

REPENT AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS



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Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, *'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."*

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, *'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."*' (Mt 4:1-10)

Jesus was faced with temptations which would have undermined his mission. We all struggle with similar temptations. Pope Benedict XVI said that the temptations in the desert 'reflect the inner struggle over [Jesus'] own particular mission and, at the same time, address the question as to what really matters in human life'.¹

That inner struggle has continued in the lives of Christians through all the centuries since Jesus was tempted in the desert. What the tempter offered was not just freedom from hunger and need, fame and admiration, or the power to influence people and events. Possessions, popularity and power are not bad in themselves. The temptation was to put them in the place that belongs to God, to live as if they were the purpose of human life.

¹ JOSEPH RATZINGER, POPE BENEDICT XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: Doubleday, 2007, p. 28.

The response of Jesus in each case was to point to the truth that God must come first and that we must 'serve only him'. If a person *lives for* power or wealth or celebrity, others will be trampled upon in the process of achieving those goals. And he or she will find that those goals will not ultimately satisfy their ambitions. Sooner or later everyone will hear the words, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' (Lk 12:20)

After the temptations in the desert, Jesus began his mission, pointing to the importance of repentance.

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'. (Mk 1:14, 15)

The word 'repentance' means seeking forgiveness for our sins, but more than that, it involves transforming our attitudes and our lives. The New Testament word, *metanoia*, means a profound change of outlook.

Repentance or penance is not a question of inflicting pain or hardship on ourselves for its own sake. Penance – fasting, prayer, works of mercy, giving to those who are in need and so on – is done 'because the kingdom of God has come near'; we repent in order to 'believe in the good news'. It is a change of outlook that allows us to see more clearly what God is doing in us and for us.

Europe in our time is a culture, almost unique in history, in which God appears to be silent and unmissed in the lives of many. There are many spheres of life in which even believers rarely recognise the relevance of the Gospel. Pope Benedict asked a penetrating question:

Is it perhaps the case that the West, the heartlands of Christianity, are tired of their faith, bored by their history and culture, and no longer wish to know faith in Jesus Christ? ²

None of us remains unaffected by our culture. It takes a real effort in a busy and noisy world to take time to reflect, to ask the fundamental questions about what our lives mean and where they are leading. It is a world in which we need to make space to recognise the challenge of turning our lives around and to putting our priorities right.

² BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the Chrism Mass, 21 April 2011.

The reason for carrying out acts of penance is that we know we have often failed to appreciate that everything we have and are is a gift from God. We have all pursued our own interests, standing and influence as if these were our goal in life. And so it is good to pray, fast and give alms – activities which express a realisation that the pursuit of such goals cannot be what makes ultimate sense of our lives.

That points to the second and more important way of looking at why we do penance – in order to receive the Good News. The words that come from the mouth of God are not just rules or demands. It is in the words of promise and love that come from the mouth of God that we find the meaning of human life.

Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: 'We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us' ... in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.

If we allow lesser realities to occupy the place in our lives which belongs to God who *is love* (1 Jn 4:8, 16), we inevitably obscure our understanding of the full reality of God's gift. The lesser things that we pursue can be important and good. Everyone needs goals and hopes in life, but no created reality can fully and eternally satisfy us:

Let us say once again, we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain.³

Penance or repentance is not simply an exercise that we do from time to time. It is, one might say, what our life is about. The tradition of Lent, for instance, calls on everyone to see the weeks leading up to Easter 'as a time ... which *identifies our human life and all of our history as a process of conversion* which is set in motion now in order to meet the Lord at the end of time'.⁴

³ BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 31.

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, General Audience, Ash Wednesday 2012 (italics added).

Repentance, *metanoia*, reconciliation, doing penance and conversion are all words which describe the journey by which we open ourselves, allow our outlook to be changed, so as to respond to the gift.

