

‘Touching the Edge of His cloak.’ Reflections on Repentance and Grace

Gordon Leah

SUMMARY

Many people traditionally believe that repentance is the basis of all Christian faith, but this essay argues that repentance varies according to the character of each individual, according to our limited humanity. This thesis is illustrated with reference to different biblical and fictional characters. Secular literature often sheds light on

biblical truths. I maintain that repentance grows as Christian experience develops and that the essential is the forgiving grace of God and the atonement wrought through the sacrifice of Christ. Repentance, if only imperfectly, is required of all humanity throughout all time, and the grace of forgiveness is granted despite our limited repentance and subsequent service, through the merits of Jesus' perfect sacrifice alone.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Viele Menschen glauben traditionell daran, dass Umkehr die Basis des gesamten christlichen Glaubens darstellt. Dagegen vertritt dieser Aufsatz das Argument, dass Buße je nach Charakter eines individuellen Menschen anders aussehen kann und in Relation zu unserem begrenzten Menschsein steht. Diese These wird durch unterschiedliche biblische und imaginäre Charaktere veranschaulicht. Säkulare Literatur wirft ja oft ein Licht auf biblische

Wahrheiten. Der Autor vertritt die Meinung, dass Buße mit einer sich entwickelnden christlichen Lebenspraxis wächst. Er behauptet ferner, dass das Wesentliche in der vergebenden Gnade Gottes besteht und in der durch das Opfer von Christus gewirkten Erlösung. Umkehr, wenn auch nur unvollkommen, ist für alle Menschen zu allen Zeiten notwendig. Die Gnade der Vergebung wird gewährt trotz unserer begrenzten Umkehr und unseres entsprechenden Dienstes, und zwar allein durch den Verdienst des vollkommenen Opfers von Jesus.

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RÉSUMÉ

De nombreuses personnes pensent traditionnellement que la repentance est la base de la foi chrétienne, mais l'auteur de cet article soutient que la repentance prend des formes variables en fonction du caractère de chaque individu et de notre humanité limitée. Il illustre ce point par l'exemple de différents personnages bibliques ainsi que de personnages fictifs. La littérature profane apporte souvent un éclairage sur des vérités bibliques. L'auteur

considère que la repentance mûrit au fil de l'expérience du chrétien et que la grâce du Dieu qui pardonne et l'expiation effectuée par le sacrifice de Christ sont des vérités essentielles. La repentance, au moins de manière imparfaite, est requise de toute l'humanité de tous les temps et la grâce du pardon est accordée en dépit du caractère limité de la repentance et du service de Dieu qui en découle, en vertu des seuls mérites du sacrifice parfait de Jésus.

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1. Introduction: repentance

In what is often considered the greatest of all parables, the parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15, the younger son, away from home and living off scraps, repents of his folly and decides to return home. In

another parable of two sons, Jesus tells of one who agrees to go to work in his father's vineyard, but then chooses not to do so, and the other who at first refuses to go to the vineyard, but then decides to obey his father's wishes (Mt 21:28-31).¹ Their

father's reaction is not mentioned in either case.

The purpose of this study is to consider the relationship between repentance and grace, the extent to which repentance is necessary for the grace of forgiveness to be experienced and whether grace can simply be granted because of our human inability to experience true repentance.

The German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, stresses the vital importance of repentance at the root of Christian experience when he says:

Like John the Baptist, Jesus proclaimed the imminent Kingdom of God. This message ... made turning back to God urgent business for them (his hearers) because the beginning of God's Lordship brings with it the decision for salvation or judgement.²

His assertion is such that repentance is made a pre-condition of all true Christian experience, but this underestimates the limitations of our human capacity to feel true repentance. Though it is true that John the Baptist came 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mk 1:4), the experience of conversion to a life in the Spirit can take a variety of forms and include a variety of different elements. The parable of the two sons in Matthew does not indicate any feeling of repentance, simply that the sons have changed their minds.

