

## **SERMON: 24 March 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **“A Call to Repentance” (Psalm 63:1-8 and Luke 13:1-9)**

It seems to me that there is a need for our nation to heed a call to repentance at the moment. Our politics has turned toxic. Its appalling to hear stories of politicians receiving death threats and the police advising at least one politician this week that it wasn't safe for her to return to her own home for the weekend.

[SLIDE] The Lord detests evil plans;  
But delights in pure words.  
(Proverbs 15:26)

[SLIDE] If you plan to do evil, you will be lost;  
If you plan to do good, you will receive unfailing love and faithfulness.  
(Proverbs 14:22)

[SLIDE] Much of what Jesus spoke about was a call for people to repent.

We don't know much about the Galileans that Jesus was speaking about in Luke 13, the ones Pilate had murdered as they offered their sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is still on his way there. But there is a clear suggestion that the self righteous Jews saw the Galileans as sinners and, according to them, it was sin of the Galileans that explained why they died.

We might think of a very contemporary example from recent events in Christchurch. Were these Muslims at Friday prayers more deserving of death than us or anyone else? Were their deaths a result of their sin?

Jesus is quick to say no, not at all, and reflects the focus back to the accuser. You're thinking that somehow you are better than them; that somehow your own safety now is your reward for your good, possibly pious, behaviour.

Jesus says to them, in effect, those who were killed were no worse than you. No worse and no better.

In other words, we're all sinners and what matters is whether or not we have the humility to recognise that and to do something about it, ie. turn from sin and turn to God.

As if to reinforce the point, Jesus speaks of the 18 people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them. Again, the crowd want to point the finger of blame away from themselves and believe that their own sin had caused their deaths.

I think Jesus adds this example to tell the crowd that accidents happen and one never knows when their time will come.

What matters is that people consider their own standing with God and turn to God, repent, change their mind, or have their mind changed, and their thinking transformed. That's what repentance means.

We can learn something from this. It's important to consider, as Jesus put it, the plank in our own eye rather than be concerned about the speck of dust in someone else's eye.

Because what matters in this whole repentance game is whether or not our repentance bears fruit.

Its great how Jesus uses the example of the barren fig tree to illustrate this. After three years with no fruit, the man who planted it in his garden is scunnered. He's ready to cut the tree down because its taking up space. Space that could be better used by other trees.

What he's saying is if its not fruitful it'd be better if it wasn't there at all because its taking up space and preventing others from growing.

Let me apply this to the church. We can do that because I think God's intention is for God's people to be fruitful, we can see that in the Hebrew Bible, the OT, that it was God's intention that Israel be the vineyard or fig tree.

And I think what God is saying here is that religious people whose lives are not bearing fruit, may actually be stopping others from growing.

I'm thinking of some of the judgemental things that Christians have said, things that have caused harm, and have driven people away from the church. We've told people in the past, or we've given people the impression that they were not good enough or holy enough to be part of the church.

And we seriously need to repent of those things.

We are, all of us, only alive because of God's infinite grace.

God is like the most patient of gardeners. Like the gardener in the parable, God is willing to give the barren tree special attention and plenty of fertiliser and wait and wait and wait for the fruit to come.

Repentance and fruitfulness are meant to go together.

Matthew records John the Baptist urging the crowds to bear fruit in keeping with repentance (3:8), as one translation puts it, to prove it by the way you live your life (NLT).

Richard Rohr says that grown up faith recognises that all people are “mixed blessings and partly sinners, and we always will be”.

[SLIDE] *13th Century mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) said, The seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree, the seed of a nut tree grows to be a nut tree, the seed of God grows to be God.*

God had placed this seed in us. It will bear fruit. And repentance ensures we stay fruitful. Turning to the mind of Christ on a daily basis, looking for wisdom from above, allowing the seed in us to be watered and fed by Word and Spirit.

Part of repenting is to become awake to God.

In Revelation 3:3, the Spirit of Christ is speaking to the church in Sardis,

[SLIDE] “Repent and turn to me again. If you don’t wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief.”

*Gregoreo* is the Greek word which means to be awake as well as to watch. To repent is therefore to change the mind and to become more fully awake, we might say, come to our true senses, and have the mind of Christ more fully formed in us.

Repentance is an important step on the journey of Maturing Faith and Growing in Christ

We must leave behind an Immature faith that seeks to criticise the speck of sawdust in another person’s eye whilst ignoring the plank in our own (Matthew 23:13-32).

Repentance is important because it helps us to control our selfish ego, it helps to put the ego down so that our true life - hidden with God in Christ - can emerge.

[SLIDE] “As all of the great world religions have long recognised, becoming ourselves actually requires repeated submissions of the ego.”

- James Hollis, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life: How to Finally, Really Grow Up* (2005)

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[SLIDE] So, in summary,

repentance is our life long friend because it helps us to continually turn away from sin and back to God.

It's an important element in the growth of faith.

It's a work of the Spirit in us and its a growing fruit of the Spirit as humility and self-control.

We need this fruit to sustain us in the journey and to be a blessing to, and sustenance for, others.

God loves it when we turn back and bear fruit.