

Year B 3rd Sun Easter (2021)

... and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins,
would be preached in his name
to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Gospel)

Biblical Metanoia

"Repent and believe in the good news!" These are the first words out of Jesus' mouth in Mark's gospel and they are meant as a summary of the entire gospel. But what do these words mean?

In English, the word "repent" is often misunderstood. It seems to imply that we have already done something wrong, regret it, and now commit ourselves to live in a new way. Repentance, understood in this way, means to live beyond a sinful past. Biblically, this is not quite what is meant. In the gospels, the particular word used for repentance is *metanoia*. Literally this means to do an about face, to turn around, to face in an entirely new direction. But what direction?

Bishop Robert Barron, when he was a young a young theologian out of Chicago, offered a simple, yet profound, understanding of this. In his view, within each of us there are two souls, a little soul (a *pusilla anima*) and a great soul (a *magna anima*). On any given day we tend to identify more with one or the other of these and we are a very different person depending upon which soul is reigning within us.

Thus, if I take my identity from my little soul I will inevitably feel bitter and angry. It is here, in the *pusilla anima*, where I am petty, afraid, aware of my hurts, and constantly nursing the sense of having been cheated and short-changed. In my little soul, I am paranoid and defensive. When I relate to life through it, I am short-sighted, impatient, despairing, and constantly looking for compensation.

But I also have within me a great soul. When I let it reign, I become a different person altogether. I am relating out of my great soul at those moments when I am

overwhelmed by compassion, when everyone is brother or sister to me, when I want to give of myself without concern of cost, when I am able to carry the tensions of life without a breakdown in my chastity, when I would willingly die for others, and when my arms and my heart would want nothing other than to embrace the whole world and everyone in it.

All of us, I am sure, have had ample experience of both, identifying with the great soul and with the petty soul within us. Sometimes we operate out of one, sometimes out of the other.

When Jesus asks us to “repent,” to do metanoia, what he is asking is that we cease identifying ourselves with the little soul and instead begin to live out of our other soul, the magna anima. The very etymology of the word metanoia implies this. It takes its root in two Greek words: meta—beyond; and nous—mind. Literally, metanoia means to move beyond our present mindset, beyond our present way of seeing things.

When one looks at the miracles of Jesus, it is interesting to see that so many of them are connected to opening up or otherwise healing someone’s eyes, ears, or tongue. These miracles, of course, always have more than a physical significance. Eyes are opened in order to see more deeply and spiritually; ears are opened in order to hear things more compassionately; and tongues are loosened in order to praise God more freely and to speak words of reconciliation and love to each other. To put it metaphorically, what Jesus is doing in these miracles is attaching the eyes, ears, and tongue to the great soul so that what a person is now seeing, hearing, and speaking is not bitterness, hurt, and pettiness but rather compassion, gratitude, and praise.

Many of us are familiar with a famous passage in Thomas Merton within which he describes a revelation he had one day while standing on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville. Among complete strangers in the middle of a shopping district

on a very ordinary day, Merton had the sense that his eyes, ears, and tongue were suddenly attached to a bigger soul:

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all of those people, that they were mine, and I, theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness ... Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin, nor desire, nor self-knowledge, can reach the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only we could all see each other that way all the time! There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. I suppose that the big problem would be that we would all fall down and worship each other.

To repent is let the great soul, the image and likeness of God, reign within us so that, like Merton on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, we are so overwhelmed with compassion that indeed we do turn and face in a completely new direction.

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