In his Letter to the Catholics of Ireland, Pope Benedict called on all of us to engage in that process:

I ask you to offer up your fasting, your prayer, your reading of Scripture and your works of mercy in order to obtain the grace of healing and renewal for the Church in Ireland.⁵

It is the same call with which Jesus began his preaching: 'Repent and believe in the good news'. It is a call to understand more clearly that the only lasting hope, the only complete healing, for any of us, whether we feel broken by sadness or illness, or injured by abuse, injustice, betrayal or ingratitude, whether we are contented or healthy, lies in welcoming the love of God who alone can give us what we could never achieve or acquire for ourselves.



The Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.

Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.'

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' Nathan said to David, '*You are the man!*' (2 Sam 12:1-7)

⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, 14.

The Good News is good beyond all our hopes and expectations. For that very reason, we have never completely grasped it, nor have we ever fully understood its implications for us. The Gospel of Christ provides the answer to what Pope John Paul called 'the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?*'⁶ But it points to a fulfilment which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived (cf. 1 Cor 2:9).

An essential part of the process of penance, of profoundly changing our outlook, is to reflect seriously on those questions, beginning with 'Who am I?' The ultimate answer is given in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the First Born of the new creation and as our way to the destiny God has prepared for us. When we see ourselves in that light the result is adoration of God and wonder at ourselves:

In reality, the name for that deep amazement at human worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity.⁷

But, as David discovered, the journey of self-discovery can be painful, even shocking. We all have blind spots like his. Our limitations, our biases and our partial perspectives distort what we think we know. We see things very differently according to our circumstances, our mood, our expectations, or the attitude of people around us. The removal of comforting distortions and evasions can be agonising. David discovered that the righteous anger he was directing at the rich man in Nathan's story should really be directed at himself.

The truth is that in all of us there are elements that cannot have a place in the new heaven and new earth where the Risen Lord awaits us and where God 'will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away' (Rev 21:4). That vision of harmony obviously cannot coexist with selfishness or arrogance, or dishonesty, or disloyalty. The text goes on to say that cowards, those who break their word, or worship

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, 1.

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

obscenities, murderers and the sexually immoral, sorcerers, worshippers of false gods or any other sort of liars do not belong in the life where God will make all things new (cf. Rev 21:8).

The history of humanity indicates that there appears to be no limit to the evil of which human beings are capable. Some may, in the end, even decide, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, that it is 'Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven'.⁸

Our experience, however, leads us to suppose that for the great majority, 'there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God ... [and that] the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul'.⁹

The meaning of our lives is to be a process of conversion. We can gradually come to know ourselves and our destiny better. It is also true that, as life goes on, we acquire new blind spots, new denials of our responsibilities, new self-justifications. The process is never completed, and it involves setbacks as well as growth, until we meet the Lord at the end of our lives and finally see ourselves in the light of his infinite truth:

The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgement. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation 'as through fire'. But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God.¹⁰

In that encounter we pass from this life into the glory which is God's promise, the promise which we haltingly, and often feebly, sought in our lives. It is therefore a painful but liberating transition which completes the journey of

⁸ MILTON, J., *Paradise Lost*, I, 263.

⁹ BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 46.

¹⁰ *Spe Salvi*, 47.

conversion. We will become totally ourselves and will see that this was the goal that our efforts of repentance were seeking. It is the moment when we will see the full meaning of the promise Jesus made to those who believe in him: 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8:32). We will finally be able to answer the question 'Who am I?' and to understand why the answer 'bears fruit not only of adoration of God but also of deep wonder at [ourselves]'.¹¹

Thus the process of coming to know ourselves, which involves acknowledging both our gifts and our failures, looks in two directions. It is a growth in recognition of God who is the source of our gifts and our ability to develop them and use them well, and a growth in recognition of our failures to appreciate God's gifts and the ways in which we have wasted or misused them. First we acknowledge the goodness of God, or as some of the older translations of the Bible expressed it, we confess the Lord for his goodness. Second, we acknowledge our sins, that is we confess them.

In the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation or Confession, we do both. First of all, as in every sacrament, we adore and worship, (confess) the goodness and majesty of God. Second, each penitent makes an individual, personal acknowledgement, so far as he or she can grasp it, of why he or she in particular has need of God's mercy.



