

292 Repentance and Forgiveness

Last week we viewed the referendum result for Britain to leave the European Union as a combination of mercy, opportunity and warning to this country from the Lord, who for centuries has indeed been “the God of our fathers” (eg., I Chronicles 5.25 / 29.20), until the liberal tide of recent decades has swept the country in a very different direction.

The warning involves our need, be it as individuals or as a people and nation, to return to Almighty God with deep repentance wherever such repentance is necessary. This repentance is about confessing and asking for forgiveness, based on sorrow for the past and resolve for a change of mind and direction for the future.

We know from many examples in God’s Word that the first step is to recognise the need for repentance, for without that recognition, repentance will be a “non-starter”. The Old Testament prophets were frequently sent by the Lord to Israel and Judah with this simple if unwelcome message: your need for repentance is great; recognise that need, and turn to the Lord God in repentance (eg., Ezekiel 18.30). Occasionally the people paid heed, but usually they ignored these divinely-given warnings because they believed that all was well between them and the Lord. Unfortunately that seems to be the current attitude among the opinion-setters in Britain – “We are a liberal, secular democracy and have no need to repent”.

Jesus contrasted the self-pleased, I-have-no-need Pharisee with “the publican standing afar off”, his eyes to the ground, smiting his breast and humbly asking for God’s mercy as he acknowledged his true sinful state (Luke 18.9-14). Here we see how the repentance journey began with a stark sense of need and was followed by heartfelt confession and the asking for forgiveness,

It is timely to note here that God in His mercy in Christ has achieved all that is necessary for Him to grant us the forgiveness of our sins: “It is finished!”, it is done, all is in place, and His forgiveness is ready to flow (egs., Romans 3.21-26 / Hebrews 4.14-16 and 7.24-28). But crucially, it does not flow until it is sought, by repentance and confession. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable remained unforgiven because he thought he was fine as far as God was concerned, but he wasn’t. What a contrast with the repentant publican, “who went down to his house justified rather than the other” (Luke 18.14a).

So whenever necessary, we acknowledge our need to repent, confess our wrongdoings and ask for forgiveness. It is at that stage that we receive forgiveness from God through Christ (I John 1.5-2.2), or from one another.

This highlights the vital distinction, much misunderstood these days, between God’s, and our, readiness to forgive on the one hand, and the actual flowing of that forgiveness, when it is sought with repentance, on the other. Does God just blandly forgive all the awful wickedness He sees going on? Of course He doesn’t, and He doesn’t expect us to do so either when we have been wronged. But in His mercy and at such dreadful cost God has put His forgiveness in place, ready and waiting to be granted when it is humbly sought in repentance. That is how His forgiveness flows, and ours is to do so too.

When we are wronged we too are willingly to “put our forgiveness in place”, ready to flow, and when it is sought we grant that forgiveness without hesitation under the Lord. In this way truly we can pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”: we see from this how our own forgiveness from the Lord is held back if we are wrongly holding back from forgiving another who has repented and asked for that forgiveness. In Matthew 18.23-35 for example, we see that in each case mercy was begged for, but the fellow-servant had other ideas.

The final steps on the repentance journey involve “repairs and reconciliation” – the demonstrating in practice that our repentance has been genuine by our honestly trying to repair any damage we may have done. Then in time reconciliation can occur.

What we have covered in this Reflection concerning our repentance and forgiveness applies equally to our nation in this Brexit era of mercy, opportunity and warning. A call for national repentance before Almighty God, made by the Queen and supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Prime Minister, while no doubt attracting howls of derision, would set the tone for a profound change of national direction. The “repairs stage” of such a repentance journey would require the repealing of much liberal legislation – a “big-ask” humanly speaking, but “with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19.26), and in His mercy He does pay heed to our prayers.

Psalm 34.15-18. Great spiritual issues are at stake. Let us continue to pray.

© 2018 Faithful Sheep Ministries - www.fsmins.org