

Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God may grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth. 2 Timothy 2.25.

You may be wondering why we are back in 2 *Tim*. Though we got to the end, there was a bit of unfinished business. There was one verse - I don't know whether you noticed it as we passed through - which bothered me, and it's this verse, 2.25... It's not the beautiful advice St Paul gives here for dealing with opponents of Christ's truth and false teachers. If only the church over the centuries had heeded these words, there would have been no Inquisition, no burning of heretics, vv23-25a... (You know, St Paul isn't the ogre he is painted, is he?)

No. The verse which startled and challenged was the second half of v25, 'in the hope that God may grant them repentance'. In other words, you don't need to bash people up to get them to know the truth. Leave it to God. Perhaps he might give them repentance, leading them to see the truth.

Do you not think that's an odd thought? Repentance is a gift from God! He might give it; he might not. The NIV here is a bit weak, v25... The Gk says, 'God may perhaps grant them repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth'. Once you get into the Bible, the thought-forms are not what you would expect, because God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

Repentance, of course, is more than just being sorry. You've heard children say SO-RREEE! Toad in *Wind in the Willows* used to come over all regretful, but it wouldn't be long before he was at his old, boastful self. Can I take you to the opening of Mark's gospel, p1002? Notice there's nothing about Jesus' birth or childhood. It starts with Jesus' temptations, and at

1.15 we hear his first words, 'The kingdom of God is near; *repent* and believe the gospel'. Christ's call to all of us is to *repent*. It's not just being sorry, but *repointing* your whole life. It's a complete change in your life direction, in your values and priorities. It's a making room in your life for Jesus so that he can be your *Lord*. *Is* Christ at the centre of your life, or is he just a little add-on?

*That's* repentance - a complete turn-about in your life. Christ himself *calls* us to repent, and yet we read here in 2 *Tim* 2.25 that *God* gives us repentance. It's odd, isn't it? (And the same thought comes elsewhere in *Acts* 5.31 and 11.18).

The Bible leads us away from the way *humans* think to the way *God* thinks. For instance, we tend to think of prayer as something we do. We tell God what we want, and he may or may not do it. Wrong! Prayer is something that *God* does in us. Turn to p1135, *Rom* 8.26... The other day I was talking to a man going through a particularly hard time in his personal life. He's not a believer but he said to me, 'You know, Brian, I found myself *praying*, and I mean really praying. I can't understand it'. Well, in the light of *Rom* 8.26 *I* understood!

And repentance is the same. It's not something we do, but something *God* does in us. Repentance is *God's gift*. After all, wasn't it *God* who hardened Pharaoh's heart? *He's* the Lord who's in charge, even of the way we think and pray. We are not in charge of our acts and thoughts as we like to think.

So what about this strange notion that it is *God* who gives us the urge to repent? There are some people who are so brutish and ignorant that they don't know how ignorant they

are. And they'll *never* realise, even in a million years. Only something from *outside* of them could help them to see.

Jesus' famous parable of the Prodigal Son tells of a lad who thought he knew everything, and had nothing whatever to learn. He demanded his inheritance, dismissing his father as an old codger who just didn't understand. Of course, he wasted it all. He became so hungry and desperate that he, a Jew, was now reduced to longing for the food thrown to *pigs*. But *Lk15.17* has that wonderful verse, 'And when he came to himself'. Now *that* is repentance, and it was *not* natural to him. It was God's gift to him to lead him to the truth; to the truth about what a prat he had been, and to the truth about how he had hurt his father so much. That moment of repentance, 'when he came to himself', was the beginning of getting into the truth and the beginning of healing.

I have here a signed copy of Joan Wilson's bereavement anthology, *All shall be well*. You may remember Joan whose husband, Gordon Wilson held on to the hand of his daughter, Marie, as she lay dying underneath the rubble of the Enniskillen bomb. Though the IRA murdered her daughter, there is not a hint of bitterness in that woman. If ever God's love was powerfully at work in someone, it is surely at work in her. It is pretty certain that it was Martin McGuinness who planned all that. He is now riding high as 2<sup>nd</sup> Minister in the NI devolved parliament. I have no doubt that he sleeps well at night. And he and all the other 'freedom fighters' have a thousand reasons why what they did was right.

My point is that our natural state is to think we are right. When things go wrong, we usually blame others. If we are caught out, we weep the tears of self-pity. Repentance is not natural. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Martin McGuinness were to 'come to himself' and realise truly what he had done to poor Joan Wilson? Wouldn't it be wonderful if that alcoholic husband who smacks his wife around and shouts at the kids could wake up and see what he is doing, rather than blaming everyone but himself? Wouldn't it be wonderful if that man could see how the children he once sexually abused are now screwed-up adults? Why can't Robert Mugabe see what he is doing to his own people? Why can't growing-up teenagers see what torment they're putting their parents through? Why can't they see? We don't see, because we don't *want* to see. That is our natural, selfish, sinful state. Let us pray that God in his great mercy might give them the gift of repentance.

I sometimes think our whole society has come under this mad delusion. We've collectively in Britain turned our back on God and closed our hearts to Jesus. We can see that society is unravelling before our very eyes, but we won't see that we are just reaping what we have sowed. May God give us repentance.

I said earlier, from *Rom 8* that we only pray because the Holy Spirit is first in us, praying in us. We only know the truth, not just intellectual truth, but the *moral* truth about ourselves, because the Spirit is given to us. St John says that the Spirit of truth leads us into all truth, and the truth will make us free. We really need the Holy Spirit. We believers need to pray *earnestly* for repentance in our nation.