

---

Hymns:	25	“God is here, as we his people”
	154	“Come, divine Interpreter “In loving kindness Jesus came”
	94	“To God be the glory, great things he has done!”

---

Readings: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23

---

### “REPENT!”

This last week has marked a turning point in a nation’s history. A new President has been sworn in.

In relation to this swearing-in, my eye was caught by a speech made by a Methodist Bishop to her head of State. It was a truly astonishing communication. Here’s a sample, a few sentences, taken from a much longer whole:

*I want your permission Mr President to speak truthfully and plainly... I see you as a brother... People tell me I should not tell you [how angry and hurt] they are because it could get me into trouble. But I know you can cope with the truth...*

*Sir, there are people who are deeply hurt and they say that it’s you who are causing... conflict among the people,... they say that it is you who are dividing us... My job, Mr President, is not politics; it’s to bring the love of God to everyone... I cannot tell you what to do Sir, but you have the fear of God in you... you’re always ready to talk about God... and you say you’re not afraid of anyone. Why should you be? But your confidence [should not be in your own strength] but in God.*

This was Bishop Hannah Faal Heim speaking person-to-person to President (now thankfully ex-President) Jammeh in The Gambia. What courage on her part to speak the truth to power in this simple, unadorned, way.

As this morning’s subject filtered through my brain, and while reading Bishop Hannah’s speech in this week’s Methodist Recorder, I felt there was a definite overlap. She could have spoken to the President in a speech that lasted no more than one word, the word that serves as a title for this morning’s sermon: “Repent!”

It’s exactly the word that sums up her speech to the President as well as the first of Jesus’s sermons all those years ago. The tone too is identical. The “sermon” (we only have its opening sentence in this morning’s scripture) is as follows:

- Repent.
- Change your thinking.
- Repent.

- Turn around.
- Repent.
- Stop your craziness.
- Repent.
- Look at what else is on offer.
- Repent.

All those little phrases are possible translations of the one word “repent”. But we are bound to ask to whom Jesus addressed this word? Who received this challenge?

He spoke to a people in despair, at the end of their tether, yearning for release from oppression. They’d suffered centuries of humiliation and upheaval, political chaos and military defeat. This was the Chosen People of God being made to trail their coats in the muck of history. First it was Egypt, then Assyria, followed by Babylon; then came the Persians and finally the Romans. They’d all walked over the Jewish people, rubbed their noses in the dirt, turned them into a vassal state with puppet governments. Their leaders had collaborated with, appeased, compromised, squirmed, sold themselves and their people shamelessly down the ages. But, in the time of Jesus, things had come to the sorriest of all passes. Everything had reached its lowest point.

“Repent!”, said Jesus to the Sadducees, the Establishment Party, the Keepers of the Temple, the liberal-conservative government party, the leaders who’d forgotten how to listen to the people. Familiar?

“Repent!” said Jesus to the Zealots, the people’s revolutionary party, the group ready to resort to shock tactics in their determination to overthrow the status quo. Theirs was a populism unleashed. Familiar?

“Repent!” said Jesus to the Essenes, the party of the Great Refusal who sought to deal with the difficulties of the time by opting out, by turning their backs on the messy world, by keeping themselves to themselves, with a laager mentality, refusing to get their hands dirty. Familiar?

“Repent!” said Jesus to the Pharisees, the party of compromise, the group that resorted to regulation and casuistry, to formulaic solutions to the social and political pressures of the day. They favoured the pre-eminence of the rulebook and judged everybody by their capacity to keep to its strictures. Familiar?

On display, all around, were some of the characteristics to be found down the ages in bodies like UKIP, Tea Party, ISIS, Trotskyite groups, Neo-con sympathisers, members of the Elite and fundamentalist groups – all power-hungry and drawn from the left and the right of the political spectrum who are, in various ways and in different degrees, ready to resort to terror-tactics, the use of fear, the manipulation of peoples’ dreams and aspirations, the telling of lies, the adoption of crude ideology to achieve their ends.

“Repent!” says Jesus

- ▼ Jesus who was closer than the priests to God;

- ▼ closer than the establishment to the people;
- ▼ more moral than the moralisers;
- ▼ more revolutionary than the revolutionaries;
- ▼ more “human” than the ideologues of his day.

