

## Advent 2A

*A sheep found a hole in the fence and crept through it. He wandered far and got lost. Then he realised that he was being chased by a wolf. He ran and ran, but the wolf kept chasing him, until the Shepherd came, rescued him and carried him lovingly back to the fold. In spite of everyone's urgings the Shepherd refused to nail up the hole in the fence.*

Repentance is not just a cosmetic exercise, it's not just 'papering over the cracks' without a corresponding change of heart. Repentance is when I freely choose to do the right thing even though other wrong choices are available.

When the people came to see John they first confessed their sins before they were baptised. Do we have a 'soul friend' or a confessor to whom we can bare our soul or do we think a generic confession of sins suffices? If we refuse to name and call out certain predominant sins in our lives, the chances are we'll never be rid of them. We could end up being sorry for everything but, in reality, sorry for nothing.

Psychiatrists tell us that a patient's presenting problem is often not the real problem with them. There is usually a deeper cause to a person's disordered life which is often kept hidden. If we hide certain things from our G.P. for instance, then he is limited in the help he can give us. The same applies to the state of our souls. When Adam and Eve fell from grace they foolishly thought they could even hide from God.

And then there are people who only see sin in the context of 'unjust structures' or 'social inequalities' or whatever. Important as these issues are, they can sometimes be used as a smoke-screen for not dealing with serious sin in our own personal

lives. If that's dealt with, my contention is we'll feel challenged by unethical global issues as well.

Others see the confession of personal sins to a priest as lumbering people with harmful guilt complexes. Yes, people do have unhealthy guilt hang-ups but repenting of our sins is not one of them. The Pharisees in today's gospel looked down on those simple folk who confessed their sins to John while they themselves only went through the motions of repentance but inwardly remained as hard-hearted as ever.

I don't know if you've seen the Lourdes 1943 movie, 'the song of Bernadette'. The local doctor at the time of the apparitions was one, Dr Douzous who was a non-believer. In the movie he sneers at the poor bedraggled multitude of people trudging their way to the rubbish dump at Massabielle where Our Lady had appeared in 1858. Clutching at their rosary beads, they were desperately hoping for a cure of one kind or another or an answer to their prayers. Well, the humble folk who sought out John in the wilderness and the multitudes who descended upon Lourdes in the early days and even today would have a lot in common. But the proud spirit of Dr Douzous is hard to exorcise.

*Advent is a time for doing that - time to lay the axe to the root of the tree which fails to produce the good fruit of repentance and replace it with a tree which is laden with the fruits of genuine conversion. There's no better way to prepare for Christmas.*