

## Repent Ye or Perish

In the late 60s of the first century, the aristocratic historian, Flavius Josephus, found himself reluctantly commissioned as an officer in the doomed Jewish resistance against almighty Rome. Part of his task was to unite to Jerusalem's cause the various rebel factions in the northern Galilean territory. He thus appealed to one leader with the following words: 'change your allegiance, and pledge your loyalty to me'. This is my translation of Josephus' Greek text, but when these very same words appear in the bible they are translated, 'repent' and 'believe in me'.

Words like 'repent' and 'believe' – along with the others translated above (kingdom, gospel, worship) were simply *not* religious words in the first century. To repent here, is to change your allegiance, that is – your commitment to a person, a cause, or a course of action. In a highly charged political context, it is likely to be a painful and life-changing re-alignment of your loyalties.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, I wonder how many of us might see ourselves as the priest or the levite who cross the road from human distress? Because when you read a story – don't you want to identify yourself with the protagonist, the hero, the goodie? How many people watched Star Wars for the first time and conclude, that Darth Vader, is he a good role model or what? (Actually, I think our former bursar may once have confessed that he actually did!)

Or in the parable we heard... you have a young man who has essentially wished his father was dead, asked for his share of the family property, then run off on a promiscuity binge of women, wine, and pigfood. After he has blown everything on his grand tour, he comes home with his tail between his legs, hoping that his father might pay him minimum wage as a casual labourer.

Social anthropologists who specialise in ancient near eastern culture and politics, have argued that the wayward son, had not only wrecked everything for his family. In Jesus' context, there were no nuclear families. No, there would be an entire village, all of whom were affected by the behaviour of this wayward son. This is largely because, given the economics of the day, homesteads that had long

been owned by families who worked the land, were frequently sold to outside investors, which weakened the village still further. So, what is the reasonable response of the villagers when they see this young idiot who's dishonoured himself and threatened everyone's wellbeing?

According to the social anthropologists, the correct moral reaction of the villagers would have been to kick the living daylights out of this boy, and send him on his way long before he got to his home. Why did this not happen in the parable? Because as the boy neared the village, 'while he was still in the distance, HIS – FATHER – SAW – HIM. If that reading is correct, then it must be the most beautiful verse in the New Testament.

In fact, the father was so overcome with emotion, he girded his loins – well, he pulled his pants up, and went tearing through the village so fast he left his dignity behind.

And, in the original – it was a churning in the father's bowels that drove him out of his front door, sprinting down the road, crashing into an embrace, protecting his son, and restoring his honour.

And what position might we occupy in the next. If we are a mainstream, status quo, morally compliant herd animal, then our position in that parable, may well be a villager ready to beat the son within an inch of his life because he deserved it. Yes, we might not like violence today, but any astute historian of ideology would argue that we simply prefer to outsource our violence, so we can sweep it under the carpet. No - what if we are the angry villagers? Are we able to read ourselves as the bad people in a text? And if so, might it be people like me, that are the reason the father has to go sprinting through the village to protect his son? To protect his son from me? Might I be the reason for the father's bowel movement?

Are we capable of reading the text like that? Because to do that, is effectively, to repent. In the original, to repent is to change your mindset – in a moral universe where our minds had already been set! It is a gargantuan effort – to change our minds like that. Meta noia in Greek. Meta means after, noia refers to your mind. So it means changing your mind. And sometimes it can mean changing your mind

about whether or not you are going out later. But more often, it is a radical reshaping of your commitments, your assumptions, your loyalties, your hopes.

And whenever you are interpreting a story, the capacity to read it against an interpretation with which you are familiar and comfortable, can be extremely difficult. But isn't this the point of literature. That you can have – what Morna last week, called, 'conversations with scripture'.

In other words, when you are reading a text – or getting to know a person – you cannot help but begin with assumptions, projecting onto people and texts and situations – your own pre-understanding. And as you encounter that text and that person and that situation, they might have the capacity to reshape your interpretive filters, so that next time you encounter them, you are slightly less wrong in all the assumptions you project onto them? Surely this is what getting to know a person is, and what getting to grips with a text is!

I think it was Mark Twain who said, 'when I was a lad of 14, my father was such an idiot, I could barely stand to have the old man around. But by the time I was 21, I was astonished at how much he'd learned in 7 years!'

My daughter is currently reading Plato for her history degree. And the first time I read Plato's works in their entirety was when I was an undergraduate. But a couple of Christmases ago, I read the whole of Plato's works again – and it was like reading a different person. I was far less confident that I understood him, far more alert to his subtlety and humour, and far more impressed with his sheer genius – even if I didn't agree with most of it.

If you want to read books, you have to be able to change your mind. In other words, you have to be able to repent – to allow the Other, the Author, the text, to have an impact on who you are and how you read.

Now of course, we can all just say, yes, we all know that. We have to be open minded. Pfff. Open mindedness is a glib and shallow virtue by comparison. Open mindedness is usually what I expect of people

who disagree with me – when they are clearly wrong. When it comes to anything that matters, open-mindedness is rarely a lived reality.

The New Testament offers a far more sophisticated means of human interaction than half-baked neoliberal postmodernism. Repentance, as we call it now, does not mean apologising on a daily basis for having been born a mere mortal and thus incapable of obeying impossible to keep religious laws. No. Repentance is listening, reading, hearing, being broken and remade by our encounter with the Other – whether the other comes to us in the form of a person, a text, a book, an idea.

And this notion of being broken and remade is what the New Testament means by death and resurrection. To believe in the resurrection, is to live in such a way that you demonstrate to the world that you have the capacity to be broken and remade by your encounter with otherness. According to the Gospels – that is what makes us us human. Death and resurrection are at the heart of everything – and that way that we appropriate belief in the resurrection in our daily life, is to model the readiness to be remade by our encounter with the Other.