The parable is inserted in the scene in the temple when the Lord Jesus is confronting the leaders of the Jewish people with their failure to act according to their pretensions. They have asked him by whose authority he does what he does. After his succinct parable he contrasts his hearers with the 'tax collectors and prostitutes' who will 'enter the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of you'. He then says that, while the elders refused to believe John the Baptist, 'the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him' (Mt 21:32). The difference is again highlighted in the scene in Luke's Gospel when a Pharisee and a tax collector, in the temple, demonstrate contrasting attitudes: the former praises himself and his own virtues before God, the latter confesses his sinfulness and need of forgiveness (Lk 18:9-14).

In repentance, the fundamental need is for sincerity, which is difficult to assess. There is no guarantee that the tax collector in the temple is sincere in his confession. How are we to gauge sincerity when all we hear are the words and all we see are perhaps a depressed downward look and a beating

of the breast? But the context allows us to presume that the man is genuinely repentant. A return to the parable of the Lost Son and the Forgiving Father leaves me unconvinced of the complete sincerity of the prodigal's repentance when he 'came to his senses' and decided to return home. Henri Nouwen suggests that his repentance is 'a self-serving repentance that offers the possibility of survival'.³ The prodigal is recorded as saying:

How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son: make me like one of your hired men' (Lk 15:17-19).

The impression the hearer gets is that he is acutely aware of what he has lost and what he sees others enjoying. According to Nouwen, the prodigal maintains that 'he remained his father's child'.⁴ He compares his fate as the younger son deprived of his entitlements with the privileges enjoyed by his elder brother and even by his father's servants. And as Nouwen continues: 'he prepares a scenario'.⁵ He is framing his change of heart accordingly. But, knowing that all our repentance bears the marks of our flawed humanity, at least he does sink his pride and turn back, and the point of the parable of course lies in the response of his father.⁶

The biblical literature and the literature of fiction span the centuries in their penetration of the truth of human experience. While the Scriptures are limited in their composition to their time, their significance is eternal, and the writers to whom I will refer also span the ages in their understanding of the limitations of humanity grappling with a realisation of sin and its consequences. While fiction may traditionally have been seen as far from biblical truth, our Lord himself in his ministry taught through stories demonstrating the deep truths of human experience and God's love. And even writers sceptical of faith may be used in God's purposes to convey the truths of the Scriptures unconsciously. For Christian readers of fiction, and those of other faiths or none, truths are only in the texts when we find them. It has been said that 'the truth is never simply and objectively resident in a text; rather it is found in the interaction between text and reader'.⁷ The discovered truth has to be grasped and assimilated by each of us before it becomes our truth. Both types of literature may be considered in their context in tandem

as representing differing aspects of the relationship between repentance and grace.

2. Examples

2.1 Sophocles

It is indeed possible to convince oneself that one has made a full and complete act of repentance while withholding elements of the truth about one's experience. While the Greek tragedians constantly demonstrate the enormous guilt of their protagonists, true repentance or in some cases, any form of repentance is prevented by the fact that guilt is often ascribed to the force of an inscrutable fate guiding their hands. For instance, in Sophocles' *King Oedipus* Oedipus in his dialogue with Jocasta accepts his guilt for the murder of his father, Laius, in an outpouring of penitence for his crime:

Is there any more wretched mortal than I, more hated
By God and man?

And just two lines later he adds:

On me is the curse that none but I have laid.
But he immediately transfers the blame onto the gods:

Can it be any but some monstrous god
Of evil that has sent this doom upon me?⁸

His acceptance of guilt and his genuine sorrow at his actions are tempered in his mind by the possibility that he was predestined by some power greater than himself to kill his father. However, in the third part of the trilogy, *Antigone*, Creon, bringing in the corpse of his son, Haemon, in the final scene, admits his full responsibility for the death of both his son and Antigone:

Behold the slayer, the slain,
The father, the son,
O the curse of my stubborn will!⁹

Creon has no time in the remaining moments of the play to make amends, and has to live on in his despair and loneliness. Yet his admission of responsibility is a confession of his guilt without any attempt to excuse or exonerate himself.

