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### **Metanoia** (Mark 1. 9-15)

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‘Repent, and believe the good news’. So begins another Lent – with the traditional exhortation to turn back again to God and refocus on our true centre. Our reading takes us to the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. We see him profoundly obedient through temptation and trial. We hear the invitation to join in his radical self-abandonment to God. And we are challenged once again to ‘believe the good news’, that is, to entrust ourselves to this reality. It’s a great gift for us – this season, this exhortation to renewed discipleship. It’s a life-transforming opportunity, especially if we take seriously the full implications of what it means to ‘repent’.

I used to think repenting was mainly about ‘being sorry’ for things. Which, if I didn’t feel I had anything very major to be sorry about, made Lent itself a vaguely guilty time. Surely I should be more sorry than I am? I suffered at times from excessive scrupulosity (searching my conscience for things to repent of) and/or excessive Lenten discipline (giving up as many enjoyable things as I could). This led (inevitably) to a backlash on my part where I found it difficult to do anything particular about Lent at all.

I’d missed the point, of course. Repentance *can* involve feeling sorry for things we’ve done or said; it might involve apology, forgiveness or the desire to change our ways. But if we simply ‘moralise’ repentance, then we miss its deepest dynamics. In Greek, as many of you will know, the word translated ‘repent’ is ‘*metanoiete*’, and ‘repentance’ is ‘*metanoia*’. ‘*Meta*’ means ‘changed’ or ‘beyond’ and ‘*nous*’ means ‘mind’, ‘intellect’, ‘intelligence’. Jesus is preaching a ‘change of mind’ – which is something far deeper and more radical than a guilty conscience. It’s an invitation, in

the light of the kingdom of God come near, to see or understand things differently, to go beyond old certainties, maybe even to let go habitual, unconscious ways of responding and being. In fact, sometimes it is *those* things – the things we don't even know are issues – that we truly need to repent of! Only as we get to the source of some of our patterns of thought and identity, only as their power over us is loosened, are we truly able to change or become capable of radical obedience (listening) to God. Jesus did not come through the temptations in the desert just by will-power and moral effort, but because his life was utterly energised by, transparent to, the life of God. Repentance is about uncovering what gets in the way of God in us; repentance and transformation are kin.

So how do we repent in this way? How do we go beyond itemising our transgressions to begin engaging with the roots of our refusal of God? This was a major pre-occupation of the 4<sup>th</sup> century desert monks, who taught that at the heart of the unredeemed '*nous*' were some characteristic patterns of thought and response to our human need, desire and fear. Evagrius Ponticus, the theologian of desert monasticism, identified 'eight kinds of powerful '*logismoi*' – thoughts, picturings, considerings'.<sup>1</sup> He emphasised that it is not 'in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions'.<sup>2</sup> The real issue, in other words, isn't the thoughts in themselves – which come unbidden – but the way we entertain them, elaborate on them and fantasise about them, and so allow illusion to take root in us, to distort our perception of and response to reality.

What are the eight thoughts? In Evagrius' analysis they are categorised under the headings of gluttony, greed, sloth, sorrow, lust, anger, vainglory and pride. They became of course (with minor variations) the Seven Deadly Sins – but again, we misunderstand Evagrius' point if we turn them into a list of moral transgressions. The

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<sup>1</sup> Mark McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 134.

<sup>2</sup> McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth*, 134.

concern is not in the first instance with overeating or sex, sadness or listlessness, but with how thoughts about these things, indulged in certain ways, lead the monk to obsess about what he does not have enough of, or to brood on his wrongs or his sorrows, or to seek after praise, or whatever. These thoughts, imaginings, and considerings pertain to every aspect of our bodily, social and spiritual life. Allowed to have their way, to dominate, they become the basis for action and perception but ultimately, they are illusory. They lock us in a mentality of deprivation and scarcity. They get in the way of reality, of God.

Evagrius writes, for example, of how the *logismos*, the obsessive mental itch of sadness, drives the monk to a terrible homesickness or tantalises with memories of lost joys: 'Now when these thoughts find that the soul offers no resistance but rather follows after them and pours itself out in pleasures that are still only mental in nature, then they seize her and drench her in sadness'. The 'miserable soul' is 'poured ... out upon these thoughts of hers'. Mark McIntosh writes of 'the subtle power of these obsessive thoughts, whether gratifying or catastrophic, to disable and stunt the mind'.<sup>3</sup> I remember when I first realised that there was a distinction between my sadness about an aspect of my life (which was real) and my allowing that thought to 'seize' me, to 'possess' me, to become the only measure of my life. I remember the liberation of realising I could have this thought, this experience – without it having me – and of how it seemed to open in me a whole different availability to reality, to God.

Well, this Lent, I would like us to explore what repentance in this sense, *metanoia*, might mean for us, and I want to take a lead from Evagrius' focus on '*logismoi*', thoughts. We won't be focusing, week by week, on his eight thoughts although we might notice overlaps at times. But I want to explore his insight that it's in our characteristic patterns of thought, our habits of mind, that we may be stuck in illusions of various kinds or watering the seeds of destructive 'passions' or cutting

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<sup>3</sup> McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth*, 134.

ourselves off from the abundance and mercy of God, and to wonder about what healing might involve. We each have our personal package of such *logismoi* – Laurence Freeman says that most of us have about six habitual worries, which we return to in our thoughts time and time again. And there are mental twitches that we share – as human beings and as persons formed in our culture and age – some that fuel our experience of scarcity, overconsumption and overwork; some that inflame passions of blaming, resentment and victimhood; and some that perpetrate the most basic and perennial illusion of all – that we are the centre of our own lives.

Unlike the desert mothers and fathers, we will not be spending this Lent in our cells; and unlike Jesus, we will not be confronting the tempter in the desert. But just like them, we are seeking to become more aware of what is unreal in our thoughts, where illusion has seized our attention and energy. And so, this week, I invite you begin to wonder about your *logismoi* – your characteristic patterns of thought – not resolving to fix or stamp them out, not beating yourself up, but just noticing. Where does your mind dwell in idle moments? What complaints keep recurring in your conversation – with yourselves or with others? What does it feel like when you choose not to indulge them? What freedom and abundance might we be missing because of them?

Let this Lent be a season where gently, with self-compassion, we offer ourselves in repentance, genuine *metanoia*, inviting the grace of God to transform us by the renewing of our minds.