

**“NEAR HAS COME THE *BASILEIA* OF GOD. REPENT
AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS” (MK 1, 15) –
METANOIA AS A BIBLICAL MOTIF AND PASTORAL
IMPERATIVE¹**

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ABSTRACT

Μετανοία – “repentance”, “conversion”, “turning back” – is a recurrent theme in the Bible. In the Old Testament, with the relationship between Israel and YHWH marked by YHWH’s continued faithfulness in spite of Israel’s repeated unfaithfulness and apostasy, the Deuteronomistic history as well as the prophetic tradition constantly remind Israel of the need “to return”(שׁוּבוּ) to YHWH. The experience of series of disasters of different kinds, intensities and durations (for instance, the Babylonian Exile, domination by foreign powers) is considered to be the result of YHWH’s just judgment of wrath against his people. Israel’s repeated appeal to God’s covenant with the ancestors always had the effect that God relented and averted his rage, and thus offered his people a new beginning – only for the people to begin afresh to drift away from him, and the circle repeats itself.

In the New Testament, *μετανοία* is a theme not only of Jesus but also mainly of John the Baptist before him. However, while for John repentance is the only possible escape from the impending and ineluctable judgment of wrath of God, Jesus preaches the acceptance of repentance as the appropriate human response in the face of the in-breaking βασιλεία of God which in his life and ministry has begun to become reality in the world. There is a shift of emphasis

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from threat in John to warning, and the motivation for repentance is no longer to escape judgment, but to gain salvation. For Jesus repentance issues in faith (πίστις) in the Gospel of God which he embodies and proclaims. But because faith is not something we can possess once and for all, but something that is under constant contestation, threat and jeopardy, repentance as a response of faith is also something that is constantly required of Jesus' disciples – then and now.

For us Christians in Nigeria (and perhaps in other African nations and beyond) as for the first hearers of Jesus, the μετανοία-summons is not only urgent, but also imperative. It is a call to rethink our prevalent conceptions of God, of Jesus Christ and of the Church, and consequently to constantly renew and strengthen our relationship to God through the practice of daily μετανοία.

Introduction

A driver came to a dead end. He had missed or rather disregarded some decisive road signs. He had an urgent message to deliver, a target time and destination. He could continue, hoping somehow to find his way or abandon his mission by aborting his journey or go back and begin again. Weighing the options, he decided to turn back, look out for and follow the road signs. Two friends who separated under bitter circumstances met after several years at a shopping mall. They exchanged fierce looks as if their misunderstanding just happened moments ago. One sighed mockingly and began to move away; the other called him back, “Hey, Chike, I am sorry about what happened, about everything. I regret my part. We should never have separated!” A family father who had become all too friendly with alcohol and drugs, resulting in abusive relationship with his wife and children, came home one day, with head down in shame. “Everything went wrong in my life – my career, marriage, my family – and I sought to escape. The result is the untold hardship I have caused everyone I hold dear. I have come to realize there is no way to overcoming a problem than by facing it. I have decided to change my life. I need help”. Coming back from seven years of exile as a result of murder, Obiekwe told the gathered villagers: “I have come back to do reparation for my

misdeed. Whatever it takes, whatever it costs me to begin life anew, I am ready and willing to do”.

In the Gospel of Mark (1, 15), Jesus begins his public ministry with the programmatic declaration: “Fulfilled is the time, near has come the βασιλεία of God” (πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ), and the invitation or summons: “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ). The evangelist Mark sets this beginning of Jesus’ public ministry historically on the heels of John the Baptist (after his incarceration) whose ministry he describes as “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, Mk 1,4). In doing this, he creates a narrative, historical and theological link between the ministry of Jesus and that of John before him. Thematically and linguistically, the link has to do with the word μετανοία. While John preaches “a baptism of repentance” (i.e. a baptism that issues from repentance or that results in repentance or a repentance whose fruit is baptism), Jesus invites or rather summons his first audience to “repentance” and “faith” as a response to the καιρὸς of the in-breaking βασιλεία of God. We shall attempt in this paper to explore the meaning and usage of the term μετανοία in the ministry both of Jesus and of John. The aim is not just to engage in a historical-critical and semantic discussion of the concept of μετανοία, but more especially to discover and posit the spiritual and pastoral-theological relevance of the theme of μετανοία within the context of a local Church³. Our goal is to build a hermeneutical bridge between the biblical concept of μετανοία and the concrete life situation of people today. That means that although we build on sound exegetical study and analysis, our goal is not merely academic-intellectual, but eminently hermeneutical and pastoral in orientation.