2.2 The Old Testament

In the Old Testament we find that King David also freely confesses his guilt:

Wash away all my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions
And my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
And done evil in your sight. (Ps 51:2-4)

He makes no excuses, but it is guilt arising from a totally different source from Creon's. David is an obvious instance of a man who has yielded to his natural human impulses in his lust for Bathsheba, but he has sinned even further in contriving to have her husband, Uriah, sent out to die in the front line, so that he, David, can enjoy her. He has acted shamefully because of his initial lust. His abject repentance is expressed openly and primarily in this Psalm. And he goes on to confess that he was

... sinful at birth,
Sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
(v.5)

His prayer is for a complete cleansing and a restoration of joy, as a consequence of which he will act to serve God and praise his name:

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
And sinners will turn back to you. (v.13)

David is an obvious example of repentance issuing in a full transformation of his life, although in his confession in Psalm 51 he omits any reference to the harm he has done to his fellow human beings, in particular Uriah, and one could therefore suggest that his repentance falls short in that respect.

Cain, however, notorious as the slayer of his brother, is a different case. In Genesis 4, we learn that God has given preference to his brother Abel, apparently as Cain, a tiller of the soil, has produced less obvious fruits of his labours than his brother who, tending his flocks, has 'brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock'. We see that 'The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour' (Gen 4:4-5). Whatever the Lord's preference, Cain's murder of his brother is clearly inexcusable. Like Adam and Eve, who deny their responsibility, with Adam blaming Eve and Eve blaming the serpent for their lapse into disobedience, Cain also rejects any responsibility for his brother's fate saying: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Gen 4:9) When the Lord spells out the punishment for his crime, the curse of the unfruitful soil that Cain will be working from now on and that he will wander the earth, he is smitten with remorse and his reaction is in contrast to what has gone before:

Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.' (v.13-14)

His reaction is a mixture of self-pity for what he will have to endure as an outcast exposed to the possibility of being murdered himself and deep regret that he will no longer know the presence of God who will be hidden from him. Henri Blocher writes that Cain 'commiserates with himself and utters not a word of regret for the act he has committed'.¹⁰ The Lord's response is to place a mark of protection on him so that 'if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over' (Gen 4:15). While Cain is still subject to the curse and remains an outcast, arguably so that he is constantly reminded of the consequences of his acts, he at least has the Lord's protection, as Gerhard von Rad says:

Cain does not have the last word in this story, but rather God, who now places Cain's forfeited life under strict protection... Because of his murder he is cursed by separation from God and yet incomprehensibly guarded and supported by God's protection.¹¹

It is a measure of God's acceptance that ultimately he cannot abandon Cain even though Cain has only expressed a limited form of repentance for his crime.

Moses presents a totally different case. He had killed the Egyptian overseer and fled into the wilderness. When he is confronted by God's call from the burning bush, he is terrified and admits his total unsuitability for the Lord's work in the words:

Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? (Ex 3:11).

Moses queries the purpose and wisdom of the Lord's commands and asks to be spared the onerous duties now placed upon him. But there is no record that he actually repents of any past deed. He is simply told that God, who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, will equip him for the task that is required of him. On the other hand Isaiah, called to the service of God, is filled with an overwhelming sense of wonder at the vision he sees in the temple (Isa 6). Like Moses, he is full of the sense of his own unworthiness and unsuitability for the commission that the Lord has entrusted to him. The difference is that Isaiah experiences

the lifting of his guilt and the atonement of his sin, and his acceptance of the commission is swifter than Moses' who questions God more before accepting his new role.

