

May I remind you of the point I made yesterday? - that God is greater than the human heart, that God is beyond our understanding or definition. This realisation can trigger our entry into the various modes of religion. Our retreat is going to consider one such mode – the Lenten mode of Repentance. We are trying to discover the exact way in which the greatness of God specifically requires our repentance.

Repentance

Now there's a nice, old-fashioned word for you. What does it mean? The real question is, what word does it translate in the Bible, and what does - or did – that word mean when it was being used there?

In general Greek *metanoeo* means changing your mind or *nous*. Let's draw the boundaries, which may seem unexpectedly wide after we've done that. *Nous* implies not just your thoughts, but your opinions, and your intentions; sometimes the connotation of *metanoia* is a sense of "later", that is, that there's a period where you had one "mind", and then things happened because of it that you didn't like or can't live with, and then you change course in all departments to try to heal the situation the previous "mind" caused. Probably our slightly negative understanding of repentance is close to that sense and comes from it.

But in the Bible there's a much more positive dimension. The word is particularly applied to human response to an initiative or revelation on the part of God, which causes a change of mind even without anyone having committed a fault. Maybe a national emergency will happen; it is ascribed to the wrath of God, and demands a change of heart.

This results in various phenomena: there are cultic and ritual responses, like the solemn communal fast, the abstention from meat and wine, the wearing of penitential uniforms - sackcloth and ashes – and self-wounding or flagellation. There are also liturgies which call on God expressing the confession of sin and seeking pardon. It is thought that this was also an occasion for sacrifices to be offered.

All this fuss drew down the ridicule and criticism of the prophets, who saw these as only outward displays, lacking in real grounds within the person. The prophets call for the renewal of relationship with God, and warn against any magical notion of placating an angry God, whilst effecting no real inner change. Their language of conversion is simple: they speak of an about-face, a total 180° turn. This does not depend on a detailed *revulsion* from something on our plane of knowledge, a sophisticated decision like someone giving up smoking or resolving to take more exercise. Such decisions are usually arrived at by the contemplation of one's navel (or in the case of resolving to diet, the inability to contemplate it without a system of mirrors). That just isn't how repentance works in Biblical terms. There, it is a matter of a transforming encounter with God. There isn't an encounter with God that isn't transforming in its effects. If you think you've had one, go back to the drawing-board.

Now we need to see what difference this makes. If we can only make room for the thought that something new is in store for us, that we need to renew the account of our relationship with God, then things can start to happen.

Turning to face God involves at the same time a turning away from anything less than God. So it's difficult for us to see how this can happen alongside other engrossing projects and relationships. That's why the Retreat is away from home, and why we don't set the other people who are here at the heart of the enterprise. It's why we keep silence, thus enhancing the effect of the sounds we do hear, which are from God.

This is where I find myself reaching the place where I wanted to be: the place where the greatness of God meets our littleness. We display our littleness by our being choked-up with little things: our work, our human relationships, our ambitions, our fantasies, and the rest. If we want to engage with God at the same time as keeping our place in that particular snarl-up, it is going to be very difficult. It's like trying to butter up your bank-manager or propose to your girl-friend whilst driving diagonally across five lanes of motorway traffic. The encounter with God demands total attention, because it implies total consequences for my life. My relationship with God is the one that is totally important and serious, because he is involved with every detail of my self, and he alone knows the destiny of all my bits, contents and qualities. If you have an encounter with God that doesn't do this, isn't like this, then be deeply suspicious. You may have met an idol, but hardly the living God. Idols are nothing until someone believes in them, which is when they become dangerous.

This is why I find a retreat so refreshing. Here you can (if you want) set the tumult of the drivelling details of life at a hundred and fifteen miles' distance, and spend your time seeking God and nothing but God. That is what repentance involves.

You can see straight away that this is a totally positive deed, and not one that involves disgust for your old mind. A starving traveller smelling a chip-shop doesn't waste time thinking how sad he once was not to be near one. He just makes a bee-line for the sizzling sound crying aloud for a large haddock and a bucketful. Disgust would be reserved for the strange desire *not* to go forwards, or to start talking about salad or cholesterol.

I read this meaning in the prefix *meta-*, which implies not just change of mind in the sense of a new choice, an alternative, but a going beyond the old mind, an entry into a much larger space, as metaphysics goes beyond the physical, or as metapsychology goes beyond the limits of experimental study of the mind. We are speaking of an encounter with God which brings about the transformation of the mind. Now, if you think of the Lenten mystery like that, everything changes. We're in the realm of conversions, St Paul falling off his persecuting horse, St Francis stripping off his clothes and running off singing into the forest dressed in an old sack, Peter, Andrew, James and John leaving everything and following him. We are talking about love; and love, once glimpsed, relativises everything else.

The Scripture and many great spiritual guides unanimously speak of our being very poor at approaching God. That isn't how it happens. We look for God, knowingly or unknowingly, but inevitably we fall short in our seeking, and mistake creatures for the Creator. The long history of human religion is a depressing history of the worship of idols, and the contortions idols always introduce into human beings. This leads many people to conclude that "religion does harm and is a bad thing". Note, however, that the best news about an idol is that it has fallen down; devastating as this is to its worshippers. No, the starting-place is where *God approaches us*, in experiences which stop us in our tracks and leave us full of questions, not certainties. You know this. It's why you prefer personal suggestions over dogmatic assertions, and why you turn away from the formulas and slogans of so-called evangelicals. People who have got God sewn up are boring and deluded. In his mercy he eventually liberates them

from their certainties and gives them questions instead: sometimes an unanswered question is much more precious than a fully-fledged principle.