The Word μετανοία in Secular Greek and Biblical Language

What do the words μετανοία and μετανοέω (noun and verb respectively) mean? Where do they come from? What are the conceptual and theological background and framework from which they could be understood and then translated into our situation as a local Church with a rural or even urban setting and colouration? A

³ The local Church in view at the time of writing was the Catholic Diocese of Awgu.

look at different English versions of the Bible shows a variety of words and expressions used in translating the Greek words μετάνοια/μετανοέω: remorse, repentance, conversion, turning about, change. Μετάνοια/μετανοέω is a compound word, being a combination of the preposition μετα, meaning “after”, “later”, “with”, “around”, and the noun νοῦς, meaning “mind”, “thought”, “opinion”, “judgment”, “disposition”, “insight”, “understanding”. Both noun and verb are “comparatively rare in both class[ical] and Hell[enistic] G[reek]”⁴. The verb μετανοέω can have a variety of meanings: “to note after, later”; “to change one’s mind”, “to regret” or “be remorseful”⁵. Such a change of mind could lead to the adoption of a different point of view and a shift in position and attitude. Literally and etymologically, it means “change of mind” or “change of one’s resolve or purpose”, resulting from a subsequent knowledge, reflection on or a better understanding, insight and appreciation of the situation at hand. A sense of regret or feeling of remorse may follow if the insight gained shows that the former position or view was wrong, improper or even evil. It presupposes that if one had known better, one would have acted differently. The noun μετάνοια has the sense of “later knowledge”, “subsequent emendation”, a “change of mind” that might pertain to the feelings, the will or thought. It also refers to “regret” and “remorse” and “expresses dissatisfaction with thoughts cherished, plans followed, acts performed”⁶. Underlying the feeling of regret and remorse is the realization that something had gone wrong or was wrong which needed to be redressed and corrected. Although originally no ethical sense was attached – change of opinion, thoughts, alteration of moods and feelings could be for good or for bad – in the course of time, μετάνοια came to denote “a change in moral judgment, regret for wrongs etc. which have been committed, the reference is always to an individual instance of change of judgment or remorse in respect of a specific act which is now no longer approved”⁷. However, “for the Greeks μετανοία never suggests an alteration in

⁴ J. Behm, μετάνοια, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament IV*, TDNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan 1967), 978 (translated from the original German: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ThWNT [Stuttgart 1942], edited by Gerhard Kittel).

⁵ Cf. J. Behm, μετάνοια, in: TDNT IV, 976.

⁶ J. Behm, μετάνοια, 978.

⁷ J. Behm, μετάνοια, 979.

the total moral attitude, a profound change in life’s direction, a conversion which affects the whole of conduct”⁸.

Μετάνοια in the Old Testament

The understanding of μετάνοια as a radical transformation of the whole person – including his intellectual, moral and spiritual orientation – is found in the Old Testament. This is particularly so in the Deuteronomistic history and preaching of judgment as well as in the prophetic summons to repentance and return to YHWH, the one and only God of Israel. The prophets Amos, Hosea and Isaiah as well as Jeremiah and Ezekiel serve as examples. The decisive Hebrew word is the verb שׁוּב (“to return”), which denotes (both literally and figuratively) a “‘turning around’ in the sense of turning away from present things and returning to the point of departure”⁹. In its OT usage, it “gained a specifically religious significance” and “points to the ‘return to the original relationship with Yahweh’”, and therefore “includes the idea of ‘a totally new beginning’”¹⁰.