2.3 The New Testament

This brings us to the moment of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. This event demonstrates that the transformation of life is not always immediately prefaced by a direct realisation of sin. We know relatively little of Paul before the event. At the end of Acts 7, we read that he is present at the death of Stephen, and the implication is that he is subconsciously impressed by the saintliness that Stephen shows in his death. Like Christ, Stephen forgives those who are stoning him to death (Acts 7:60). Chapter 8 contains the account of Saul's persecution of the Christians. Then his dramatic conversion takes place. Blinded by an overwhelmingly dazzling light, he hears the voice of God asking why he is persecuting him, the Lord. Saul is not directly constrained to repent, but is so dazzled by the transcendent glory of the divine presence and so totally dependent on the Lord restoring his sight to him that a realisation of his need and total dependence on God take place. Sometimes God convicts by the sheer dazzling brilliance and wonder of his glory and shakes us by the total contrast between that and our human limitations. Saul's dependence on God is demonstrated by his immediate response to Jesus as 'Lord', even though he must have been mystified by what had happened. But he knows that as the Lord Jesus challenges him to say why he is persecuting *him*, it is the Lord who is speaking. The conversion and repentance are total, and confirmed by three things: his baptism, his reconciliation with the other disciples and his immediate preaching of the Gospel which results in his missionary zeal and total commitment. When he later refers several times to his initial encounter with Christ in the words 'Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?' (1 Cor 9:1), it is not to dwell on the dramatic details of his conversion as an isolated event (1 Cor 15:8), but to say that the gospel came 'by revelation from Jesus Christ' (Gal 1:12), that 'God was pleased ... to reveal his Son in me' (Gal 1:16) and that he sees the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor 4:6). However, as his experience of the grace and love of God grows, Paul confesses his own constant need to repent of his inability to do what his good intentions direct him to and his constant failure to resist the evil that he knows he

should resist (Rom 7:15-19). He continues: 'What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!' (Rom 7:24-25). He who has received such life-changing grace is aware of the human nature from which he has been saved and of his constant tendency to fall into sin. This has become his concern, relegating references to his previous experience before conversion to two passages (Gal 1:13-15 and Phil 3:5-9) primarily as a matter of comparison.

What is clear from the words and experience of Paul is that an initial act of repentance and turning to God needs to be supplemented by a daily awareness of our inadequacy in living up to the call of the Spirit within us and our failure to follow the commands and standards that Christ Jesus has set us.

In the scene in the upper room in John 13, Simon Peter makes the mistake of assuming that if he has to be cleansed he has to have not only his feet, but his hands and his head washed by Jesus as well. The Lord says, however: 'A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean' (Jn 13:10). We have already experienced what we may call 'primary washing' as the result of an act of repentance, but we do need the 'secondary washing', forgiveness for our daily failings in worship, love and service, just as the early disciples had to wash the dust from their bare feet after a day on the road. A little later Jesus says to his disciples: 'You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you' (Jn 15:3), but as branches of himself, the Vine, they have to be pruned. Many Christians do themselves a spiritual disservice by their constant feeling that their life is a fundamental and everlasting state of penitence which can deprive them of joy in their salvation.

It has emerged therefore that the moment of turning to respond to God is not always accompanied by an act of repentance, but by some other reaction, either the sense of being overwhelmed by the glory of God or by a moment of realisation of our human limitations.

2.4 Thomas Hardy

As we have seen, realisation of our need does not automatically lead to confession and the acceptance of forgiveness. At this point we turn to consider the work of the English novelist Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), and in particular the experience of one of his characters, the Mayor of Casterbridge,

who knows his catastrophic failings and repents of them, but does not experience grace or peace.

The mayor, Michael Henchard, is fatally impulsive and bitterly regrets the acts in his past towards his family, which eclipse the goodness he has shown towards the community he has served: 'Why should I still be subject to these visitations of the devil, when I try so hard to keep him away?'¹² In true Hardy fashion, Henchard sees himself as the victim of powerful forces of fate embodied in his personal devil who dogs his steps throughout his life. When he dies, a piece of paper is found on his body stating his will. Among other things, he wants simply to be forgotten and for nobody to grieve over him.¹³ His words 'Who is such a reprobate as I! And yet it seems that even I be in Somebody's hand!'¹⁴ indicate his awareness of a guiding supernatural power in his life. Despite his feeling of total worthlessness, he has recently helped the mother of a local man, Abel Whittle, who in return has followed him to tend him in his final illness. He is so unaware of the extent of the goodness he has shown in his life that, as he is dying, he asks Whittle: '...can ye be really such a poor fond fool as to care for such a wretch as I?'¹⁵

