

ADVENT 2A (NEW)

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 putting me in a straight-jacket, it's not being forced to stick to the rule book without a corresponding change of heart on my part. The man who went berserk in London recently ticked all the right boxes for the parole board but there was no inner transformation, no repentance despite coming across as being de-radicalised. He pulled 'the wool over their eyes'. Repentance is when I freely choose to do the right thing despite other sinful choices presenting themselves. I repent because my conscience troubles me.

When the people came to see John they first confessed their sins prior to their baptism. Do we have a priest confessor or even a 'soul friend' to whom we can bare our soul, or do we think a generic confession of sins is enough without homing in on where I'm weakest and liable to fall? If we refuse to bring to light and confess our principal sin we could end up being sorry for everything but, in reality, sorry for nothing.

Where disorders of the mind are concerned, 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 mental state which they often keep hidden. If we hide certain things from our GP for instance, then he is limited in the help he can give us. The same applies to the state of our souls. Like Adam and Eve we can even try and hide from God.

And then there are people who only see sin in the context of 'unjust structures' or 'damage to the environment' or 'social inequalities'. Frightfully important as these issues are, especially in the present context, they can sometimes be a convenient diversion for not dealing with recurring sins in our own personal lives. If each of us is right with God in our own souls then we can't but be challenged by 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 guilt hang-ups but repenting of our sins is a very healthy thing to do. People who blame the church for burdening people with guilt resemble the Pharisees in today's gospel who sneered at 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. John the Baptist called them 'a brood of vipers'.

Advent is the 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 transformation and conversion of heart. There's no better way to prepare of Christmas.