The return to the original and exclusive relationship with YHWH finds expression in the OT in mainly two forms: cultic and ritual practices on the one hand, and prophetic pronouncements and summons on the other. Occasioned by emergency crises such as defeat, drought, famine, pestilence, fire, mildew, locusts, enemy attacks – all of which are traced back to God’s wrath as a result of the transgression of his will by his people Israel – certain penitential observances are performed as public acts and events (including days mapped out for penitence) to placate the divine wrath. Such practices include fasting and wearing of sackcloth and ashes, wild lamentation, prayer, confession of sin, special liturgical ceremonies)¹¹. The aim is to call upon the mercy of God on his

⁸ J. Behm, μετάνοια, 979.

⁹ H. Merklein, μετάνοια, in: *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament II*, EDNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan 1991) 416 (translated from the original German: *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, EWNT, edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider [1981]; J.A. Soggin, שׁוּב, in: *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament III* (Original: *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*), Ed., Ernst Jenni/Claus Westermann; transl. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, Massachusetts 1997), 1314.

¹⁰ H. Merklein, μετάνοια, 416.

¹¹ Cf. E. Würthwein, μετανοέω/μετάνοια, TDNT IV, 980.

people in order that God might relent, avert his anger and not punish his people as they deserved on account of their unfaithfulness and transgressions. On the whole, the prophetic tradition is very critical of this “externalization” of cultic and ritual penitence, and instead calls for “inner turning rather than outward gestures”¹², i.e. a change of heart that leads to an inner renewal of the individual and the community in their relation with God.

Thus, at various times and in various situations these prophets keep reminding Israel of its obligation and responsibility to return to YHWH. This is predicated on the covenant that God had made with the people of Israel – that he would be their God and Israel would be his people. The historical background is the repeated drifting away of Israel from God, the introduction and worship of foreign gods, and the imbibing, adopting and adapting of ways of life that are contrary to the exclusive relationship that should exist between Israel and God. The Deuteronomistic tradition blames the various calamities that befell Israel as a people (especially the Exile) on Israel’s failure to abide by the covenant with YHWH, i.e. on Israel’s unfaithfulness and apostasy. This tradition includes not only the threat of YHWH’s wrath on account of Israel’s apostasy and persistence in apostate life, but also the promise of YHWH’s forgiveness and continued care if only Israel would return to him. Worried that “the peoples’ penitence is not firmly anchored at the depth where it becomes a genuine encounter with God”¹³, the prophet Amos (4,6-11), enumerating to the people of Israel a number of negative signs worked by God to move Israel to repentance, in a refrain concludes: “Yet, you did not return to me”. Although the tone of Amos is generally pessimistic¹⁴, yet his appeal is urgent: “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5,14-15). On his own part, using the image of an unfaithful wife, the prophet Hosea (Hos 11,1-11; also 5,4) remonstrates Israel’s recalcitrance in refusing to return to YHWH,

¹²Würthwein, 983.

¹³Würthwein, 982.

¹⁴ J. P. Healey, “Repentance”, in: *Anchor Bible Dictionary V*, ABD, Ed. David Noel Freedman (New York 1992), 671.

and proclaims God’s threat as punishment to return them to Egypt, the place of slavery and servitude. But Hosea also makes earnest plea for repentance: “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity”; and he gives assurance of forgiveness: “I will heal their disloyalty: I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily, he shall strike root like the forests in Lebanon” (Hos 14,1ff). Qualities exemplifying repentance in Hosea include: humility and knowledge of the Lord (Hos 6,3-4), “loyalty and justice” (Hos 12,6) as well as “care of the poor, the quality of justice, and the dedication to the Torah”¹⁵. The destruction of Judah and Jerusalem and the subsequent exile to Babylon, understood as YHWH’s punishment for Israel’s unfaithfulness, offered Jeremiah the platform and background for his teaching on repentance and conversion. The image of marriage also plays a role in Jeremiah’s description of Israel’s estranged relationship with YHWH. He speaks of their “whoring and wickedness” (Jer 3,1ff) and of their turning away from YHWH “in perpetual backsliding” (8,4ff) and rebellion (cf. 3,13); but he also speaks of YHWH’s mercifulness and readiness to receive them (i.e. “faithless Israel”) back (Jer 3,12; 15,19) and to heal their “faithlessness” (Jer 3,22). Jeremiah envisages the reestablishment of the covenant: “I will bring them back to this land ... I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I shall be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart” (cf. Jer 24,6.7). By the prophet Isaiah, in spite of the assurance of salvation and hope given by YHWH: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength”, Israel prefers not to return, but rather to flee from YHWH with the consequence that Israel becomes desolate “like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill” (Isa 30,15ff).

