

## ***“Repent, for the end of the world is nigh!”***

How do you feel when you see this on a sandwich board or on an advert in the underground? I’m afraid it makes me very cross because it reinforces people’s negative stereotypes of Christians as always going on about sin and hell and judgement.

**But doesn’t the Bible say we should repent?** Yes, absolutely! And not just the Bible as a whole, but Jesus’ *very own words*, specifically – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”. And for those who heard it (well, not for the Pharisees!) it was very Good News!

To see why it was such good news, we need to look at what Jesus meant, but we have a problem: Jesus didn’t actually say ‘Repent’, did he? He wasn’t English, remember. He said (so I’m told),

Μετανοεῖτε ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν

(Isn’t the internet a wonderful thing?!)

The important point is that he used the verb ‘metanoia’, which our Bibles tend to translate as ‘repent’. So what does ‘repent’ mean in English? OED: *feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one’s wrongdoing or sin.*

I know that Wikipedia isn’t always right, but I looked up ‘metanoia’, and it seems very clear that the above definition is **not** what Jesus meant. We just don’t have a suitable word in English. Drat!

So what does metanoia mean? Here are a couple of quotes:

“In early Christianity... [metanoia] ...was used consistently ... to express a fundamental change in thinking that leads to a fundamental change in behavior and/or way of living.”

“In 2006, an ecumenical group of scholars published a study of repentance in the Bible and the Church ... the study found that for Jews living at the time of Jesus, ‘repentance’ meant ‘a fundamental change in thinking and living’.”

So Jesus did **not** say:

*“Feel-remorse-about-your-sins for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*

It was more like:

*“Fundamentally-change-your-thinking-and-behaving for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*

And what about the first recorded sermon? In it, Peter said,

*Fundamentally-change-your-thinking and be baptised ... for the forgiveness of your sins.*

Peter did **not** say,

*Feel-remorse-about-your-sins and be baptised ... for the forgiveness of your sins.*

But don’t misunderstand: it’s **not** saying “if you change your thinking and behaviour then when you die you will get into heaven” because (1) he’s talking about heaven **now** and (2) as we know, it’s not by good works that we come into a relationship with God (it’s the relationship with God that leads to good works).

Do you remember back in “the early days”, when I started writing all this stuff? How I said that if people are to come to faith, they **first** have to understand about sin-and-a-holy-God?

Well, I was wrong; we don't have to **start** with that! And neither did Peter in that sermon I mentioned. He **started** with the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

So how we ‘preach the good news’ won't be the same in every situation throughout history, because we have to start where people really are, and not say, “If you want to know about Jesus' good news, you first have to understand...” No, no, no!

Start with **where they are** and work out what aspects of ‘the kingdom of God’ they can relate to. Share that with them as GOOD NEWS!

No, I'm not going soft on sin; I'm not a universalist; I WANT PEOPLE TO BE SAVED! But for 99% of the people around me, sin-and-a-holy-God is a terrible starting point. How small is our God?! Is there only one mechanism through which he can bring people to salvation, to shalom, to wholeness, into a living relationship with himself?!

How far wrong can we go if we tell people about the person and work of Jesus Christ?! Let God be God and he will work in people's lives in the way he chooses.

Finally, to see just how positive a concept repentance is, here are a few quick quotes:

- “The kingdom of God is near. *Repent and believe* the good news!”
- And then “Produce *fruit* in keeping with *repentance*.”
- “The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and *repentance* and *forgiveness* of sins will be preached in his name”
- “*Repent* and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the *forgiveness* of your sins. And you will receive the *gift* of the Holy Spirit.”
- “*Repent*, then, and turn to God, so that your *sins may be wiped out*”
- “God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give *repentance* and *forgiveness* of sins to Israel.”
- “God has granted even the Gentiles *repentance* unto *life*.”
- “...the riches of his *kindness, tolerance* and *patience*, not realising that God's kindness leads you towards *repentance*”
- “God will grant them *repentance* leading them to a *knowledge* of the *truth*”
- “He is *patient* with you, not *wanting* anyone to perish, but *everyone* to come to *repentance*.”