

*Year B, 2018*  
*Fr. Robert D. Arnold*

*Third Sunday of Easter*  
*St. Luke 24:36b-48*

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

“Then [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and he said to them ‘...that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’” (Lk 24.45-47).

“Repent, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out...” (Acts 3.19).

I thought we had done the repentance thing during Lent—that somber, sober, penitential season of introspection, contrition and self-discipline. I even gave up chocolate and carbohydrates for the season (partly, I’ll admit, for the discipline of a diet, but with the hope that it would have some spiritual benefit as well). Nonetheless, Lent is when you expect to hear the call to repentance. Now here we are three weeks into The Great Fifty Days of Easter, and we’re still dealing with repentance and forgiveness. Don’t get me wrong; I think it is important in every season to face the reality of Sin in our lives, in our world, and in our society. We would do well to acknowledge our brokenness, take responsibility for the hurts we have caused others, the harm we have done to others and ourselves, the evil we have not yet fully renounced and the way we continue to participate in the injustices of the world’s systems. I think I can safely say my prayers have increased dramatically over recent months but also daily as events continue to unfold at an ever-increasing pace in our world. Hundreds of thousands have recently marched in our streets in a call to repentance and a search for a responsible answer to the violence in our society and a remediation of how we care for the mentally ill. Others are marching for economic justice and fair dealings. These kind of things are indeed cause for profound regret and remorse... with, hopefully, a sincere commitment to change our ways. But that’s what we do in Lent. This is Easter. Easter ought to be a time of joy and celebration, not self-examination, contrition, guilt and regret.

Is it possible that there might be a different way to understand the meaning of repentance? The Hebrew use of the concept is connected closely with the return from Babylonian captivity. Those captives decided soon after their defeat and captivity that God had deserted them because they

were not adequately keeping their side of the Covenant—keeping the Law, the statutes and the ordinances—and depending instead on the leadership of their country. As a result, God used the Babylonians to drive them from God’s Presence. The Presence they believed dwelt in the Jerusalem Temple, not in Babylon. They wondered if it would even be possible to “sing the Lord’s song in a strange and foreign land.” If they were to return to the place of the Presence, they could turn to more faithful living. Repentance, then, is less about contrition (although, of course, that’s a part of it) and more about choosing a different way of living.

Jesus went further by connecting repentance with the good news: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in this good news.” Jesus first said this when He returned from the wilderness of the desert and began His ministry. It was His mission statement, His platform, His agenda. Now, at the end of the story, He returns out of the desolation of suffering and death and informs His followers that the mission is still on and the message hasn’t changed. The kingdom of God is still here because He was never its sole proprietor. It was never fixed in Jerusalem in the Temple, or the Jordan River where John the Baptist began, or Galilee where Jesus began. The kingdom of God happens whenever you turn (or return) to God, wherever you are, living its ethics in covenant with God; wherever the poor are lifted up and no one goes without; where the abused and oppressed are healed and the wounded made whole; where the sinful are forgiven.

We live in a country where we can live the good life and share with others good values of freedom, justice under the law, self-determination, easy access to the best of just about anything including health care. But there are many in our country for whom these things do not trickle down and who can’t reach up. There are many that move in circles that live day to day, dog eat dog, that forces one to compromise good values in order to fit in, do the job, or get ahead. One day you wake up and realize that you are not dealing with equals or with friends who have your welfare in mind, but with a system that has it’s own ways with its own hierarchy of values and class, that may include favoritism or sabotage, conspiracy or corruption. We learn early how things work in this world from the clicks in school halls to the halls of government—who’s in, who’s out, who’s up, who’s down. How

many people just do their time until they can get out? Hopefully the cost is not too great. So, you see how this kingdom of God can seem like the best good news on earth (as it is in heaven).

So repentance is to turn or return to see and understand and to walk in a new way. Someone may ask: Is the turning the cause that produces a returning, or is it simply a response to what God is in the process of doing? Is repentance something we accomplish or something God makes possible in us? Was Jesus telling people that if they repent the Kingdom of God will come, or was He telling them that He was bringing the Kingdom into their present and that as a response to that good news they ought to turn and in that new direction? Must we repent to be forgiven, or do we repent because we're forgiven? Theologian Paul Tillich wrote a marvelous sermon entitled, *You Are Accepted*. Don't try to understand it, he counseled, simply accept the fact that you are accepted. Don't try to do anything to earn it, just accept it, and after that acceptance you will do much.

Is it possible that the Easter proclamation—our proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins—means not that if we repent, sins will be forgiven, but that sins are forgiven and in response we turn to different ways of living... or that we allow God to transform the minds our culture gave us and teach us how to see and understand with the mind of Christ? Easter's good news is that we need not be stuck in the past or in our culture's mindset. Repentance does not mean primarily beating ourselves up for past sins and failures, but celebrating the liberation God gives us from the "normal brutality of civilization" (to quote John Dominic Crossan). That liberation sets us free to participate in God's ongoing transformation of ourselves and our world.

"Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in this name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.'" Amen.