These summons to repentance by the prophets underscore the necessity and possibility of repentance, but also point at the dire consequence of non-repentance, namely, disaster that would have been avoided or averted by repentance. Here, reward and the threat of certain punishment play a significant role. They represent a “call for a recognition of sin and a return to the original covenant with

¹⁵ J. P. Healey, 672.

God”¹⁶. Thus, in spite of its social undertone, “prophetic criticism did not ask for a repudiation of all external forms of favour of the inner attitude. All prophetic criticism is agreed that the penitence of the people lacks the one thing that matters, namely, that in penitence one is before the God of unconditional requirement, that one has to take Him with full seriousness, that it is not enough to be sorry for past sins and to pray for their remission or for the aversion of calamity, that what counts is a turning from the sinful nature as such”¹⁷. There is the desire in the prophetic tradition (both pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic) that Israel turns back to YHWH, that a new beginning be inaugurated, and that Israel seriously counts on and reckons with him always, in all situations and in all things. On the whole, “Israel’s ‘history’ shows that God has dealt with Israel according to its performance: an original blessing and a call to covenant, the increasing sinfulness of the nation, punishment, followed by suffering and a cry for mercy. This leads to gradual conversion, until the cycle starts again with a further blessing and the restoration of the covenant”¹⁸.

The Occurrence and Use of μετανοία in the New Testament

In the NT, the noun μετανοία occurs 24 times, its verbal form μετανοέω 34 times, in addition to μεταμέλομαι which occurs 6 times. All three concepts retain here the basic meaning of “change of mind” (with μεταμέλομαι including the nuance of “regret” and “remorse”). All three concepts are used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew נָחַם (53 times) in contrast to שָׁבַח which LXX translates 1500 times as ἐπιστρέφω (“to turn, be converted” “turn around”, “go back”)¹⁹. The use of μετανοία/μετανοέω is most pronounced in the Synoptic Gospels (26 times; but not at all in John), in the Acts of the Apostles (11 times) and the Book of Revelation (12 times), and only infrequently in the epistolary literature (5 times in the Pauline epistles, 3 times in the Letter to the Hebrews, 1 time only in 2 Peter)²⁰, although the theme of the renewal and restoration of the relationship of human beings to God is a recurrent theme across the

¹⁶F.J. Moloney, “Conversion”, in: *New Catholic Encyclopedia IV* (Detroit/New York 2003), 232-3.

¹⁷Würthwein, 983.

¹⁸Moloney, 233.

¹⁹ A. Boyd Luter, Jr. “Repentance”, in; ABD V, 673.

²⁰ Cf. A. Boyd Luter, “Repentance”, 673; H. Merklein, μετανοία, 416.

whole of the NT literature. In the Synoptic Gospels, they are used especially in connection with the preaching and message of John the Baptist and of Jesus of Nazareth.

The semantic background of the use of these concepts in the NT is to be found not in ancient Greek (where they refer primarily to “change of mind” in both good and bad senses), but in the Old Testament Jewish tradition in which the Hebrew word שׁוּב – meaning a turning away from what has been (the present things) and a returning to the original point of departure (German: *Umkehr/Umkehren* – “turning back”) – plays a significant role, especially on account of its ethical and religious undertone. The basic idea is that of turning around and away from what is, namely, the situation of sinfulness, unfaithfulness and alienation from God, and of returning to the starting point of the relationship to YHWH – the God of Israel. It is a change that is at one and the same time *radical*, because it touches on and involves one’s entire existence, and *transformational*, because it initiates a completely new beginning, new existence, new viewpoint, orientation, focus and direction for one’s life.

