

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is, according to Saint Mark, not an elderly priest being told he will become a father, nor an angel visiting Mary, it is a call to repentance. John the Baptist appeared in the Wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord by proclaiming a baptism of repentance.

Repentance and good news are not in our minds close companions. We are used to magazines that tell us to 'be kind to ourselves', 'don't beat yourself up', 'have some 'me' time', or 'consider your right to be happy'. The good news according to current thinking is that you can become rich, or famous, you can apply your makeup or have a little surgical help to look beautiful, you can look trendy by buying the right clothes, you can become interesting by knowing about the fashionable books or films, you can appear discerning by being seen in the right restaurants. Saying sorry is not seen as good news. Saying sorry is an admission of failure. If you have to say sorry you are not by definition perfect.

Knowingly or accidentally we pass on this culture to our children. They are pushed and pushed to get good academic results. Success is everything. No wonder then that if when they leave university they struggle to get a job they feel useless and depressed. As a message, this striving for perfection and success does not seem to be bringing contentment. There were over 50 million prescriptions for antidepressant last year in this country. In the States 13% of the population are on antidepressants, with 1 in 4 women of my age group taking them. That is a huge number. It is as though people are searching for Good News, but they are looking in the wrong places and so are constantly disappointed.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is a call to repentance.

Recognising and accepting your faults without going into self loathing is a delicate balance. We all wear masks, cunningly contrived to make us look confident when we are nervous, to appear sociable when we long to be alone, and so long as we realise what we are doing that is fine. They are a coping strategy. But if we are not careful, those masks can fool even ourselves. It is all too easy to put on a sincere voice. Even when we do good things, when we are helpful and kind, is it really out of altruism or to meet some need of our own? Trying very hard to see ourselves as others see us, not as we would like them to see us, or better still, attempting to see ourselves as God sees us, is a truly humbling experience. We are very far from perfect. But it should not be a devastating or demoralising experience.

Our sense of self is dependent upon our relationships, the way in which we communicate, with each other and with our environment. We have an innate need to belong. If our communication is not honest, the relationship is built upon a lie and we will never have that sense of belonging. The same is true of our relationship with God. We need to bring our whole selves to him, our hopes and fears, our insecurities, our failings, our joys. If we constantly trying to appear to be something that we are not we will never be able to get really close.

When we talk about repentance, it does not just mean the big sins, it is about every single aspect of our life, our lack of self discipline, our longing for recognition, our apathy, our failure to act. These are the things that damage our relationship with each other and with God. It is only when we see this damage and acknowledge the part we have played in causing it, that we can begin the process of repair.

The Good News is that God forgives. Every time we turn away from him, he is prepared to restore the relationship, provided we are truly sorry. He will do this over and over again. That's why we say the confession each week. But saying the words of the confession or saying sorry without any understanding of the damage that our actions has caused is not repentance. We have to take the time to prepare for confession. The same is true for our human relationships. If we admit our faults to each other and forgive each other, our human relationships can be restored. Repentance is the first part of a two-stage process. Reconciliation requires both repentance and acceptance of forgiveness.

True forgiveness is a sign of deep love. To be forgiven and to accept that forgiveness is to know that you are loved. Whatever has happened, whatever has caused the breakdown in communication, can be healed. When we experience this forgiveness from God, and truly accept it, then we can learn to love, not for how it makes us feel, but simply because we become one with God and with all creation, we belong to him and to each other. We are no longer alone.

This is beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the beginning of the story that shows us how we can belong. Amen.