

Penitence and Repentance

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"Who's Sorry Now?"

Welcome to Lent, the season of penitence and repentance. It is not a fashionable season, even among godly people who tend to prefer the jollier periods of the Christian year such as Christmas, Epiphany, or Easter. Such preferences are natural: Lent has an out-of-date feel for it is associated with punitive disciplines such as wearing sackcloth and ashes, fasting, or doing penance. These Lenten traditions, which nowadays survive only in limited forms such as attempting to stay off the booze for six weeks, may themselves be artificial inventions. Many churches are now acknowledging this with changes, which range from quietly downplaying the importance of fasting (Catholics), to noisily forgetting about Lent altogether (Evangelicals). So is Lent becoming obsolete? If not, how should it be observed in the 21st century? A good starting point for discussion is the feeling among most believers that penitence, if not the season of it, is an essential ingredient in a spiritual journey. But why?

Penitence is important for at least three reasons. It brings us closer to God. It is the start of the deeper spiritual journey of repentance. It may enable us to hear God's call to a new life.

Before grappling with such issues in 2006, let's go back to the 15th century B.C. and look at one of the great Biblical scriptures dealing with the theology of penitence. This is Isaiah 6:1–8, which begins with the words "In the year that King Uzziah died." This was a historic year, 547 B.C., in which Jerusalem was hit by a massive earthquake. Some theologians speculate that the earthquake may have been the start of Isaiah's penitence because he felt the doorposts and thresholds shaking as a prelude to his vision. "I saw the Lord seated on his throne high and exalted as the train of his robe filled the temple," wrote Isaiah, whose immediate response was one of abject penitence. "Woe is me," he cried out, "for I am a man of unclean lips."

This reaction has the ring of authenticity. In occasional moments of fantasy I sometimes wonder what I would do if some leviathan of history such as Washington, Lincoln, Churchill, or Shakespeare magically entered the room. I am sure I would stand up and be extremely respectful, to say the least. But what would be the reaction if it was God who entered the room? My guess is that I would fall to my knees in an Isaianic fervor of awe and abject penitence, saying the equivalent of "Woe is me!" Yet simultaneously I would expect to be enveloped in the glory of divine love and suffused with a desire to reciprocate that love. For it is penitence that brings us into intimacy with God.

One author who has captured this understanding of penitence was William Temple, arguably the outstanding Archbishop of Canterbury of the 20th century. He wrote:

It is penitence which creates intimacy with our Lord. No one can know Him intimately who has not realised the sickness of his own soul and obtained healing from the physician of souls. Our virtues do not bring us near to Christ—the gulf between them and His Holiness remains unbridgeable. Our science does not bring us near him, nor our art. Our pain may give us a taste of fellowship with Him but it is only a taste, unless that great creator of intimacy—penitence—is also there.

It is when we are experiencing the earthquakes of life that we are most likely to become intimate with God. Our personal earthquakes can include the breakup of relationships, family divisions, losing a job, our home, or our money. If we are honest, these situations have often been contributed to by our own sins. This is where penitence—saying sorry to God—should begin. Some penitents make their apologies with extraordinary passion and eloquence. Isaiah was one. Another was King David, who after breaking several of the Ten Commandments when he stole another man's wife and murdered her husband composed Psalm 51, the most beautiful of the penitential psalms.

At the other end of the scale the most remarkable penitent of the New Testament, the Good Thief, said almost nothing in the way of an apology to Jesus on the cross. But an omniscient God knew that the thief's near-silence was far more sincere than the verbosity of the scribes and Pharisees. **It is the broken and contrite heart that God does not despise.** [See 2 Ne 9:42.]

If saying sorry to God is too quick and easy, it may not be real penitence. For there cannot be true penitence without pain, no real contrition without courage. As soon as we recognize God's holiness we recognize our own sinfulness. It is a recognition that theologians call "conviction of sin." Isaiah expressed his by crying out about his woe and his unclean lips. Then he went through pain. He describes in his vision how a seraph picked up a live coal from the altar and placed it on his lips to purify him. This celestial surgery without an anaesthetic must have hurt. Yet we should not fear the pain of penitence, because it brings great rewards. As Martin Luther said, "It is in our pain and our brokenness that we come closest to Christ." Back in 547 B.C. Isaiah was prophetic enough to catch a glimpse of the

forgiving power of the cross when he heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for” (Isaiah 6:5).

After the pain of penitence comes the redemption of repentance. It can be a joyful process. The English language of Lent somehow makes repentance sound a gloomy, miserable process. But if you take the original language of the Gospels, New Testament Greek, the word for repentance is *metanoia*, which translates as “a change [*meta*] of mind [*noia*],” perhaps more richly as “a change of heart and mind.” If penitence is presented as the precursor to a change of heart and mind and a new start in life, it should sell like the proverbial hot cakes—even in the middle of lugubrious [glum] Lent.

When our penitence and repentance are genuine, two results are likely. First, we will follow the command of John the Baptist to “show the fruits of your repentance” (Matthew 3:8). Those fruits may include the second and greater step of making a commitment to God. That was what happened at the climax of Isaiah’s penitence. In the middle of his earthquake he heard the voice of the Lord asking, “Whom then shall I send?” And who will go for us?” To which Isaiah answered, “Here am I. Send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

Note the unconditionality of that response. Isaiah did not dither or dodge. He did not say, “Send me—but I want to keep my options open for a bit longer. Send me—but I prefer to stay as a nominal Christian. Send me—but I need to spend a few more years dedicated to my business and my bank account.”

Isaiah’s full-hearted commitment was the litmus test of true penitence and repentance. He wanted to change his heart and mind and set off in a new direction of service. A special reason of the church is not needed for embarking on such a journey. Nevertheless, Lent is still a good time for thinking about booking the tickets.