Μετανοία in the Teaching of John the Baptist

The Evangelist Mark begins his Jesus story (cf. Mk 1,4ff) by introducing the figure of John the Baptist as the precursor/forerunner of the mightier One who is to come (ὁ ἰσχυρότερός ὁ ἐρχόμενος). All the Synoptic Gospels present his life to be austere just like his message is critical and urgent. While Mark and Luke present John in the wilderness as “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1,4 par Lk 3,3: βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν), Matthew associates John’s preaching of repentance directly with the in-breaking of the βασιλεία of heaven: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (μετανοεῖτε· ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, Mt 3,2). For Matthew, the proximity of the βασιλεία is the real reason (γὰρ) for the call to repentance. Thus, in all Synoptic Gospels, μετανοία is central and essential to his preaching and message. The direct addressee of John the Baptist’s preaching is the whole of Israel, not individuals or any specific group of individuals. It is to Israel as a whole and as a people that the content of his message is directed.

What John preaches to them is contained in the *Quelle* 3,7-9.16b-17 (cf. Lk 3,7-9.16/17 par Mt 3,7-10.11f)²¹:

Mt 3,7b/Lk 3,7b: Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Mt 3,8/Lk 3,8a: Bear fruits that befit your repentance!

Mt 3,9/Lk 3,8b: And do not presume to say to yourselves: ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Mt 3,10/Lk 3,9: Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Mt 3,11/Lk 3,16: I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming; whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with fire.

Mt 3,12/Lk 3,17: His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

From the above Q-text, it becomes clear that John the Baptist does not share the differentiation in Early Judaism between pious people and sinners or the Rabbinic understanding that the pious are more highly esteemed as the penitents. Following Q, John radicalizes the demand for repentance not only with reference to time, but also to the circle of those involved²². His words are scathing, frightening and threatening at the same time. Considering that the relationship to YHWH involves the totality of human existence, John describes his audience without exception, i.e. Israel as a whole, as a “brute of vipers” (Mt/Lk 3,7b: γεννήματα ἔχιδνῶν). This description is more than just a rhetorical or symbolic expression, for it describes factually and existentially Israel’s state in relation to God. What is this state like? According to John, Israel as a whole has reneged on

²¹Cf. Paul Hoffmann/Christoph Heil, *Die Spruchquelle Q – Studienausgabe Griechisch und Deutsch* (Darmstadt 2002), 32-33; H. Merkley, *Jesu Botschaft von der Gottesherrschaft – Eine Skizze* (Stuttgart ³1989), 28.

²²Cf. H. Merkley, “Die Umkehrpredigt bei Johannes dem Täufer und Jesus von Nazaret”, in: H. Merkley, *Studien zu Jesus und Paulus*, WUNT 43 (Tübingen 1987), 114.

its covenantal relationship with God and is therefore under the wrath of God with the consequence of a judgment that is imminent, ineluctable and inescapable. That is John’s anthropological premise.

How serious the situation of apostasy and alienation from God is, is illustrated by John along the line of Deuteronomistic preaching, according to which the disasters experienced by Israel are considered to be the direct consequence of and punishment for Israel’s failure and infidelity in relation to God, i.e. as God’s punishment of Israel for abandoning the way of YHWH. However, while the Deuteronomistic literature saw in the covenant of God with the ancestors (particularly Abraham) a sure sign of hope for a future redemptive intervention and action of God in favour of Israel, John dismisses the recourse to Abraham entirely as forthwith irrelevant. For him, Israel’s situation is so disastrous and hopeless that even the appeal to being the children of Abraham does no longer hold any sign of hope of salvation. The urgency of the situation is underscored by the imminence of judgment, and with it there is an elimination of the time factor. For the One who is coming, who is mightier than John, a judgment-figure, already has “his winnowing fork in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Q: Mt 3,12; Lk 3,17). In other words, what was announced in the prophetic tradition as a future event – the eschatological judgment – has already started taking place here and now with the presence of the Mightier One; it is already a present reality! This judgment nullifies “every attempt by Israel to rely upon the former promises of salvation”²³. What counts now is alone *μετανοία* – a turning around, a turning away from sin (cf. Mk 1,4ff) and a return to the original covenantal relationship with YHWH, “a radical acknowledgment of God, who stands over against Israel in his wrath, as well as a radical confession of a sinful falseness that is so total that recourse to the former means of salvation appears hopeless”²⁴ – and no longer the recourse to the ancestors or to Israel’s privileged position as the community of God’s Elect. Thus, John is able to say categorically: “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is

²³H. Merklein, *μετανοία*, 416.

