

“Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). Repentance is a conversion of our hearts away from sin and towards God. It starts when we recognize we have offended God. We are sorry and remorseful for the harm we have caused.¹ With a firm purpose of amendment, we are determined to change our lives for the better and to avoid the near occasion of sin. When Jesus called people to repent, his Jewish listeners heard the echo of the prophets who repeatedly called Israel to turn back to the Lord with all of their hearts, minds, and souls. The message bears repeating in every generation.

Lent is a season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We practice these disciplines to help us listen more closely for the voice of Jesus. He calls us to see our actions in the light of truth. He calls us to name our failures. He does not leave us in the depths of despair. He lifts us from darkness and helps us to chart a new course forward. The quiet voice of the Holy Spirit prompts our conscience to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. Confessing our sins is only one part of the healing. Through penance, we are called to make amends and work with God to heal any damage that has been done.

Jesus also asks us to believe in the Gospel. Believe and embrace him as the promised Messiah that has come to set people free ... free from captivity to sin ... free to rise from the dead and cross the great abyss to the Promised Land of Eternity. Believing in Jesus also calls for a rising to new life in our limited time here on earth. We are called to imitate his generosity of life by loving God and loving our neighbor, not simply the kind neighbor next door, but also the man who has been beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. Jesus set us free. We are called to build up the Kingdom of God here on earth so that other captives are set free and the oppressed are liberated.

“Repent, and believe in the gospel.” On Ash Wednesday, we received ashes reminding us that we are dust and to dust we will return. Confronting our own mortality, helps us to put life and eternal life in perspective. We look back at the sins of our youth. We look forward to what is possible with a fresh start. A person who has neglected their health for years can be a real convert when they suffer a serious heart attack. The stroke of a loved one can reorient us to be a caregiver and respond with a love we did not know we possessed. A near death experience has a way of sobering us and convincing us to change our ways immediately. Suddenly, we may be able to forgive past hurts, to overcome obstacles that we thought insurmountable, and to reestablish ties that may have slipped away over time.

“Repent, and believe in the gospel.” True repentance calls for a conversion in our lives. Conversion is never a onetime event. It is an entirely new way of being. Saul went from being a persecutor of Christians to becoming Paul, Christianity’s greatest apostle. He who punished Christians becomes the great liberator ... “releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed” (Ps 86:6). Jesus radically transformed him for far more than a moment in time. Paul was reborn for a lifetime of service to our Lord.

A modern-day example comes from the life of Bernard Nathanson. Trained as a doctor, he abandoned the Hippocratic oath to be a champion for abortion. He helped to legalize abortion around the country in state after state following the tragic Supreme Court decision of 1973. After 10’s of thousands of abortions performed in his New York Clinic, he burnt out. An ultrasound showing life within the womb caused him to question all he believed in. He tried to numb the pain with drugs and alcohol. He only spiraled further down a dark hole. Struck by the love of those who opposed abortion and truly reached out to help woman caught in the most difficult of circumstances, he had a profound conversion of heart. God healed him body and soul and he went on to be a champion for life.

“Repent, and believe in the gospel.” Jesus came out of the desert after a 40-day experience of prayer and fasting. The devil tried to tempt him, but he was strengthened by the Spirit. The forty days afforded him the opportunity to focus on what was really important. We are just a few days into our own 40-day desert experience. The devil will tempt us as well. When temptations arise, turn to Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Pick up the Bible and read. Believe in the power of light over darkness, believe in the power of Christ to transform your life. **“Repent, and believe in the gospel.”**

¹ Hahn, Scott. Catholic Bible Dictionary. Repentance.