

## Communion Service Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> December – led by Martyn Macphee

*It's good to have a worship leader who can take all the disruption of his Service we can offer, yet sail serenely through it, offering calm and thoughtful prayers, a guiding hand when needed - and flashes of dry humour to spice a thought-provoking reflection.*

*And keep watch that the advent candle doesn't burn the communion tablecloth!*



*We lit a candle for Olga Hopkins, listened to our mini-choir sing an anthem, lit the second advent Candle for the Prophets (Isaiah in our case) and listened to*

*the words of both Isaiah and John the Baptist (for the third candle – as yet unlit)*

### **Repaint and sin no more – God can, even when I can't.**

A story about the members of a Cumbrian church, scammed by an unscrupulous painter whose efforts did not survive the first rainfall, who had then responded by writing on the washed-out church wall "Repaint and sin no more", took us into the day's theme from the Gospel reading – repentance.

John the Baptist had proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and "bring forth fruit worthy of repentance." The question was: what was repentance? Martyn wanted us to think about the meaning of repentance.

The Biblical scholar Brian Stoffkin had explained that the Greek word for repentance meant "to change one's mind." However, in Matthew's Gospel, the emphasis was on bearing fruit, suggesting a deeper meaning rooted in the Hebrew word "shuv" which meant "to change one's ways." Repentance involved not just a shift in thinking but also a transformation in behaviour—a genuine change in how one lived.

Richard Jensen had described repentance as often being understood as an "I can" experience - feeling sorry for one's sins and resolving to do better and please God. Repentance was often seen as our way of turning to God. In fact, Christianity was not about individuals striving to reach God; rather about God reaching out to us.

Martyn suggested that repentance could better be understood as an "I can't" experience. We could not achieve God's expectations on our own; it was only through God's redeeming power that change was possible - provided we were willing to let go and allow God to shape our lives. This required humility and surrender, especially in the midst of life's busyness. Repentance was not just doing better, but an invitation to turn from futile striving and rest in God's embrace. And he used the story of Adam and Eve to illustrate this concept. God had provided all they needed for a full and abundant life, yet they sought independence, wanting to decide right and wrong for themselves. This had led to separation from God, and their attempts to secure for themselves hadn't worked out. Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees, who believed that rigorous adherence to the law would make them righteous, echoed this theme. In fact, their efforts had only distanced them further from their goal. Perfection seemed to become more elusive the harder one tried to attain it.



There could come a point in life when we had reached the limits of our own strength and ability, with nowhere else to turn. In such moments—whether through personal loss, hardship, or despair - we could come to actually understand God, understand the strength that belief could give us - and rest on God's grace. The essence of repentance was not about striving harder to please God but about relinquishing our independence and trusting God to do what we could not do ourselves.

Paul had expressed this in his second letter to the Corinthians: "Therefore I take pleasure in weakness, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distress, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Martyn noted that this was reflected in the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous, where help was sought when individuals reached the bottom. Yet, AA emphasised that one need not wait until reaching the lowest point to seek assistance. The good news was that, whether we were seeking help for the first time or as a last resort, God was always present and ready to offer support to those in need. All that was required was to ask.