²⁴ H. Merklein, *μετανοία*, 417.

able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Q: Mt 3, 9; Lk 3, 8). In John’s preaching, Israel has lost its salvation-prerogative and is therefore liable to judgment, and John’s pronouncement of judgment against Israel is apodictic-categorical. John does not say: “unless you repent, judgment will come upon you”, but: “judgment is coming; therefore, repent”. That means that the demand for repentance is predicated on the certainty of judgment, and the judgment radicalizes the demand for repentance through its imminent nearness²⁵.

However, John’s preaching of judgment is tied closely and inextricably to the message of “repentance”, and this message would not be meaningful (indeed, it would be nonsensical) if it did not allow, even if minutely and covertly, the possibility of salvation. But the escape from judgment and therefore the opportunity of gaining of salvation is not something that Israel on its own or on account of its redemptive-historical past (for instance, Abraham’s sonship) can effectuate or demand or hope for as of right. It is now completely outside of Israel’s power and merit, and is entirely dependent on God’s faithfulness to his elective action which Israel’s fallenness and liability to judgment do not and cannot vitiate, eliminate, erase or nullify. We notice here a dialectic tension between continuity (faithfulness) on the part of God and discontinuity (unfaithfulness or faithlessness) on the part of Israel. John addresses this tension by preaching a repentance that includes the “confession of sins”, i.e. the acknowledgment on the part of Israel that God, who is faithful and just, is right in being angry with Israel, i.e. in his judgment and treatment of Israel. This confession is, according to John, the last possibility which God offers to Israel in order that she might – in spite of the unlawful recourse to the covenant with Abraham – escape the coming judgment of wrath. But even by John as by the OT prophetic tradition, repentance remains an eschatological gift of God which also has soteriological quality insofar as it protects against judgment²⁶. The reception of the baptism of repentance offered by John corresponds with bearing “a worthy fruit of repentance” (Mt 3,8; Lk 3,8).

²⁵ Merklein, “Umkehrpredigt”, 113.

²⁶ Cf. Merklein, *Jesu Botschaft*, 31.

Μετανοία in the Preaching of Jesus

The Synoptic Gospels leave no doubt or are indeed unanimous in reporting that Jesus knew John the Baptist; that he received John’s baptism of repentance; and that he was perhaps initially a follower of John or for some time may have been under his influence, and may have recruited some of his own disciples from among those of John (cf. Jn 1,35ff). However, both the Synoptic and other early Christian traditions are silent on the motive behind Jesus’ reception of John’s baptism. In other words, they do not address the question: Why did Jesus undergo the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? The interest of the Synoptic writers seems to be governed not so much by historical as by Christological interest. That is why the emphasis in the baptism narrative is more on the outpouring of the Spirit and the messianic identification and commissioning of Jesus (cf. Mk 1,10f par). On the whole, the placement of the narrative of John the Baptist before the beginning of the story of Jesus proper goes to show that, for the Synoptics, there can be no proper understanding, appreciation and appropriation of the message of Jesus without recourse to the figure and preaching of John. John is presented as preparing the way for Jesus and as vacating the stage for him. In the Synoptic tradition, Jesus enters the scene only after John had been incarcerated (cf. Mk 1,14).

Like John the Baptist, the focus and centre of Jesus’ message is the βασιλεία of God which in his life and ministry has begun to become a reality in the world. However, Jesus’ understanding of the nature of the βασιλεία of God and the mode of its presence, and his delineation of the conditions for people to become part of it differ markedly from John’s. Both of them share the view according to which the present is evaluated from the future, and they therefore demand distance from what has been²⁷, namely, distance from recourse to Israel’s salvation-prerogative. Both as well see and underscore the need for μετανοία and present it as the first step or rather as the point of departure for the renewal of the relationship with God and therefore as the *conditio sine qua non* for the reception of and participation in the in-breaking βασιλεία of God. However, while John sees the imminence of the βασιλεία as certain judgment of wrath against apostate Israel, for Jesus the presence of the

²⁷ Cf. Merklein, “Umkehrpredigt”, 111.