He remained “provocative on all sides”; he fitted no mould. He challenged everyone, whatever their persuasion, cultural grouping, or political standpoint.

I’ve always felt challenged by this word “repent”. It seems to me to have a positive and also a negative impact. Since I like to think of myself as an inveterate optimist, I’ve tended to go for the positive spin on the meaning of the word. I’ve certainly tried to avoid its negative implications.

My optimism comes, genetically I suppose, from my mother. She left school at 13. She went into service – scrubbing floors, washing people’s dirty linen, carrying coal, being at everyone’s beck and call. Later in her life she stood in the line at the soup kitchen seeking nourishment for her family. During the war she worked on the railways, coupling and uncoupling wagons full of coal. After marriage and the birth of her children she went to work in the tinsplate factory – this is what did for her health. She lived her last years in constant pain. She had little luck in life. She never had any money or prospects. She was an uneducated lass and a single mum.

But she was always cheerful. To any friend or neighbour grumbling about their financial state or the bad weather would be regaled with her predictable interjection: “Don’t worry darlings, spring’s just round the corner.”

She maintained this upbeat stance on almost everything. But not on the question of religion. She liked her cigarettes, did the football pools, enjoyed a tippie from time-to-time, backed a horse (only both ways and only in the big races!), loved her bingo, and, to boot, she was a divorcee. She knew that the preachers would love to point their fingers at the likes of her. “Repent!” would come with venom, disdain, thunderously. “I don’t intend to give them the pleasure” she used to say.

The Church in all its denominations and confessions has turned the injunction of Jesus to repent into an industry, an industry that begins by inculcating a sense of guilt and develops mechanisms for dealing with that guilt. At one end of the spectrum of responses are a few gentle hail Mary’s and at the other naming and shaming and socially ostracising those who offend the rules.

St Mark begins his gospel with a slightly different version of Matthew’s reportage. Here they are alongside each other:

“Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand” – that’s Matthew’s voice  
 “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news.” And that’s Mark.

I’ve always preferred Mark. I like the linkage between repentance and belief. And I love the idea that repentance is stimulated not by the sorry repetition of all that is bad but rather by what the Gospel calls “Good News”. I’ve always liked to think that

a change of direction is possible to anyone who has been warmed, wooed, won by something called “Good News”. And that’s how I’ve tended to preach on the subject down the years.

But now I feel the need to take Matthew more seriously and to recognise that when things are bad, really bad, the word “repent” should be directly used, nakedly and unashamedly, in its negative sense. It should be aimed and fired at those in power. Just as Hannah (Bishop Hannah) did to President Jammeh in The Gambia. We must be prepared to speak the truth to power.

With that in mind, I put a very mild rebuke to President Trump onto my Facebook page earlier this week. I urged him to think twice instead of using his Twitter account as a sledgehammer. In my sermon last week I regretted his attack on Congressman John Lewis, his ugly imitation of the gestures of a disabled young journalist and his readiness to be dismissive of the family of a Muslim soldier in the American army who was killed in action.

That was last week. This week I could easily add another note – his expression of utter respect for Hilary Clinton – whom he’s bad-mouthed and been crude about for the last period. “Crooked Hilary” and shouts of “lock her up” one minute and an expression of total respect the next. And then his 1000%(!) confidence in the intelligence service. They seemed to be at the very bottom of his heap just a week ago.

For my pains, I got a reply on my Facebook page: “Stay in Britain,” it said, “and keep out of our business! We have a President who won’t take your crap.”

Well there we are! I rest my case. But I won’t withhold my voice from the fray of the present moment. Like Bishop Hannah, I feel bound to attempt to speak truth to power. It is time our political leaders learned the true meaning of respect. Time they re-learned the necessity for speaking the truth (even when it hurts). Time they showed an integrity that captivates us by its patent sincerity and honesty.

This is a time when our next hymn comes into its own. We need rescuing “from the depths of sin and shame,” and we stand in desperate need of the “tender hand” that will raise us from the “sinking sands” into which we’re disappearing fast.

Repent! That has to be a message for our time.

Amen.