

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus shows us that there is a link between repentance and the kingdom of heaven. When Jesus began his ministry after His baptism by John in the Jordan and John's arrest, He taught "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."

Repentance is not just a turning away from sin, but a turning to the kingdom of God; it is a turning away from the devil in the works of darkness a turning to Christ as our Lord and Savior; A turning away from that which brings pain, and a turning to those things that bring healing and joy; A turning away from the seeking to please self, to a turning to seeking to serve God.

Repentance, this turning away from self, produces total dependence on God and reliance on prayer. In Luke 13 Jesus was told by some of the Jews that Pilate had mixed the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. Wanting to teach how important repentance was, Jesus responded, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way! Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell. Do you think that they were worse offenders than all those who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did!"

The apostles also taught how important repentance is. In Acts 2:28 Peter taught, "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the Name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

In 1 John 1:9 John wrote in his first letter: If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous so that he will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

St. John of the Ladder wrote concerning repentance.

"When our soul leaves this world we shall not be blamed for not having worked miracles, or for not having been theologians, or having attained visions. But we shall certainly have to give an account to God of why we have not unceasingly wept over our sins".

St. Isaac the Syrian wrote:

"This life has been given to you for repentance. Do not waste it on other things." He goes on to say, "This delightful gift of repentance by which the soul is set free from sin and death."

We have all been taught the Jesus prayer. It is a prayer of repentance: "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

We pray Psalm 50 at many of our services and I hope in our private prayers. It is a Psalm of repentance, written by David after he had committed adultery and murder and then returned to God in repentance.

St. Isaac the Syrian wrote:

"Repentance is the door of Mercy, opened to those who seek it diligently. By this door, we enter into Divine Mercy and by no other entrance can we find this mercy. Let us not grieve when we make a slip, but when we become hardened to it. For even the perfect often slip, but to be hardened in the same slip means total death."

St. John of Karpathos wrote:

"Do all in your power not to fall, for the strong athletes should not fall. But if you do fall, get up again at once and continue the contest. Even if you fall 1000 times... rise up again each time, and keep on doing this until the day of your death. For it is written, 'The righteous man falls seven times' -- that is repeatedly throughout his life -- seven times 'shall he rise again'" (Prov. 24:16 LLX).

Repentance is the prodigal son returning to his father from the far country of sin and saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. And I am no more worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants"

Repentance is the publican and standing at the rear of the Temple, not daring to lift his eyes to heaven, smiting his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me the sinner."

Repentance is a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of life, a change of values.

St. John of the Ladder writes;

"Repentance is the renewal of baptism and is a contract with God for a fresh start in life.... Repentance is critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself. Repentance is the daughter of hope and refusal to despair."

St. Theognostos writes,

"We will not be punished or condemned in the age to be because we have sinned, since we were given a mutable and unstable nature. But we will be punished if, we did not repent and turn from our evil ways to the Lord; for we have been given the

power to repent, as well as the time in which to do so. Only through repentance shall we receive God's mercy."

St. John of the Ladder again wrote:

"Repentance is a turning from that which is not our nature, to that which is our nature, a turning from the devil to God through spiritual struggle and pain".

Repentance is more than regret. Some people regret that they have been unfaithful to their spouse, or that they have cheated a partner in business, but it never occurs to them that they have offended God. It bothers them that they have gotten in bad with other people, but it does not bother them that they are in bad with God.

Repentance toward God is an admission of being in bad with God, of having offended and hurt and broken God's heart through disobedience. Repentance takes place inside a person, but it can be seen on the outside.

Ugly words are replaced by kind words. Dishonesty turns into honesty. Frictions in family life are healed. Pride turns into humility, and healthy agreement takes the place of disagreement. These are the beautiful fruits of repentance.

Commenting on the connection between repentance and the coming of the light in Jesus, Bishop Kallistos Ware writes,

"Until you've seen the Light of Christ, you cannot really see your sins. So long as the room is in darkness, says Bishop Theofan the Recluse, you do not notice the dirt; but when you bring a powerful light into the room, you can distinguish every speck of dust. So, it is with the room of our soul. The sequence is not to repent first, and then to become aware of Christ; for it is only when the light of Christ has already entered our life that we begin truly to understand our sinfulness. As the Desert fathers observe, 'the closer a man comes to God, the more he sees that he is a sinner.' They cite Isaiah as an example of this: first he sees the Lord on His throne and hears the Seraphim crying, 'holy, holy, holy', and it is only after this vision of God that he claims, 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips.'"

"Repentance begins when we allow the light of Christ through His word to flood our life. When John the Baptist preached repentance, the response to his message on the part of many was:

'We don't need repentance. We are Jews! We have Abraham as our father!'

Today those same people would say, ‘Repentance is good, but not for me. After all, am I not a good Orthodox Christian? Am I not a member of the ancient and undivided apostolic Church founded by Jesus Himself? Haven't I been baptized? Don't I come to church regularly? Don't I pray and pay my pledge?"

John the Baptist would say to these people what he said to his hearers then: Don't try to escape the obligation to repent by hiding behind the walls of the Church or baptism. God can raise up church members from these cobblestones. God does not need you. You need God.

Repent! Forsake your sins. Return to Jesus, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

One of the greatest of all Saints-St. Paul-said of himself: "The saying is sure and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (I Tim. 1:15).

We pray these very words in each liturgy before receiving Jesus in Holy Communion: "I believe, O Lord, and I confess that thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." If we merely say these words and do not mean them, then we have not yet met the Living God in Christ Jesus. We are still in the darkness of sin.

The church fathers emphasize the need for daily repentance.

St. Isaac the Syrian says, “during every moment of the 24 hours each day we stand in need of repentance.”

“Repentance is fitting at all times and for all persons, for sinners as well as the righteous who look for salvation. There are no bounds to perfection, for even the perfection of the most perfect is nothing but imperfection. Hence until the moment of death, neither the time nor the works of perfection can ever be complete.”

You cannot repent too soon, because you do not know how soon it will be too late. We need to hear God's call to repentance today. There is a time to plant, and a time to reap. The human heart, like the soil of the ground, has its own favorable season. Tomorrow may be too late.

Fr. Anthony Coniaris gives us guidance on repentance:

The following are some practical steps to follow in helping make repentance a part of our daily life:

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the areas of sin that he most wants to deal with now in your life. (If we try to deal with too many areas at once we can become discouraged.)
2. Make frequent use of the Sacrament of Confession. The sacrament provides grace, wisdom, strength, and healing.
3. Make an examination of conscience a frequent part of your prayer.
4. In relationship difficulties, be eager and willing to give and receive forgiveness. Instead of mumbling, "I'm sorry," or "That's okay--it was nothing," be direct. "Will you forgive me?" "Yes, I forgive you."
5. Once you have repented, reject any guilt feelings. At this point they are only the tool of Satan.
6. Once you have forgiven someone, put the incident aside. Something forgiven is to be forgotten. God's grace can accomplish that.