

Advent II B
December 10, 2017

Grace, Lexington
Fr. James

Isaiah 40:1-11 Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 II Peter 3:8-15a *Mark 1:1-8*

REPENTANCE, CONFESSION AND PARDON

Advent is upon us. God is coming. This Sunday and next we see in our Proper an emphasis upon John the baptizer, and the prophets—those men of God whose uncomfortable task it was to call men and women, boys and girls to repentance in order that God could come to them.

John the Baptizer, has always fascinated me, because of his strangeness as much as anything. What a startling figure he must have made out in that wild, open country along the Jordan River. I am sometimes confident that his appearance was as much a drawing card as was his message, which in itself was singular and uncompromising. Undoubtedly, however, what he had to say gripped people once they were there to see and to hear him. People like a good show, but they don't necessarily return to see it twice, particularly if there is little substance to it. But people were coming, indeed following this John. Mark says that all of the

people of Judea and all of the people of Jerusalem went out to him, that is every sort of person from Judea, and a constant procession of Jerusalemites went out to him. John was addressing the whole nation, was having considerable impact upon on the whole populace. Why was he having this impact? Three suggestions: Because of the power of his message which drew these people to repent of their sins, because of the public confession that was made at least in the presence of John and finally because of the personal healing, forgiveness and joy that they experienced following their pardon.

John's message must have been simply overwhelming. In a sense he was the Billy Graham of his day, but more to the point he was identifying from Isaiah as the forerunner of the Messiah. He had the gift of the evangelist, one who spoke good news and was able to communicate it and how to benefit from it. He embraced all the storied hopes of the Jewish people, and when he spoke his listeners became very aware of their neediness before God.

None of us like to admit fault, much less sinfulness. Our

world from the President's office to the child in your home is full of refusals to take responsibility for their own actions. Albert Camus observed: "The idea that comes most naturally to man, as if from his very nature, is the idea of his innocence....Each of us insists on being innocent at all costs, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven itself."

David Head in his slim, little volume *He Sent Leanness* rewrites the General Confession from our Book of Common Prayer. Tongue-in-cheek yes, but to the point, he writes: Benevolent and easy-going Father: we have occasionally been guilty of errors of judgement. We have lived under the deprivations of heredity and the disadvantages of environment. We have sometimes failed to act in accordance with commonsense. We have done the best we could in the circumstances; and have been careful not to ignore the common standards of decency; and we are glad to think that we are fairly normal. Do thou, O Lord, deal lightly with our infrequent lapses. Be thy own sweet Self with those who admit they are not perfect; According to the unlimited

tolerances which we have a right to expect from thee. And grant us as indulgent Parent that we may hereafter continue to live a harmless and happy life and keep our self-respect. Amen.

A few years ago, Karl Menninger's bestseller was titled and asked the question, *Whatever Became of Sin?* He chided those therapists and social scientists who sought to rationalize away all aberrant human behavior as the result of unfavorable social conditions. But Menninger reserved his harshest rebuke for the liberal religious establishment which, for the past few decades, has been telling people, in effect, there is no such thing as sin. For some time now, many people have gotten the impression that “sins” is an unduly judgmental term which has no place within an “I’m OK, your’re OK” progressive world view. What was once called “sin” is now dismissed as an ancient and anachronistic noun. That ultimate authority by which all human behavior was once judged, i.e., God, has been reduced, in the minds of the many, to a kindly, all-affirming, all-accepting indulgent therapist who blesses everything and damns nothing.

“Hogwash”, said Menninger, in effect. There is in our world infidelity, cruelty, racism, stealing, prejudice, lying, idolatry, and a host of other human behavior which can only be called *sin*. It's time we admitted it. Those folks who listened to John the Baptist admitted it. They knew he was talking to them.

Second, they confessed those sins, either to John there at the river before he baptized them, or to the entire crowd. We don't have the details. But the confession is reported. Through the years as I have looked at religious revival movements, I've noticed that they have one thing in common--public confession. It is my opinion that in open confession there is a power for self-acceptance, forgiveness and love, which is so attractive and so desirable that when people find it they commit their lives to the God who made them and live very differently from that experience forward.

In our church we have this confession available. The Prayer Book on page 446 reads “The ministry of reconciliation, which has been committed by Christ to his Church, is exercised

through the care each Christian has for others, through the common prayer of Christians assembled for public worship, and through the priesthood of the Church and its ministers declaring absolution.”

Three ways—through care for each other and that certainly could be interpreted to be understood that confession is available in small caring groups, through the General Confession at Eucharist—but that must be prepared by each individually. Repentance is not automatic by the reading of words, and finally through the sacrament of reconciliation as you see it on page 447 of the Prayer Book. May I say, that I have seen more healing in my ministry in the confessional than in any other venue. Admitting to at least one other human being that I am sinful takes courage and a desire for integrity that is often missing in private confessions with only yourself as witness. Alcoholics Anonymous learned that from the Church. One of the first steps in AA is to admit publicly and without qualification, “I am an alcoholic.” “I am a sinner.” Unless I can confess that, I can ever confess the joy of serving Jesus

Christ. That kind of personal and public admission is part of all confession and certainly was in John Baptist's day, as well.

A man went to see a priest. This man had to get something off his chest. The burdened man said: "I have something that has bothered me for years. When I was in college, I cheated on my final Greek exam from the Bible. When I took the test I accidentally omitted one section of translation. Since I usually did fairly well in class my professor called me at home to see what had happened. I told him I didn't realize I had left the translation out. Since he trusted me he said, 'I'll let you translate that passage to me now over the phone.' I agreed, then excused myself for a moment and got both my Greek New Testament and the English translation. Then I translated the Greek over the phone. But actually I was reading from the English. I got an A in the class, and graduated with honors, but to this day I cannot look that professor in the eye." He continued: "Every time I think about the test and that professor I feel like a hypocrite. I have prayed and prayed about it but nothing seems to change., I still feel guilty."

Do you know what the priest told that man? He said, “Your sins are forgiven. Telephone that professor and admit your cheating.” But, the man said, “I can't do it. What would the professor think of me? But sometime later, after thinking it over, the man called the professor, admitted what he had done, and had a long conversation with the professor. Later, all the man could say was, “I feel like a hundred pounds have been lifted off my back.”

Repentance, Confession, Pardon. To be forgiven and to know forgiveness brings joy. It is the very best preparation for the coming of the Christ child. Confession is available in this church by appointment with the priest. Never hesitate to utilize this sacrament for the benefit of your soul, your life, your joy. *So be it.*