LENT 4

THE NEW SHOFAR

I like to think (God) has one weakness: a bad memory, Once he has forgiven you, he forgets. And this is great!" "The sins are no more; they have been wiped away by divine mercy." Pope Francis

Repentance in the early church

The call to a change of heart and a change of life was a hallmark of the ministry of Jesus, of his forerunner, John the Baptist, and of his apostles. And from the earliest days of the church, Christians have made repentance a core element in Christian living.

If we take a good look at the way the early church approached sin, repentance and the Lenten season, we notice some significant differences from the way we tend to approach these things today. For many of today's Christians, it is a season of spiritual self-help. We choose something to give up and we try to work on a fault or two. Lenten penance is a personal thing.

For the first few centuries after the resurrection, to become a Christian was a radical act. It involved a complete break with a former way of life and the values of a pagan society. Baptism was not only a solemn commitment to a holy God and a holy lifestyle, but an empowerment by the Holy Spirit that made it possible to live the Gospel.

According to the early Fathers of the Church, all true repentance must begin with humility. To take our eyes off others' sins and instead to admit our own — this is only possible through humility. To take our eyes off ourselves and look to God is also an act of humility. Perhaps this is why the season of Lent begins with the sign of the cross traced on our forehead with ashes. "Remember, man, that you are dust and unto dust you shall return."

Rolling away the reproach of Egypt

Joshua 5:9 Then Yahweh said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away *the reproach* of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.

It can be difficult to translate the Hebrew word behind "the reproach". One meaning of the word is 'He has rolled away the shame of Egypt'. This means that even though they were God's people and in a covenant with Him, they were living as slaves. They were supposed to be God's children. He had a land for them, a land he had promised would be theirs. And yet they lived in Egypt not as a people who were free but a people enslaved to the whims and fancies of their Egyptian masters. This is why Gilgal held a special place in Israel's history and self-understanding. It was here that the shame of what had happened to them prior to this was rolled away. It was taken off them. Gilgal means 'a rolling'; something is rolled off you which had previously oppressed you. No wonder the Hebrew people today continue to celebrate its symbolic importance. It tells us much about God's loving mercy.

From those early days of Israel as a nation, as the people of God, it has been made clear that we need not let our past failures hang over us, cripple or limit us. We need not let our past failures hang over us, we need to let the past go and go on into what Christ has for us. At Gilgal God began to remove and roll away all of the things that had oppressed them. For the Christian this is a significant message because there are always things we have done about which we feel guilty. God wants us to allow Him to roll away "the shame", the guilt of sin. In the risen Christ and on redemption ground these things are no longer a hindrance to us. Gilgal was pivotal for Israel, and it is pivotal for us as Christians. It is the place of the Cross. It is the place of death. It is the place of resurrection. But it is also the place of self-judgement. We need to judge our own lives first before God can use us. Now the things of the past no longer hindered Israel; God was freeing them so that they could now inherit what He had in store for them.

Repentance is…

Repentance is a constant movement of our hearts to God for he is always reaching for us. It is an encounter with an honest assessment of ourselves and a deep trust in what God can do in us. This repentance is a process, something we return to repeatedly. Our call to repentance is really our call to conversion. It is our call to change, but to become our most authentic selves and children of God.

We know who we are in God when we turn to face God, to point ourselves toward God. The act of repentance is really a practice for our whole-of-life journey of conversion. To repent is to return to our Creator from whom we have strayed. Repentance is inspired by God's grace and love, for as John the Evangelist tells us in his first letter, "We love because he first loved us" (4:19). Even our movement toward God is because of his grace, as St. Augustine preached. God loved us before we even knew him.

God is always waiting for us to turn toward him. In the parable of the prodigal son, we see a loving father who always waits for the return of wayward children. He rejoices in our return. Celebrates it. To return, however, requires us to see the state of our lives honestly and to be able to give voice to what has burdened us and what we have done. We need to begin with the acknowledgement that we are sinners. All of us*… If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in u*s (1 John 1:8).

God is reaching out to us *now, always*, will we respond in hope?

God does not simply wait for us. He initiates this dialogue. He searches for us. In Genesis when Adam and Eve are disobedient, though they hide in shame, God comes looking for them. Although they try and clothe themselves with fig leaves, God wraps them in skins. God does not remove the consequence of their sin as Adam and Eve still leave the garden. However, he pursues them, clothes their shame and gives them the tools to return to him.

This is in part the value of the pillars of Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Each of these elements reminds us of our constant dependency on God. Although we may see our brokenness, we also see more clearly God's grace. When we know we have been pursued by his love and we have returned to it, we also see the importance of modelling this in our own relationships. Our Lenten journey helps us to see ourselves and God more clearly.