

An interesting short item on Radio 3 this week reminded me of the existence and the chilling effect of the combination of notes known as the Devil's Chord, the Devil's Tritone, or *diabolus in musica* – the Devil in Music. It consists of three adjacent full tones played together, and Dr Nash is going to play it for us now – first on the eerie strings of the organ; and again on the spine-chilling solo reeds.

This chord has an unique way of grabbing the attention: it's used at the start of some very familiar theme tunes

[play: Pink Panther]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcDkUf6rz60>

it's used to accompany the dance of death

[play: Danse Macabre]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCMaIMgNon4>

it's used to portray the evil of war

[play: Mars – the Planets]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXOanvv4plU>.

It's also very widely used in Heavy Metal music to underline the aspects of protest and the turning away from the conventions of sickly-sweet love songs which tend to dominate popular music. [but I'm not going to inflict any Heavy Metal on you this evening, sorry...]

It grabs the attention because the human ear and those parts of the brain which decipher sound suggest that it shouldn't be there – and I've chosen it as the Leitmotif – the theme – to start an address on repentance because repentance itself starts with the recognition of something in life which should not be there, something that clashes with reality as it is meant to be. When we recognise sin, we recognise it to be a matter that is discordant with the right ordering of things, and, as I

suggested last week, as a breakdown in the proper relationships of humankind, within creation, and before God.

The sense of hearing serves to alert us to the presence of discordant sounds; the sense that alerts us to the presence of the discord that is sin, is known as the conscience. It is a moral sense, which with appropriate guidance tells us what is right and wrong – and where things are wrong, it gives us the kick up the backside that starts us off on the process of putting them right.

Conscience is part of that element which human beings consider to set them apart from other creatures: the ability to reflect on oneself; the thing we call consciousness. It's the part of Freud's rough sketch of the makeup of the individual which he calls the *Superego* – the part of us which is capable of looking over what we do and who we are, and making

judgements on what we *should* do and who we *should* be. It is this moral sense which is governed by conscience, and it is this sense that can bring us to repentance.

It is hard to over-state the central role repentance plays in the teaching of Jesus as it is presented in the gospels. In Mark's gospel it sets the scene as he begins his preaching activity: *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'* (Mk 1.14-15) Constantly we find ourselves confronted with the need to repent in order to be able to hear and believe the Good News. To perceive the good things of God, it is necessary first to turn away from sin, to start putting our lives in order. This is the core of repentance: to go beyond feeling bad about things we

know are wrong; to make ourselves open to putting things right.

Much of the prophetic literature in the Hebrew scriptures backs up this demand from God. Time and again the people of Israel are told not to rely on their acts of piety and the keeping of the law, but to start off with a contrite heart. This is classically expressed in the Lenten Psalm 51 (verses 16-17): *For thou desirest no sacrifice, else would I give it thee * but thou delightest not in burnt-offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit * a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise.*

Through and through the scriptures invite us to repentance which starts with contrition, with the breaking up of that very human resistance to admitting there might be something wrong with us, and then the breaking open to God's life and influence.

For all that this is a hard ask, it is still all too possible to go into it with rose-tinted glasses. Medieval theologians were nothing if not realistic, and they pointed out the human tendency to pass off self-interested behaviour as something altogether more praiseworthy. Thomas Aquinas made the distinction between two types of fear that motivate repentance and moral behaviour. The first he calls *servile fear*: a fear that arises from the consequences foreseen from doing something wrong; servile like a slave fearing punishment. The second he calls *filial fear*: a fear of causing hurt and offence to a person loved and respected; filial like a child not wishing to hurt a parent. It's the difference between being upset because you've messed up and being upset because you've been caught and are awaiting punishment. I recall weeping in the head's study when I

was in junior school waiting to be caned and being told by him that it was nothing but ‘crocodile tears’.

This difference is reflected in the late medieval approach to repentance. Saying sorry to God was a matter either of *attrition* or of *contrition*. Attrition is the imperfect repentance when fear of hell or some other sort of fear leads you to confess your sins; this sort of repentance needed help from the sacraments of the church and the prayers of others, or even additional spiritual works such as a pilgrimage so that it would be effectively open to the forgiveness of God. Contrition is when you have fully got hold of the fact that what you have done is simply wrong, and a simple act of contrition opens you up fully to God’s forgiving grace. This throws light on the fact that repentance can be made a very complicated business because all manner of human motivations and behaviours get in the way.

Perfect repentance (which probably never exists in our messy reality) is where the properly informed conscience simply leads people to turn away from an attitude or a course of action because they know it is wrong – and when they say sorry to God, this perfect act of contrition is the work of a person fully open to God’s forgiveness and to changing for the better.

But this perfect repentance is seldom seen or experienced, and then the best we can do is just to say sorry, do our best to change, and leave the rest to God. The example Jesus gives is very revealing (Lk 18.9-14): *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people:*

thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

A small piece of homework to do each day this week: instead of feeling bad about your sinfulness, or making long acts of contrition, just repeat the Jesus Prayer – the traditional simple prayer drawn from the words of the tax-collector: **Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner.**

Let us pray.

*Almighty and everlasting God,
who art always more ready to hear than we to pray,
and art wont to give more
than either we desire or deserve:
pour down upon us the abundance of thy mercy,
forgiving us those things
whereof our conscience is afraid
and giving us those good things
which we are not worthy to ask,
but through the merits and mediation
of Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord. Amen.*

PC, 17th March 2019