

## A CALL TO REPENTANCE (Lk 3:1-6)

A woman was telling her husband that for Christmas what she really wanted was some help with the housework. So for her Christmas present her husband gave her a vacuum cleaner. **There** is someone from whom repentance will be **demanded**. Guess who told me that joke? Yep, Mary, my wife. She also told me that a general rule of thumb for guys is to never give their wife a Christmas present that has an electric cord attached to it.

Many of us are caught up in preparing for the great celebration of Christmas. We are decorating our homes, both inside and out; we are buying our gifts for one another and sending out Christmas cards; we are planning parties and festivities and trips to visit relatives and friends. But in John's message of preparation there is not one word that tells us to prepare in that way for the coming of the Lord. John calls us to prepare inwardly for Christ to enter into our lives; John calls us to repentance. Many of us may only have a vague understanding of what "repentance" means. Repentance begins with our willingness to admit that we have done things to ourselves and to other people that have caused us to become estranged from God. We have a hard time making even this beginning step because we rationalize, make excuses, and blame others, anything but to say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Repentance begins when we acknowledge how deeply we have hurt others just this past week, through insensitivity, through selfishness, through manipulation, through dishonesty, through indifference or pride. It begins when we acknowledge that, in the process of hurting others, we have hurt ourselves --- spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

The poet Michel Quoist gives us the first step towards repentance in the following prayer:

"Lord, here I am not feeling sinful. I don't do dreadful things like stabbing people, stealing or mugging. I try to help people and love them. I suppose I don't always help the right people in the right way. Probably I trust myself more than you. Help me to see what you would like changed in me; there must be something; help me to feel sinful."

Repentance produces fruit in our lives far greater than the effort it takes to repent. It is not a one-time event nor a once-in-a-while event, but an ongoing affair, a change of life. The fruits of a changed life resulting from repentance are love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control --- the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We are all looking for love; we all would love to be filled with joy; and we all say that we want to just live in peace. Well, those things, and more, are ours when we repent by living as Jesus himself did and shows us.

Jesus took up the message of John. The very first words which Matthew has Jesus preaching when he came out of the wilderness after his baptism were, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." And then he went out and showed us how to repent: by forgiving those who hurt us, by praying for those who mistreat us, by blessing those who hate us, by giving aid and comfort to those who need us, by being merciful and compassionate to the outcasts of society. To do all of these things consistently means a lifetime of dedication to change, to change ourselves through the fire of God's love.

There is an inscription on the mantle of a fireplace in an old stone mansion in Texas that says, "If your heart is cold, my fire cannot warm it." Neither fireplaces, nor aerobic exercises, nor winning jackpots, nor a day at the races, nor a week at the coast, nor dream houses, nor fancy jewelry can warm our hearts. Only the fire of the living God can warm our hearts. We might ask why did God choose to make a world like this, with so much suffering and disease and war and famines. When someone complained to a friend about just this very thing and said that he/she could make a better world than the one we live in, the friend replied, "That is the very reason God put you into this world, to make it a better world. Now go and do your part." John did not simply proclaim the coming of the Christ; he called for a response. He called for a whole new attitude and approach to life from us. We are called to "do our part."

Francis Bacon said, "It is not what people eat but what they digest that makes them strong, not what we gain but what we save that makes us rich, not what we read but what we retain that makes us learned, not what we preach but what we practice that makes us Christian."

God gave Adam and Eve the vocation of being gardeners, and all of us have inherited that primal vocation. Every thought we have, every word we speak, every action we perform are seeds that will someday grow into plants which in turn will bear fruit in due time. Plant seeds of anger and we will grow violent people; plant seeds of greed and we will grow economic disasters like what we are currently living through; plant seeds of selfishness and we will grow people who look out only for themselves. But plant seeds of kindness and we will grow people who care for one another; plant seeds of gentleness and we will grow warm individuals; plant seeds of peace and we will grow a world where people live together in harmony; plant seeds of love and we will grow the kingdom of God.

We plant seeds of kindness when we do things like bringing a meal to a neighbor who is alone this holiday time because of a death in the family or because he/she is divorced this year. We plant seeds of gentleness when we respond to another person's anger with genuine care for their strong feelings. We plant seeds of peace when we tell someone we are sorry for how we have hurt them and ask for their forgiveness. We plant seeds of love when we embrace one another as a sister or brother with the same warmth with which we would wel-

come Jesus Christ. It doesn't take big things to begin a life of repentance; it just takes us changing the way we treat one another, including those in our family. Small acts of kindness, generosity and compassion done frequently throughout the day will bring love, joy and peace into our lives.

As we each prepare for the birth of Christ once again, may we heed John's call to repentance and change our lives to make this a better world --- a world of peace, a world of joy, a world of love at Christmas and all through the year.

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