βασιλεία is an assurance of salvation. John is not so much interested in how Israel could find salvation, but in how Israel could escape judgment²⁸. Jesus, on the other hand, preaches μετανοία not as an escape from God's judgment of wrath as in John, but as a requisite condition for accepting, i.e. "believing" the Gospel. In other words, for Jesus, πίστις (faith) is the other side of μετανοία. In the view of the Evangelist Mark, Jesus himself is both the subject and object of the "Gospel of God" (Mk 1,14) which he preaches and to which he summons belief in. The Gospel is about him as God's beloved Son: his life and ministry, his passion, death and resurrection, and the hope which he awakens in those who follow him. Thus, in Mark's Gospel, there is an intrinsic connection between the Jesus, whose story Mark presents as εὐαγγέλιον, the "Gospel of God" as "gospel from God" and "gospel about God" (subjective and objective genitives respectively), the βασιλεία of God and then the invitation to μετανοία and πίστις in the Gospel as appropriate response. Mk 1,14-15 thus provides a programmatic summary of the whole gamut of Jesus' message.

To appreciate Jesus' understanding of and teaching on μετανοία and how he differs from John the Baptist, let us turn to the text of Lk 13,1-5 which has no parallels in Matthew and Mark (Luke's *Sondergut*). The general context of this text in Luke's Gospel is Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his encounter with "the crowd" as a narrative figure (Lk 9,51-19,27). It is in this broad context that "Jesus begins to speak to the crowd about the harsh demands of discipleship"²⁹. There is in Jesus' encounter with the crowd repeated references to the theme of repentance (cf. 10,13-15; 11,32) which culminates in his stern warning on the need for repentance (Lk 13,3.5). Lk 13,1-5 recalls two horrible incidents presumably known to Jesus' audience which, on the one hand, are interpreted as God's verdict and punishment³⁰ and, on the other, as a warning against

²⁸ Cf. Merklein, *Jesu Botschaft*, 33.

²⁹ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts – A Literary Interpretation, Volume One: The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia 1986), 148.

³⁰ This follows from the prevalent Pharisaic doctrine of retribution, i.e. the understanding or rather the popular piety that disaster/suffering/death are taken to be punishment from God for sin committed (cf. Job 4,4-8.17; 8,4; Ezek 18,26; Jn 9,2). Consequently, any one who is suffering is considered to be suffering because he/she had committed some sin or other for which the suffering is viewed as the punishment.

complacency or rather as a moment of grace. At the background is ultimately the question of theodicy³¹. Although Jesus does not directly challenge or question the validity of this way of thinking (i.e. the connection between sin as cause and disaster as effect), he warns against taking God’s graciousness and mercifulness for granted. “Do you think that these Galileans [whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices] were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus?” Again: “Or, those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders [i.e. more due for punishment] than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?” To these questions Jesus answers emphatically with “no”, and goes on to make a strong pronouncement that serves as a warning: “but unless you repent you will all likewise perish”. Thus, the criterion for determining who is a sinner before God and who is not is no longer a question of who has undergone or who is undergoing suffering (of any sort) and who is not undergoing suffering, but how positively or negatively one responds to the demand and challenge of Jesus for repentance; the criterion is now Christological³². Whether one is a more egregious sinner or one’s sin is less public than others, all without exception are indicted and called to repentance. The victims of the disasters mentioned above “are turned to warning examples for his [Jesus’] listeners. The people who died were not more deserving of death than others. One cannot argue from sudden and violent death to the enormity of sin. Indeed, Jesus himself will suffer a death that appears to be as much a punishment for sin. But the prophet’s [Jesus’] point is that death itself, with the judgment of God, is always so close. It can happen when engaged in ritual. It can happen standing under a wall. And when it happens so suddenly, there is no time to repent”³³.

