

Ash Wednesday 2007

Both Aaron Copland and Sydney Carter did much to popularise the old Shaker song, Simple Gifts – ‘tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free, ‘tis the gift to come down where we ought to be. One verse of the song runs thus: When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed, to turn, turn shall be our delight, till by turning, turning we come around right.

The New Testament word for repentance – metanoia – is sometimes said to mean a turning around. It doesn’t mean that, actually, it means a change of mind. Literally, it means an afterthought, the notion that having held one view or opinion I decide to switch to thinking something else. It is clear, however, that metanoia, and conversion – which does mean turning – are closely connected. One of the first things that students of New Testament Greek learn concerns the first reported words of Jesus in the earliest gospel, that of Mark: the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel. Students learn that when Jesus says “repent”, he does so in a way which shows to the reader that he means “repent and go on repenting”: he does not mean, perform a

single act of turning, and everything will be OK. He means change your mind, and continue to change your mind.

“To turn, turn shall be our delight, till by turning, turning we come around right.” The turning of which the song speaks is metaphorical, of course, but we can think of that metaphor as describing two quite different processes. One we might call a volte-face, a term which in English means a sudden about face, rather as if we were obeying the command of a drill sergeant. The other notion of turning is one which is rather more slow. Our image for that might be a large vehicle or ship which takes an extremely long time to go from facing one way round to facing the other.

This slow turning, though slow, is nevertheless a complete realignment. It is a gradual process, which requires continued momentum. If one stops pushing the object round, the object will cease to turn. One of the hardest things about Lent is to make each day of this season, each action of our penitence and preparation, into a smaller type of the whole, to practise continual self-examination, actually to work out in detail the practicalities of that gradual process, that bit by bit exercise of learning which we call discipleship.

Lent exists precisely because we all need help in turning ourselves to God. If it were easy, the process wouldn't need institutionalisation, tradition, corporate observance. The church helps us live as Christians, precisely because we can't do it alone. The disciples learn who Jesus really is – their crucified and risen messiah – by following him where he leads. Lent for us should also be about being led, about walking with other disciples through our own wilderness and following Christ to the climax of his call – death and resurrection, suffering and glory. The season of Lent takes us step by step and day by day closer to the truths of Golgotha and the Easter garden, and it does so by bringing the cross closer to us, by placing it in our line of vision and pulling it gradually ever closer, as we follow Christ to the frightening and liberating truth of his mission.

The daily realities of Lent, therefore, are not an inconvenience on the way to Easter. They are the way itself, and they are the only way. There is no route to that empty tomb which bypasses the cross of Christ. Every day of Lenten discipline is the Christian life in miniature, because only by doing, by following, by listening, can we actually be disciples, can we actually claim to be those who learn. After all it is when we learn, that we change our minds.