

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Romans 15:4-13  
Psalm 72  
Matthew 3:1-12

**The kingdom is come: enough of God and enough of us**

---

*In a sentence:*

*Jesus is where the reign of God happens, and we live within this reign as we are conformed to his humanity*

“Repent”, John advises (demands!), “for the kingdom of heaven is come near”.

Repent is a loaded word. Mostly it means for us “stop doing something.” See where you’ve done wrong, be sorry, and do rightly. More fundamentally, however, it has to do with thinking again, seeing anew, turning to move in a different direction. And, while the force of John’s preaching comes from his conviction about a coming day of judgement, repentance is not just a religious notion. Within a day of last week’s state elections, the clamour for change was heard within the state Liberal party: the party needs to turn around, become something different, think and see differently. In other words, the party must “repent”.

This repentance, of course, is not in response to the approach of God but because there’ll be another election in four years, and we (the Liberal party) can’t endure another such loss. But the principle of repentance is the same: we were not ready this time, and we fear we might not be again when the election comes around once more. This is repentance motivated by fear – understandably so, but fearful nonetheless. The news of the approach of the next election is bad news because we’re clearly not ready for it.

Yet the proposal for change here is odd. The election seemed to declare that Liberal party policy was not welcomed by the majority. Repentance in this circumstance is a commitment of the Liberal party to stop being itself. The focus is not on what is right but on what will see us through the next electoral moment.

John’s preaching seems to resemble this. “Repent” is spoken in the context of a presumed crisis – that God is coming. On this surface reading, the approach of God is bad news because – as with the Liberal party in its present condition – we might not be ready. There is not a little fear at play in this hearing of John.

Yet the problem with repentance arising from fear is that it can only be superficial. Such repentance is not about what we believe to be true but what we need to do to survive the coming crisis. It’s like the Liberal party thinking it should ask what the people in Melbourne’s West want and then shaping policies to those desires, rather than imagining – as political parties tend to – that there are certain things which need to be done despite the will of the people. If – as one Liberal supporter probably now regrets having said last week – Victoria is populated by idiots who simply couldn’t see the merit of the Liberal policy platform, must the Liberal party itself become a party of idiots to win back ground next time around?

I’m not interested in all this to analyse the election nor to criticise the Liberal party; any party in the same position would likely think this way. The point is to see the temptation to superficiality which comes with fear: the temptation to sell out. Or, if the plan is not

to sell out but to “trick” the approaching menace, then we are planning to manipulate by deception. In either case, our true selves are obscured as we re-colour to hide in the shadow of the approaching doom.

The preaching of John – if we take it seriously – can be heard in just this way: stop doing what you clearly think you should be able to do, and do something else. This is an invitation to the superficial – in John, a moral superficiality. You can’t deny the power of God or the poll booth, so deny yourself. The superficial is what sits on the surface, so that we look like one thing but are really something else. Superficiality is a mask behind which is the true me. In the end, John sounds like he’s saying, “Stop being yourselves”.

It is, of course, impossible to stop being ourselves if we honestly value what we are. We can’t healthily desire one thing and be another. The commandment we don’t want to hear instils in us this tortured dynamic. Certainly, what we do – our moral action – is important. But the call to goodness and the motivation of fear are in deathly conflict because the fearful can’t know when they’ve done enough. John’s preaching, then, must be heard as a kind of pre-repentance call: a call which cannot bring about what it demands. Hearing the call, we begin to wonder, how can we repent? How can we be both ourselves and different? And how much change is enough?

The answer is hinted at in John’s preaching and developed in the wider context of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is not distant and on its way. Rather, the kingdom has drawn near; the kingdom is come with the arrival of Jesus. The call for repentance – the call for reign-of-God-like human being – is answered in the person of Jesus. Jesus is our repentance, our re-thinking, our seeing again.

If Jesus *is* the kingdom, John’s call changes radically. The kingdom is now not first something demanded of us but given to us: The kingdom *is* come. So far as repentance goes, Jesus is enough.

And the “enough” is crucial. If we intentionally do something wrong – which is John’s moral observation – it is because of fear about “enough”. We fear that there will not be enough – not enough *of* me, not enough *for* me – and we act against the rules to secure enough or we calculate to prove that we are enough (which is what we call self-righteousness). When it comes to repentance, the question will be, have I repented enough? How moral do I have to be? How much does God – or the electorate – need to let us through? These are the moral uncertainties we face if it ever occurs to us to think about them.

With Jesus, it is different. The question is not our “Am I good enough?” or “Have I got enough?” Jesus answers God’s own question: What is required when the question is always “How much?” What is required is assurance of enough. And this is what comes in the arrival of Jesus. Jesus does not ask the superficial How Much? As the presence of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is simply Enough. The miracle is that he is enough *as one of us*. Limited in time and space and culture, limited in how much good he can do, still susceptible to the charge from those around him that he has not done enough, our faith is that this one *is* enough – that Jesus was enough human being, enough God: the definition of the kingdom of heaven.

God’s answer to the question about enough is Jesus: this is enough for God. And God gives him as also enough for us. Not a mere model of how to be, Jesus is made the fullness of God’s kingdom for God and for us. With this, repentance is no longer *becoming* enough by doing better here or there but *receiving this fullness*, pointing to the coinciding of our desire and God’s desire in Jesus. Christian repentance stops trying to be enough and lets God’s gift be enough.

Of course, the moral imperative to do better doesn't go away. There is no question that we could not do better and, most of the time, we probably know what and where this is the case. Just do it. But do it not because there approaches some crisis to avoid. Do it because the only crisis – the only judgement – which matters has already come: enough of God has come in Jesus to liberate us *from* fear we can't do and be it all, and to liberate us *for* works of love and mercy for their own sake.

Repentance is not a wondering about how to win God's favour but the conviction that we already have it.

And so the moral life is not about storing up reserves against the judgemental onslaught of God or the world but about expressing that favour for those who do not yet know it.

We are not called to avoid the approach of a menacing God but to become the approach of God's grace, mercy and peace.

Repent, therefore, and believe the good news, so that the kingdom which has come may come again.

\*\*\*