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St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

YEAR C, LENT 3, SUNDAY SOLEMN MASS  
EXODUS 3:1–15; PSALM 103:1–11; 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1–13; LUKE 13:1–9

Do you think that the Ukrainians, who are suffering and dying, are worse sinners than all of us here in New York? “I tell you, No; but unless [we] repent, [we] will all likewise perish.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s essentially Jesus’ message in first part of today’s Gospel passage. It’s startling. And, it is meant to be.

He talks about some Galileans who suffered at the hands of Pilate and those in Siloam that were killed when a tower fell on them. Of course, none of that happened because they were worse sinners than anyone else.

The opposite is also true about sin. We aren’t sitting pretty over here, far away from Eastern Europe, because of any lack of it.

Jesus is also making the point that death is never too far away. There are many now in Ukraine that have died or are on the front lines who, a month ago, were living normal lives and working normal jobs. And, now, well.

Jesus is using this imagery to wake us up. It gives a sense of urgency to his message that calls for us to repent.

Given the challenge of articulating well the concept of repentance, I went back a bit to the 17<sup>th</sup> century this week and spent a little time rereading some of the writings of Jeremy Taylor. He’s sometimes known as the “Shakespeare” of the Anglican Divines, so he seems a reasonable place for us to turn to begin to put it all into words.

Taylor essentially summarizes Christianity, all of the religion, as comprised of faith and repentance. He sees faith as seeking a better understanding of God. Repentance, he describes, as being a continued transformation of ourselves towards the image of God that we were created to be.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 13:3

<sup>2</sup> Thomas K. Carroll, ed., *Jeremy Taylor Selected Works: The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 304.

He also says that there are two types of repentance: "a repentance to be repented of and 'a repentance never to be repented of.'"<sup>3</sup>

For the repentance to repent of, he cites the example of Judas. Taylor describes this as a "mere sorry for what is past" and nothing more. Judas repented for what he did and then hanged himself.

On the other hand, a repentance that can lead to transformation, conversion, and an amendment of life, Taylor says, is that which is "productive of holy fruits" and never to be repented of. He points to the example of those in Nineveh who repented following Jonah's preaching. They put on sackcloth, fasted, and turned from their evil ways.<sup>4</sup>

But, then he makes a key point. He talks about fasting and sackcloth, and other outward acts and signs of repentance, as only "the forerunners" of repentance. They are somewhere within the repentance family, he says, but they are no more repentance than the fingers are the whole body.<sup>5</sup>

Maybe we could say that they represent only the small part of the iceberg that's visible above the water. Much of it is below the surface. And, that's where it matters. Those in Nineveh did a lot of outward signs, but on the inside they changed.

They turned from their evil ways. They turned back to God.

He then cites Paul's letter to the Romans and argues that repentance ought to be a renewal of the mind.<sup>6</sup> And, looking at Paul's Greek, a renewal of the mind would be a renewal of the νοῦς. The Greek word νοῦς is often translated as "mind".<sup>7</sup>

But, the Greek Church often talks about the νοῦς in a way that goes well beyond how we understand English words such as "mind" or "intellect."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Carroll, *Jeremy Taylor Selected Works*, 329; 2 Corinthians 7:10.

<sup>4</sup> Jonah 3.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll, *Jeremy Taylor Selected Works*, 331.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid; Romans 12:2.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 680.

<sup>8</sup> Paul likely wasn't working with as developed a concept of νοῦς as would come later in the writings of the Greek Fathers.

They sometimes speak of it as the spiritual intellect or the upper part of the soul or the eye of the soul. This is the eye of the soul that can give us the ability to look towards God. And, some of the Greek Fathers refer to the νοῦς as that within us which is created in the image of God.<sup>9</sup> If we use this understanding of the νοῦς, as what we are looking to change through repentance, then repentance can be seen as getting ourselves back in line with the image of God we were meant to be.

In fact, the Greek word in the Bible that we translate as repentance is μετάνοια, where the -νοια part of the word relates to the νοῦς.<sup>10</sup> As a result, μετάνοια is often talked about as changing of one's mind.<sup>11</sup> But, as we're seeing, we're aiming for something much deeper for repentance than "oh, I changed my mind."

It can also take on a much different tone than the English word "repentance." The first thing that comes to my mind when I think about "repentance" is sorrow, but sorrow is a concept largely foreign to μετάνοια. I suppose, the repentance to be repented of, that Jeremy Taylor spoke about, could be repenting from our translation and use of the word "repentance" in the first place.

Sorrow can be a tool, like fasting or sackcloth, but it isn't repentance itself, even if it can help us get there.<sup>12</sup> If changing our mind, changing our νοῦς, is focused on an internal transformation, restoring within us that which is the image of God, and then reflects God to others, what is sorrowful about that? We're training the eye of our soul to look up towards God and not down and away.<sup>13</sup>

In our Gospel lesson, after Jesus calls for us to change our νοῦς, he then offers a parable about a fig tree. On the one hand, Jesus' message has a sense of urgency. He's on his way to Jerusalem. And, mentioning Pilate in the beginning of this passage helps bring the context of the Cross into our focus.

That's where we're headed.

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<sup>9</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 48-51; [orthodoxwiki.org/nous](http://orthodoxwiki.org/nous).

<sup>10</sup> In Luke 13, it is the related verb form μετανοέω.

<sup>11</sup> Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 640-641.

<sup>12</sup> "Tears purify our nature" according to Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 205.

<sup>13</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 113-114.

But, in the parable, the vinedresser says to leave the fig tree alone for just one more year. Give it a chance to bear fruit. Don't cut it down. Not yet. Despite the sense of urgency, as the man who owns the tree is ready to cut it down, the vinedresser buys the tree some more time. The tree is given an opportunity.

There's still an opportunity to bear fruit.

And, it's only the Third Sunday in Lent. There's still an opportunity for us to bear fruit this Lent as we travel towards the Cross.

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.