

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 cannot be reduced to 'patching up' certain external aspects of our lives without any real change of heart. We must, as John says, 'lay the axe to the root of the tree' if our repentance is to have any lasting effect.

It says that the people who came to see John first confessed their sins before they were baptised. When and where do we disclose our sins and failings to another person these days or have we just got into the habit of confessing them generically and call that repentance. If we refuse to single out certain sins we could end up being sorry for everything but, in reality, sorry for nothing. Do we have a priest confessor who knows us or even a 'soul friend to whom we can open up to?

Psychologists tell us that often the patient's presenting problem is not the real problem with them. There is usually a deeper cause to a person's illness which can remain hidden. If we hide certain things from the medical doctor then he is limited in the help he can give us. The same applies to the doctor of our souls. We can even be 'playing games' with God.

And then there are people who only see sin in the context of 'unjust structures' or 'damage to the environment' or 'social inequalities'. Important as these things are in themselves they can end up being smokescreens for not addressing pertinent

issues in our own personal lives. Repentance, like charity begins at home.

Others see the confession of personal sins to a priest as lumbering people with a harmful guilt complexes. Yes, people do have guilt complexes but it's sure not from owning up to their wrongdoing. That is a very healthy thing to do. People who harbour these attitudes are like the Pharisees in today's gospel who looked in condescending disdain at those simple folk making their way to John for confession and baptism while they themselves stubbornly refused to look into their own hard hearts.

I don't know whether you've seen the movie of the 'Song of Bernadette' about the apparitions at Lourdes in 1858. It's worth seeing. The atheistic doctor at the time, Dr Douzous, speaks words of pitiful disdain about the multitude of bedraggled people making their way to the grotto at Massabielle", clutching their rosary beads, desperately hoping for a cure of one kind or another or an answer to their prayers. The Pharisees of John's day would have had a lot in common with Dr Douzous. Do we?

Advent is time to lay the axe to the root of the tree which fails to produce the fruits of repentance and allow the fire of the Holy Spirit to burn out from our hearts all that would keep the truth hidden from us.