

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Bruton Parish Church
The Rev'd John Maxwell Kerr
Sunday, January 22, 2012

The French have an interesting name for God. In their Bibles, instead of the word "Lord", they often say *L'Eternel*; the *Eternal*, or the *Eternal One*.

So, Psalm 106: 48 reads,

Blessed be the Eternal One, the God of Israel,
From eternity to eternity!
Let all the people say, "Amen!"
Praise the Eternal One!

French-speaking Christians are constantly reminded that God is eternal: for them, it has become the very name of God. If we think about it all, 'eternal' is one of those mystifying words that crop up in Scripture. We think it means *everlasting*, but it doesn't.

All three lessons today (Jonah 3:1 -5, 10; I Corinthians 7:29 – 31; Mark 1:14 – 20) are about time, the time of our lives. They are about time, which is the fire in which we burn, and about repentance, which is the constant theme of God's word to the ungodly, (that's us). And as always, hovering over the speaker of God's eternal word (Jonah, Paul or Jesus), and over those who half-heartedly listen to it, (that's us again), is *L'Eternel*, the Eternal One, to whom all time is forever simultaneously present. Because that's what Eternal means.

Meanwhile back in Nineveh, that great city so big that it would take three days just to cross it, using the I-64 and avoiding rush-hours, God, the Eternal One changes God's eternal mind. That's good news: our fate is not sealed: we can still repent of our sin and folly and God will respond if we do, because that's what the Eternal One is. Eternally present, eternally loving. Eternally forgiving. *C'est son métier*, as the French wisely say.

We understand that time was invented to stop everything from happening at once.

Jonah is prompted by God, the Eternal One, for a second time, given a second chance, a fresh start, and finally sets off on the Mission to which God has called him. He goes a day's walk into Nineveh, that great city, crying out, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." It's not much of a popular election slogan, "You have no future!" but it is what God had told him to say. How different things were then. 'The past is another country, they do things differently there' (L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*.) In Nineveh, they actually repented and, it may be supposed, lived happily ever after, much to Jonah's *chagrin*.

Amazing, isn't it? – in those days people could both hear the word of the Eternal One, and act on it. How times have changed.

By the time Paul was writing for the first time to the Corinthian Christians, their response to the Word of the Lord was different: "the appointed time is running short.... For the present form of the world is passing away." That was the Word of the Lord. There is no evidence that the congregation of the Church in Corinth paid much attention. Or indeed, any attention at all. The reason I think that is because Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth doesn't begin, "Now that you've repented...."

And in our Gospel reading, Jesus says to the Galileans: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news." Some did, most didn't. Jesus spoke the Word of the Lord, the Eternal One, and was the Word of God, and still they didn't listen.

Which brings us neatly to us, does it not? We have just heard the Word of the Lord, the Eternal One, the excitement to repent, three times in three different lessons, in case we missed it the first time. And if by any chance one missed the Word of the Lord in Holy Scripture today, I am happy to tell you that we in the Church are only too likely to hear that Word calling us to repent again, perhaps eternally, certainly on any other Sunday.

Today, we heard it spoken by the prophet Jonah to the people of Nineveh, pagans all: they actually repented. The lesson in that story is that the consequence of repenting is not a bad thing: it is a wonderful thing. It is God's forgiveness and a fresh start.

Then St Paul pronounced the Word of the Lord, the Eternal One, to the Corinthian Christians. They replied that their 'schedules (or perhaps skedules) were too full to fit in much of your actual repenting today. Nice exhortation, though.'

Then the Lord Jesus Christ, *standing right in front of the Galileans*, called on them to repent. And there is not much evidence of a response.

Then there's us. Three times not enough? Perhaps we're a trifle uncertain about what 'repent' means? Part of the problem is that repentance requires one to have moral courage and take responsibility for one's actions: role models for this are extremely rare in Church and State as we see on TV.

Repent means, Turn again; change your ways and thoughts; stop sinning. The actual process of repentance is not necessarily comfortable but God already knows what we have been busy hiding or denying. So, turn to God. If none of this helps, the Christian Church teaches that God our Father, the Eternal One, is waiting eternally on a direct line to receive your call (that would be 'prayer'). Just ask God for help. Or if anyone is out of practice in praying, you could always ask one of us, the clergy, about what 'repent' means. Cc'est notre metier.

Practically, and right now, we can at least do this. Repentance begins by taking a deep breath and opening one's heart and mind and hands from the grip of self-deception. It is false pride that lets any Christian think that, unlike the people of Nineveh, the Corinthians, or the Galileans, we have no need to repent, nothing to repent of. Close attention to the Confession should dispel that if introspection is unknown to you.

And next we can do this: it's what Christians have always done. We can hold out our empty hands as we kneel or stand at the altar rail. We can receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the bread and wine. That is the means of grace and of forgiveness: it is a response of love and forgiveness made before we even began to repent. It is the moment when God, L'Eternel, the Holy and Eternal One, reaches down and heals our time-bound emptiness and gives us eternal life and a second chance, a clean slate, as clean as it was at our baptism.

And as we stagger back to our seats, as stagger we should if we had even the slightest grasp of what God has just done for us, we can then raise up our grateful, thankful, repentant hearts.

Three times in three lessons, we heard the Word of the Eternal and Holy One. Our time is running out at one second per second: nothing we can do can change that. The Word of the Lord is, and was, and always will be, "The Eternal Now is the moment to repent and believe the Gospel. Now, before the time is fulfilled, as the Kingdom of God draws near."