Hardy's bleak sense that humanity is dogged by an inscrutable fate means that his character achieves a miserable self-awareness and regret, which still leaves him in a quagmire of futile self-reproach with no ability to forgive himself and to move on into a state of joy. Circumstances do not seem to allow Henchard the regeneration he desires and needs. Yet the Christian reader would glimpse possibilities that Henchard is only half aware of. He has an undeveloped, half understood sense of a divine presence in his life, if only when it is too late for him to enjoy it. His position is an extreme form of the everlasting penitence that some feel who are aware of their frailty and mentally repent of it constantly, but are incapable of finding freedom from its power. Like many others, Henchard would be unable to share the thoughts of John O'Donohue in his wonderful book *Eternal Echoes* who says:

When personal guilt in relation to a past event becomes a continuous cloud over your life, then you are locked in a mental prison... While you should not erase your responsibility for the past, when you make the past your jailer, you destroy your future. It is such a great moment of liberation when you learn to forgive yourself, let the burden go and walk out into a new path of promise and possibility.¹⁶

A realisation of personal sin without freedom from self-loathing leaves sensitive individuals in a worse emotional state than if they had no self-awareness at all. And Judas Iscariot, who has known the presence of Christ in his life, knows repentance and self-disgust without seeking the forgiveness of the one he has betrayed and without ever feeling that he would be justified in being forgiven.

Thus, both realisation of sin and repentance exist in differing forms and to a different extent. An awareness of personal guilt is often present without repentance, and there may be conversion and transformation without an obvious act of penitence, purely through the force of the dazzling light of God's glory that shines on the unreformed life and makes us aware of past errors and new possibilities. Self-knowledge is necessary in the total Christian experience, even if it first happens during the development of a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour. Paul certainly knows the things of which he has to repent once he has seen God's glory. There is surely no required sequence in the Christian's developing experience. But we now need to consider in greater detail the gift of forgiveness which eludes so many who experience incomplete self-knowledge and repentance.

3. Grace and forgiveness

During the ministry of Jesus, a woman who had been 'subject to bleeding for twelve years' but who was unable to attract Jesus' attention, tells herself: 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed' (Mt 9:20-21). This recurs later when, after Jesus has landed at Gennesaret, he is recognised by the people and they bring their sick to him, begging him 'to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed' (Mt 14:36). It is their last desperate act of faith that Jesus will be able to accomplish the virtually impossible, the conviction that in our powerlessness all we can do is throw ourselves on his healing grace and trust that he can do what we are incapable of achieving for ourselves. While these instances are not directly moments of repentance, it is also clear that Jesus sees physical disease as symptomatic of unforgiven sin. An example of this is the occasion when, after the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus sees him later and tells him: 'Stop sinning, or worse may happen to you' (Jn 5:14). And a classic instance of disease as symptom of sin is the paralytic man who is lowered down through the open roof into the presence of Jesus by friends who, like

the woman who touches the edge of his cloak, are unable to reach Jesus because of the crowds of people wanting to see him. The first words which Jesus speaks to him are: 'Son, your sins are forgiven' (Mt 2:5). Pannenberg writes:

Like the promise of forgiveness and the assurance of salvation, so too Jesus' healing ministry was closely bound up with his message of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The healing he performed demonstrated concretely that where the message of God's nearness is grasped completely and in full trust, salvation itself is already effective.¹⁷

It is highly unlikely that any of these three persons had any awareness of the need to repent or of unconfessed and unforgiven sin. The emphasis has shifted from the personal consciousness of inward and spiritual need to the actions of the one who acts to help us despite our limitations, our ignorance and our moral blindness. In the parable of the Lost Son, it is the spontaneous forgiveness of the Father that matters, rather than the reactions of the prodigal son. We are in the realm of grace.

