

3rd Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2010
St. Paul's Cathedral, London, ON
The Reverend Ruth M. Ferrier

On this 3rd Sunday of Lent we are confronted by the traditional Lenten theme of repentance. To repent means to be converted. Conversion is the starting point of every spiritual journey and is a prerequisite for entry into the kingdom of God. It has to do fundamentally with our relationship to God. Repentance implies that we recognize the presence of sin in our lives and in our world. Some maintain that they have no sins, at least no serious ones. But what about our sins of omission? What about the good we could do but which we don't do?

Jesus started his mission with a summons to repentance. "Repent," he said, "for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The call to repentance is at the heart of the Gospel. Today, he issues the same call to us. Jesus addressed his call to repentance to all, including ordinary people who were not thieves or murderers or adulterers, but what you might call decent, respectable people. More surprisingly still, he directed the call at those who prided themselves on their holiness and goodness - people like the Pharisees. In other words, the call to repentance was addressed to all without exception. But you may ask: how can this be - that good people should need to repent?

Let me tell you about a man named Thomas. Thomas was a collector of walking sticks. He tells a story about one stick that came to him in a very strange manner. Once in winter, on a dark and stormy night, there came a knock at his door. He went out, not a little annoyed at being disturbed at such a late hour. The wind blew the latch out of his hand. A drift of snow came into the hall. It really was a terrible night out there. On the doorstep stood a man. He knew him as old Joe. He often came by, knocked and held out his hand. He never uttered a word either of thanks or of greeting. He just stood there with his hand held out.

That night old Joe looked at him out of drunken, watery eyes and Thomas gave him what was nearest to hand - a few slices of bread and a few pennies. Now, over his shoulder Joe carried a stick. At the end of the stick was a bundle which contained all his worldly belongings. But what was most upsetting to see was that he was bare-headed on a night like this. So Thomas took a woolen cap from the hook and Joe swayed a little as he pulled it down over his ears. Then he turned away without saying a word.

"That," he said later, "was the moment I should have thought about not sending him away. I should have thought of my back room. Oh yes, I did think of it. In there was an empty bed all prepared, a table and a chair for a guest, and the room was warm and comfortable. There was soup in the kitchen, also bread and butter and a few bottles of beer. But immediately I thought of my clean house and how this drunken tramp would nose about inside it, wet and dirty and smelling of cheap wine. He would let his rags fall on the polished floor. No - that was asking too much. So I closed the door and left him out there - in the storm - and cold - and dark. I refused to think where or how he was to pass the night. It just did not bear thinking about.

Two days later the gravedigger came by and showed me a stick. It was an extraordinary piece of work, carved by hand from hazel wood. He asked me if I wanted it. I said yes, and we agreed on a price. It was then that he told me he had just buried old Joe, and hadn't got a

penny for his trouble - only the stick. 'Actually he didn't die," he said, "I mean not from a disease or anything like that. He froze to death.'

"When he went away I felt ashamed. And what I say now is meant only for myself. I do not want it to be a burden on anyone else. What I wish to say is this: the evil that we do, God will perhaps forgive. But the good that we fail to do, remains unforgiven!"

What disturbed Thomas most of all was not the evil he had done (for he hadn't done any), but the good which he had failed to do. I believe this is the main thrust of Jesus' parable about the barren fig tree. What is a fig tree for if not to produce figs? The owner is disappointed with the tree, not because of any poisonous fruit it has produced, but because it has produced no good fruit. It is judged and found wanting because of what it has failed to do.

We Christians should ask ourselves the question: what have I failed to do? The call to repentance is not merely a call to turn away from evil, but a call to 'produce the fruits' of good living. That is why it is relevant for everybody. The parable of the fig tree has an edge to it, too, that we cannot just take up space and spend our lives turning oxygen into carbon dioxide. 'Where am I going?' 'What's it all about?' These are the big questions of life. There is a story told of an English bishop who was travelling by train to lead a service in his diocese. He misplaced his ticket, and was unable to produce it when requested by the conductor. "It's quite all right, my lord, we know who you are." But the bishop replied, "You don't understand. Without the ticket, I don't know where I'm going." It is not enough for us to know we are here - we need to know where we are headed and why.

Jesus' call to repentance disturbs us. We want to be left alone, left as we are. We don't want anyone, not even Christ, to disturb our quiet life, a life which may contain a lot of selfishness. We may not be guilty of great evil but yet we can be so selfish, instinctively demanding, totally inconsiderate, completely self-absorbed and very often think ourselves superior to others and above criticism. But we don't want to know, much less do anything, about this side of our nature. Jesus calls us from being self-centred to become other-centred and God-centred.

Perhaps we need an awakening. Perfectly good people can sink into a life of selfishness and pettiness slowly and imperceptibly. There are currents in life which can take us away from the values of the Gospel. At such times as the Lenten season we can be turned around - and re-directed. Conversion is a joyful thing. It is good news. It is a call from the slavery of selfishness and every kind of sin, to a life of grace and freedom. It is a call from a life of barrenness to a life of fruitfulness. It is a call to enter into the joy of the kingdom. However, it is not something that is done once and for all. It calls for growth and development. In this Lenten season could you consider making a start toward making a change?

Dostoyevsky has said, 'If we fail to accomplish acts of love, all our good intentions will remain mere daydreams, and our whole life will slip by like a shadow.'