stressed here is not forcefulness in the sense of physical handling but forcefulness in the sense of *necessity - urgency*. Mark is not suggesting that Jesus was unwilling to go and needing a push, he's making the point that this time in the wilderness is absolutely essential for Jesus if he is to be clear about the parameters of his mission and well-prepared to stay the course.

We can appreciate this more fully if we read this story against the background of the Hebrew Bible, in which times of wilderness testing are charged with meaning and potential. You may recall that Moses spent forty days in the wilderness before receiving the tablets of the Law (Ex 34.28), that Elijah spent forty days in the wilderness before he received his visitation from God on Mt Horeb (1 Ki 19.8), and that the children of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness before they were ready to enter the Promised Land. The number 40 is symbolic of the necessary time, and the wilderness is a symbol

for the necessary place of preparation for deep engagement with God, and with God's purposes, which is why (incidentally) the season of Lent is itself forty days in length.

We too, then, are being invited into a time of preparation for deepening our engagement with God. This is the gift of this season, the opportunity to offers for change and growth, especially if we can appreciate and take seriously the full implications of what it means to repent.

Like many, I used to think that repenting was mainly about 'feeling sorry' for things. Now of course, I know this feeling. I've felt it many times. I also know that I can't just concoct this feeling. Trying to generate this feeling because it was Lent and because that was what I thought I was supposed to do, met with limited success. As a consequence, I could spend the season feeling vaguely guilty. I suffered at times from excessive scrupulosity (searching my conscience for things to repent of) and/or from excessive Lenten discipline (giving up as many enjoyable things as I could in order to punish myself and suffer a bit). This led (inevitably) to a backlash. where I found it difficult to do anything in particular about Lent and maybe you've been there too.

I'd missed the point, of course. Yes, repentance can involve feeling sorry for things we've done and said; and yes it may well involve seeking to set things right – offering an apology, making restitution, and trying to do better. But if we simply 'moralise' repentance, make it all about dealing with what we've done wrong, then we miss its deepest dynamics. In Greek, as many of you will know, the word for repentance, 'metanoia', is a compound of two words. 'Meta' meaning 'change', and 'nous' meaning 'mind' or 'intellect' or 'intelligence'. When Jesus proclaims 'repent', he is calling for a 'change of mind', a transformation of our way of thinking – which is

something far deeper and more radical than a guilty conscience. The call to repent is an invitation, in the light of the kingdom of God come near, to see and understand things differently, to get to the root of habitual and unhelpful ways of seeing and being in the world. It's only as we get to the source of these patterns of thought and identity, as their power over us is loosened, that we are truly able to change.

What is it that keeps me stubborn or argumentative or exploding, for example? Why do I keep doing this – always like this? Why am I so often in *this* place?! Repentance has to do with uncovering and realigning these deeply ingrained patterns and habits of mind and heart – recurring, reactive ways of being that diminish our lives and often the lives of others; that stifle the life of the Spirit. So how do we repent at this level, get to the root of things; move from merely listing our transgressions and feeling sorry, to the transformation of our way of being and seeing?

This question was a major pre-occupation of the 4th century desert monks, who taught that at the heart of the unredeemed 'nous' or mind were certain characteristic patterns of thought. Evagrius Ponticus, one of the great spiritual teachers of the desert and an astute observer of human nature, identified eight kinds of powerful thoughts ('logismoi') that drive much of our behaviour and disturb our peace. He emphasised that it's not in our power to determine whether these thoughts arise, but it *is* up to us to decide whether or not they persist and fester, and so stir up what he called our 'passions'. The issue, in other words, isn't the thoughts in themselves – which come unbidden to all of us. The critical issue is what we do with them, with what we allow them to do with us. If we indulge and entertain these disruptive thoughts, give them sway so to speak, they distort our perception and our response to reality.

So what are these *logismoi*, these eight compulsive and troublesome patterns of thinking? Evagrius categorised them under the headings of gluttony, greed, sloth, sorrow, lust, anger, vainglory and pride. Not long after Evagrius (with minor variations) these became known as the Seven Deadly Sins. But again, it's important to stress that we're not just talking about naughty or disreputable acts, a list of **illicit** behaviours. Evagrius' real concern is not in the first instance with overeating or sex or sadness or laziness, but with the thoughts that **elicit** these behaviours, that feed these reactions and keep us locked in futile cycles while locking out the life of God.

Jesus in the desert is tempted in the first instance by certain thoughts – it shouldn't be like this, you shouldn't be hungry, turn these stones into bread; you're worth more than this, you deserve recognition; come on – get out there and show yourself, prove yourself, cast yourself off the temple. And so on. It's our thoughts, those insidious whisperings – you've never been good at this, no one really loves you, it'll never change, no one understands ... Indulged in certain ways, these can lead us to obsess about what we do not have enough of, to brood on our wrongs or sorrows, to seek after praise, whatever.

Evagrius wrote, for example, of how the *logismos*, the obsessive mental itch of sadness, could tantalise a monk with memories of lost joys and cause debilitating nostalgia. 'When these thoughts find that the soul offers no resistance but rather follows after them and pours itself out in pleasures that are still only mental in nature [fantasising], then they seize and drench him in sadness', he wrote. The 'miserable soul' is 'poured ... out upon these thoughts' and disabled by them. Reflecting on this, a friend of mine wrote: 'I remember when I first realised there was a distinction between my sadness about a lack in my life (which was real) and my allowing that thought to seize

and possess me, to become the measure of my life – all I thought about. And, I remember the liberation of realising I could have this thought, this sadness, *without it having me*'. What she is describing is repentance, a change of mind, of seeing, that became for her a door to freedom.

Well, this Lent, we're going to begin to explore what repentance in this sense, (*metanoia*) can mean for us and our freedom. Drawing on the wisdom of Evagrius and others we will learn, I hope, how our characteristic patterns of thought and habits of mind can trap and cut us off from the 'good news'; and how we as disciples can cooperate in our liberation and healing (which is to say, 'believe' this good news). Evagrius was reflecting on the experience of desert monks of the fourth century but, in truth, we each contend with troubling thoughts. Laurence Freeman suggests that most of us have about six habitual worries that we revisit time and time again – worries about scarcity; habits of overconsumption and overwork; habits of blaming, anxiety, control, resentment and victimhood.

Unlike those early desert monks, we won't be spending this Lent in our cells or, as Jesus did, out in the desert wrestling with temptation, not the *physical* desert anyway. But like them, hopefully, we will be seeking to become more aware of what is unreal in our thoughts, and of how these illusions seize our attention and sap our energy. And so, as we begin this journey, I invite you in these coming days to seek to notice your *logismoi* – the recurring patterns of thinking that you are most prone to. This isn't about resolving to fix or stamp them out – they will arise. And it's not about beating yourself up for them – criticising yourself or obsessing endlessly about your obsessive thoughts – that's just more habitual, unhelpful thought. In the first instance, just notice and seek to meet them with stillness, dispassion. Where does your mind go in idle moments? What do you obsess, complain, worry –

fantasise about? What happens for you when you get tired, or frustrated, or feel lonely; when you make a mistake, or are snubbed? Do you have a typical reaction – a thought that's there in a nano-second? And notice too what happens when you don't just indulge these thoughts, when you neither obsess nor repress them; when you just let them be... let them go?

Let this Lent be a season where gently, with self-compassion, we offer ourselves in repentance, genuine *metanoia*, inviting the grace of God to transform us by the renewing of our minds. Let us repent and believe the good news.