When Jesus pronounces his forgiveness from the cross, who is he forgiving? While he says 'Forgive *them*' (Lk 23:34, my italics), is he only forgiving those who are his immediate executioners? He is surely including Judas among them, as well as the disciples who flee from him at the moment of his arrest. And surely he is looking at Simon Peter who had betrayed him, but who unlike Judas had the immense benefit of Jesus' forgiveness and re-commissioning. Simon Peter repents bitterly and weeps, but do the authorities, Pontius Pilate and the High Priest, also feel any repentance for their actions? From the cross Jesus allows for the fact that 'they do not know what they are doing' (Lk 23:34). This would mean that, while they know the immediate consequences of their acts, they are unaware of their deeper significance – that they have followed God's plan that Jesus should suffer and bring redemption to the world, past, present and future without any repentance or understanding of the consequences.

Even those who died in faith in God before Christ was born are justified by their belief. Paul sees this in his reference to Abraham when he reiterates the reference to God's covenant with him (Gen 15:6) and reaffirms in the original words from Genesis 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness' (Rom 4:3). The promise of grace is given to Abraham and his

descendants on the basis of their faith alone. This is also promised to David who certainly knows repentance and craves forgiveness when, in the same passage, Paul repeats the words of Psalm 32:1-2:

Blessed are they
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man
Whose sin the Lord will never count against
him. (Rom 4:7-8)

At this moment in his life, Abraham does not yet have the towering faith and obedience recorded in his readiness to sacrifice Isaac. Faith can be as 'small as a grain of mustard seed' (Mt 17:20 and Lk 17:6). Who is to assess the size and extent of the faith required? It can indeed be the faith of the woman who simply wants to touch 'the edge of his cloak' (Mt 9:20).

And just as in the mind of the immortal God, creator of time, who spans the ages and sees the lives of humanity as one moment, the faith of past generations is accepted, the promise is also to us, the present-day disciples who, like Peter and the others, have time and again fled from Jesus and denied him. When Pontius Pilate washes his hands and says: 'I am innocent of this man's blood' and the crowd responds with the words: 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' (Mt 27:24-25), it is not only the Jewish crowd who will bear responsibility, but all those present and future whose actions, neglect and failure have added or will add to the death of Jesus. 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God', writes Paul (Rom 3:23), and all still do fall short, as Paul has just written: 'This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference' (Rom 3:22). All stand under the same judgement and have access to the same promise of justification and acceptance in God's sight. And lest we place too much emphasis on our own virtue in the faith we have, Tom Wright reminds us where the true virtue lies:

When God's covenant faithfulness/justice is unveiled, this is done *on the basis of the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah*, on the one hand, and *for the benefit of those who believe* on the other.¹⁸

We are justified by God's grace for our faith. The grace of God covers the sins and failures of all humanity and all ages because God knows the frail humanity of those he has created. He knows that his grace and strength are made perfect even if our

realisation of our weakness and our repentance fall so far short.

It is emerging from our reflections that, while our concentration so far has been on individual cases and on the repentance of the individual, the offer of forgiveness on the basis of faith alone is a collective offer to all. It is important at this point to consider that, while the entire human race is included in the grace that is extended to us, the whole of humanity is called to repentance.

