

Reflection for Sunday 21 February 2021

Perhaps because it's a reminder that I'm not as young as I was, I get a little bit shirty whenever someone, usually a family member or a colleague, makes it clear that I'm suffering from an attack of technological dinosaurism. Deep down, I know they're right and they find it faintly amusing, if a little exasperating, that I'm just a bit scared by the likely consequences of getting things wrong. For example, it takes quite an act of courage for me to delete an app and re-install it because I fear I'll never find my way back in and will lose vital information. This week, however, after my Facebook page failed to load properly, I took courage in my hands, a deep breath and deleted it from my phone. A few very anxious minutes later, I managed to restore it, all in apple-pie order. I felt like doing a dance of joy around my study.

I know the theory, but putting it into practice can take more courage than I'm sometimes able to muster. I've learnt that when I re-boot my phone everything that's in RAM (random access memory – which sounds very much like what seems to go on between my ears) is cleared out and that I'm able to start again with something like a fresh slate.

Oh that it were quite so easy with life in general! How often have you felt that you could just re-wind the conversation that's just come to an end? How often have you admitted to yourself that your actions have got you into another nice mess again? In lockdown it almost seems harder because the little human actions like a touch on the arm aren't possible and a face-mask hides the corners of someone's mouth turning up into a little smile of understanding and forgiveness.

In life it's never easy to re-boot relationships or turn back the clock, but there are times when we're given the opportunity of a fresh start. This is exactly what Jesus means when he talks about repentance. Such repentance isn't just to do with beating ourselves up over the things we've got wrong, but far more to do with a change of mind, a conscious effort to be honest about and then move on from the RAM of mixed-up emotions and regrets that make us hesitant or afraid to risk something new and good. It's very much to do with conversion, which in practice and reality, is a much gentler and more affirming process than we often imagine it to be.

It's repentance with a purpose, which is to look to the future with fresh eyes and fresh hope in order to see the good that's breaking out around us. It's about being prepared to hear and respond to good news rather than allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the mass of muddle and confusion that so often seems to take over our lives. It's just what the doctor ordered.

And it's just what Jesus offers as St Mark proclaims at the start of his Gospel: 'The decisive moment has come, God's in charge, take a deep breath and begin again, because this really is good news and not just another false dawn.' (I paraphrase, of course, but I hope you get my drift.)

Mark then goes on in breathless fashion to describe just what this good news meant for those who came into contact with Jesus - in terms of healing of mind and body, hope and the deepest possible experience of being valued and accepted – of being loved.

And the really good news is that all this is still on offer, if we can dare to re-boot our lives and try to believe it. That's the simple and profound message to us not just at the start of this season of Lent, but every day we wake, despite the problems we'll have to face. This is the kernel of repentance.

To be able to do this requires courage and humility, not altogether unlike the daunting prospect of deleting and re-installing a faulty app, but just like that, it's often easier than we imagine - and just as effective. It means trying deliberately to look at the world in a different way, informed by the transformational priorities that Jesus stands for and allowing that new outlook to allow hope to overcome our fears and confusion.

If ever there was a time for such a fresh start, surely it has to be now, when we're most fed up with the cold of winter, the frustrations of lockdown and an uncertain future. But the kind of repentance I'm trying to describe, which Jesus invites us to embrace, is no act of spitting into the wind, but one of refusing to accept that our lives need be compromised and restricted by all those things that we find destructive and demeaning. If we were to use Biblical language it's about holding out against sin and death wherever it's found and in whatever form it appears.

If you need a bit of inspiration to repent and believe the good news this Lent, please read the story of Jesus again. Make a pot of tea, sit down and read St Mark's Gospel from the first verse to the last. It really helps. It's an amazing, inspiring story, and though you'll certainly be puzzled by some of it, I think you'll be caught up in it in ways that will take you quite by surprise.

This Lent, I'll read it again too. It won't take away the cold, the lack of freedom we all feel and the uncertainty of what this year hold for us, but I think you'll find that you see them all in a new light, and the random rubbish that stops us seeing the love that surrounds us and the future with hope, will at least for a while, be cleared away.