Jesus said to his disciples: The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.'

And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.

And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you.'

'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last will be first, and the first last.' (Mt 20:1-16)

The story of the labourers in the vineyard offends our concept of fairness; it clearly fails to observe the principle of equal pay for equal work. But the parable is not about payment, it is about the gift of 'God who is rich in mercy' (Eph 2:4) and who offers us what we could never earn.

Doing penance is not a way of earning God's favour; it is an act of gratitude and appreciation for the love and mercy that we have not, and never could, earn.

We can never earn anybody else's love or mercy. 'I demand that you love me!' or 'I am entitled to your forgiveness!' are nonsensical statements which would simply demonstrate a failure to grasp that these are gifts which can only be asked for. When it is a matter of the love and mercy of God who created us, it is even more evident that these can only be gifts, freely given, to which we have no claim.

The person who succumbs to the temptations in the desert sees possessions, popularity and power as goals to be grasped and achieved, not as gifts to be accepted. He or she thus turns them into things to be competed for. That reveals one of the contradictions at the heart of such a project – it will always be vulnerable to the arrival of a more powerful and ruthless competitor.

The heart of the process of repentance or conversion lies in the kind of deep reflection that will see the profound truth: Everything is gift. Blessed John Paul said that if we are to be able to appreciate and live the Good News of ‘the beauty and grandeur’ of the Gospel, we have to develop a ‘contemplative outlook’:

It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image.¹²

Every human being is created in the image of God and invited into a relationship with God. That is the fundamental meaning of solidarity which calls us to see and treat the other as a sharer with us ‘in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God’.¹³ This is the deepest meaning of the parable of the labourers.

Repentance is about seeing more clearly the loving gift and call of God and about responding to it with generosity and courage. It is also about seeing more clearly our own relationship with all of those who are ‘equally invited by God’:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

¹² JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39 (italics added).

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
(Is 58:6-9)

The two aspects of repentance cannot be separated. Conversion involves seeking 'communion with Christ **and** with one another' – the theme of the Eucharistic Congress.

The gift of God can be summed up in the word 'shalom', which reaches its fullest expression when God, who sits on the throne, makes all things new (Rev 21:5). 'Shalom' refers to a state of complete spiritual and physical wellbeing, abundance and harmony.

The concept of penance has always included almsgiving, because we cannot be ready to enter God's ultimate peace if we have neglected the least of Christ's brothers and sisters (cf. Mt 25:45, 46). The task of responding to those who have suffered or are marginalised as we would respond to Christ is an essential element in repentance.

People who truly understand what the call to repentance means will understand the challenge of the words Pope Benedict addressed to those who suffered sexual abuse and to their families:

It is in the communion of the Church that we encounter the person of Jesus Christ, who was himself a victim of injustice and sin. Like you, he still bears the wounds of his own unjust suffering. He understands the depths of your pain and its enduring effect upon your lives and your relationships, including your relationship with the Church. I know some of you find it difficult even to enter the doors of a church after all that has occurred. Yet Christ's own wounds, transformed by his redemptive sufferings, are the very means by which the power of evil is broken and we are reborn to life and hope. I believe deeply in the healing power of his self-sacrificing love – even in the darkest and most hopeless situations – to bring liberation and the promise of a new beginning.¹⁴

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, 6.

The task for us in Ireland is the permanent task of the Christian – to resist the temptation to put convenience, celebrity, domination, blindness, dishonesty, pride, or any other ambition or craving or comfort in the place of God. It is a demanding path but it is the path that leads to the truth which sets us free. It is the only path to a real renewal of ourselves, our country, our Church.

God of our fathers,
renew us in the faith which is our life and salvation,
the hope which promises forgiveness and interior
renewal,
the charity which purifies and opens our hearts
to love you, and in you, each of our brothers and
sisters.¹⁵

¹⁵ From Pope Benedict XVI's *Prayer for the Church in Ireland*.



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