4. Collective repentance

When John the Baptist comes 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mk 1:4), he comes not only to challenge individuals, but the entire nation of Israel. In the parable of the wedding feast (Mt 22:1-13) Jesus pronounces judgement on the Pharisees and the religious authorities by telling of the privileged guests' rejection of the invitation to the banquet and the consequent invitation to the outsiders to take their place at the feast. This is a reference to the Lord's opening up his mission to peoples other than the nation of Israel. But the disease of rejection of Christ and the failure to repent spreads throughout the rest of humanity and history into our own day, such that history falls under the same judgement of having failed to follow and obey the commands of God or even to accept the moral precepts of the Ten Commandments. Surely, while many may reject the authority of God as Lord of the universe and see no relevance in the first of Jesus' two great commandments, there is no reason why human beings should reject the second commandment: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mk 12:30-31). Acceptance of the relevance of the second commandment is surely not conditional on acceptance of God's authority over our lives: it is the creed of all who seek to live in harmony with their fellow beings and to further the good of the human race. It is therefore important to accept that the entire human race is in need of repentance for its neglect of the interests of our fellow beings, our planet, our environment and the resources of the world that are being abused and wasted. It has often been the case that confessing Christians have been less aware of their failings than non-believers observing them. Many professing belief and goodwill suffer from a form of wilful blindness, by which it is easy to convince oneself that what is happening is not happening at all.¹⁹ When Jesus on the cross forgives the world, it is not only for our actions in

crucifying him, but also for our crucifying our disadvantaged fellow human beings who are crying out for our help and love. An important aspect of our imperfect repentance is that we as Christians, throughout history, have collectively failed to speak out and act firmly enough to reverse the harm that is happening, while at the same time we are perhaps acting as individuals within our human limits to alleviate suffering and need on a small scale. While we come regularly in worship to have our feet washed, do we also repent for the collective failure of our race to further a world that the Creator found to be 'very good'? (Gen 1:31). Are we even sufficiently aware of the failures in ourselves from which we need to repent?

5. Atonement

It has been clearly established that realisation of our failure and repentance only go some way in our journey of faith and that the grace of God's forgiveness is necessary for our salvation and peace. The forgiveness of Christ, contained in his prayer from the cross, is the entrée to an even greater grace, the grace of atonement, which must now be considered particularly.

On the road to Emmaus the two disciples who are returning home in their disillusionment following the crucifixion, refer to Jesus merely as a 'prophet powerful in word and deed before God' (Lk 24:19). Jesus himself suffers the flogging and the nails, the taunts of the crowd and the soldiers, the fear and the betrayal of his followers, yet he knows that, as Son of God, he is the very essence of God himself. In his reflections on the prodigal son, Henri Nouwen sees Jesus as the Father becoming, in the person of the younger son, the prodigal son for our sake. He writes:

Jesus left the house of his heavenly Father, came to a foreign country, gave away all that he had, and returned through his cross to his Father's home.²⁰

Though himself sinless, he is at one with his rebellious, half-penitent child. This is his atonement for the sins of the world, bearing the sufferings of the whole of humanity. Only God who sees the full extent of human sin can forgive sufficiently to cover our sin and failure. According to D.M. Baillie,

God in Christ's suffering and death is infinite Love confronted with human sin. And it is an *expiator*y sacrifice, because sin is a dreadfully real

thing which love cannot tolerate or lightly pass over, and it is only out of the suffering of such inexorable love that true forgiveness, as distinct from an indulgent amnesty, could ever come.²¹

While, contrary to Baillie's assertion, some individuals manage to achieve feats of apparently superhuman forgiveness that cannot justifiably be relegated to the description 'indulgent amnesty', the atonement wrought by God in Christ is unique and beyond human means and understanding, in bearing the sins of humanity of all time in one act of grace that encompasses and absorbs our sin and our imperfect penitence, provided it is grasped in faith, no matter how imperfectly.

But one further question is posed by Christ's unique act of expiation. Is this an act that demonstrates the supreme power of God, but has no ultimate effect on humanity because it is so supreme and renders humanity incapable of response? Jürgen Moltmann, in his stark portrayal of the significance of the sacrifice of Christ, demonstrates the way open for our response when he describes the challenge to us. Christ's sacrifice is

... the unconditioned and therefore boundless love which proceeds from the grief of the Father and the dying of the Son and reaches forsaken men in order to create in them the possibility and the force of new life.²²

Christ's death is not an isolated event in a wilderness of human failure and sin, but it is a transforming act that infuses the human spirit with the power to forgive, even when our repentance is limited by our humanity. Those who are 'forsaken' because of their denial of Christ and their failure in love and service, are enabled to respond to the love of Christ, to be received again and to live renewed lives in the power of the resurrection. While repentance may be subject to our human limitations, his grace meets our imperfect response and creates new life, issuing in responses that may well be beyond what we believed to be our capability.

6. Repentance and fruit

Both Matthew and Luke record that John the Baptist addressed the Jewish leaders, warning them of judgement to come with the words: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance' (Mt 3:7-8, Lk 3:7-8). Our repentance, to be genuine, has to be matched with a response

to the inward call to bear fruit. We see this clearly in the case of Jonah who when he hears the voice within him telling him to go to Nineveh, at first runs away to Tarshish, but then when called once again, obeys and indeed goes to Nineveh.

We are driven back to the two brothers in the parable, in their differing responses to their father's request mentioned at the beginning of the article. Then there is Simon Peter whose threefold denial of Christ is cancelled out by the threefold command of the Saviour to love and serve, sealed by his further injunction to Peter: 'Follow me' (Jn 21:15-19), which marks the renewal of his discipleship. Peter of course matches his repentance with his actions in his new, dedicated life. And Luke quotes Paul's confession to Agrippa in the words: 'So, then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven... I preached that they should return to God and prove their repentance by their deeds' (Acts 26:19).

One parable illustrates that fruit and good actions do not necessarily occur at once. In the parable of the fig-tree that a man plants in his vineyard, no fruit is visible. When the owner wants to cut it down after three years of fruitless waiting, the steward pleads for the tree to be given another chance, after which it would be cut down (Lk 13:6-9). What strikes us in this story is the second chance offered to the unfruitful fig-tree, perhaps an antidote of grace in contrast to the severe judgement meted out to it in Matthew's and Mark's accounts of the cursing of the fig-tree. I am sure that Luke's fig-tree would have been given even a further chance to prove itself.

The final note, in fact, is one of forgiveness and grace. One is left with the awareness that God loves everything he has made and it is in his nature to offer redemptive grace to his creation. The experience of regeneration is a total experience of self-knowledge, repentance, forgiveness and call to action. G.W.H. Lampe writes about Zacchaeus that he was 'not called upon to make restitution before Christ entered his home; he repented and made amends because Christ had already accepted him as a sinner' (Lk 19:5-6).²³ Self-knowledge and repentance are manifest in varying ways, not always directly visible, sometimes subsumed in one of the other elements, and also, as Lampe suggests, subsumed in forgiveness and acceptance. All individuals coming to God have their own experience of transformation, which is often incomprehensible to themselves.

From the dramatic, transforming revelation

on the Damascus Road, Paul moves on to a new mission which is characterised by constant repentance in the light of his self-knowledge and of God's endless grace. Unless the grace and forgiveness issue in response, even simply the response of 'touching the edge of his cloak', the forgiveness has been only half grasped and we remain in a limbo of semi-commitment. However, from the scene of transformation, they and we constantly return to the foot of the Cross where salvation is wrought and where our resurrection to new life begins. Even Michael Henchard, aware that he is in 'Somebody's hand', is surely received into the grace and the loving hands of God whom he has sensed as a presence in his life.²⁴

In the final analysis, the parable of the Lost Son and the Forgiving Father is perhaps the greatest of all parables for what it says about our flawed humanity and God's loving grace. After all, on his return to the Father the Prodigal Son has nothing to offer. His only response and action is to return to the Father who is the one who lavishes forgiveness and grace on him. God is a God of grace and new life and we live not by certainty, but by faith that, however weak our experience and our commitment may be, we are accepted and empowered by the one whose power surpasses our own.

Dr Gordon Leah publishes on matters of Christian belief reflected in literature. He is a retired language teacher (German and French) and lives in Worcester, UK.

Endnotes

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ISBN: 9781842278161 (e.9781842278628) / 250pp / 216x140mm / £11.99



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