“Unless you repent you will all likewise perish”! This response and indeed threat and warning of Jesus, which places repentance and judgment in a conditional relation (“unless”), goes to show that, as by John, the preaching of repentance by Jesus is also connected with

³¹ That is the question: How can a good, loving, all-powerful and just God allow innocent people to suffer? and the answer: He can allow that only as punishment for sin!

³²Cf. M. Wolter, *Lukasevangelium*, HNT 5 (Tübingen 2008), 476.

³³ L. T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina 3 (Collegville, Minnesota 1991), 213.

judgment; but there is a substantial difference. On the one hand, Jesus puts the whole responsibility of repentance with his audience and, on the other, he lays the emphasis not on judgment, but on salvation. There is, therefore, a shift from threat to warning, and the motivation for repentance is not to escape judgment, but to gain salvation. That is what differentiates the teaching of Jesus on repentance from that of John the Baptist. John preaches apodictic judgment (“you have turned away from God; consequently, you are under God’s judgment of wrath”) and repentance as an escape from it; while Jesus pronounces apodictic promise or assurance of salvation as an eschatological gift of God open to all those who repent, i.e. those who not only turn away from sins, but who also distance themselves from what has been (estrangement from God), and who now begin to live a life worthy of their original calling and relationship with God. With his βασιλεία of God message, Jesus announces a new reality of salvation established and offered by God. For Jesus, therefore, repentance is no longer primarily the escape from disaster-judgment, but the acceptance of the new reality of salvation for Israel created by God by means of which the past liability of Israel to judgment before God has apparently become baseless and inconsequential. Although the announcement of judgment remains, it can no longer be apodictic; it is conditional. Judgment is now the result or consequence not of sin committed, but of salvation rejected.

Jesus’ preaching of repentance is deeply connected with the βασιλεία of God which he announces, embodies and inaugurates as a reality here and now. That explains why the appropriate response demanded by Jesus as consequence of repentance is “faith” – faith in the Gospel (πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ). This gospel is itself deeply connected with his life, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection. Given that the Gospel of Mark should be “read backwards”³⁴, the real good news about his story of Jesus is to be found at the scene of the empty tomb with the announcement of the young man: “Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who

³⁴Already in the 19th century, Martin Kähler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (Leipzig 1896), 80, considered Mark’s Gospel as a whole to be a passion [and resurrection] story with an extended introduction. Accordingly, the evangelist Mark applied the principle of “backward composition” by prefixing all the Jesus traditions and the tradition about John the Baptist to the primary passion and resurrection narrative.

was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you” (Mk 16,6-7; cf. 14,28). Galilee was the place where Jesus began his ministry and called his first disciples; Galilee – the place of the first and feeble beginning – is to be the place of a second and more stable and enduring beginning. There, the disciples, who deserted Jesus at his moment of crisis, would meet him and (hopefully) be transformed by their encounter with the risen and exalted Lord. There, they would realize that there can be no understanding of Jesus and, therefore, no real relationship and commitment to him outside of the framework of the cross and resurrection. The non-plotted and unnarrated post-resurrectional meeting in Galilee must have brought a change in the disciples’ perception of who Jesus is – a change so radical and life-changing that they committed themselves totally and unconditionally to him – so much so that they were ready to die for him! That is what conversion from the Christian point of view is all about: radical transformation (conversion) and total and unconditional commitment to Jesus and his cause (faith).

Experience of Repentance and Salvation in the Encounter with Jesus

What the disciples experienced only at the non-depicted Galilean meeting, some individuals were privileged to experience during the earthly ministry of Jesus who defines one of the crucial elements of his mission as calling sinners to repentance, and who therefore seeks the company of sinners and tax collectors (cf. Mt 9,9-13; Mk 2,13-17; Lk 5,27-32). However, the response to Jesus’ demand for repentance and faith was not always positive as the woe-pronouncements against Chorazin and Bethsaida show (cf. Mt 11,21ff; Lk 10,13ff). Briefly, we mention some instances in which people who encountered Jesus responded with repentance and faith, people whose lives were changed and transformed and who became committed to Jesus. Examples of such “conversions” abound in the gospel narratives, especially in Luke’s Gospel. Peter, at his calling, was able to recognize his sinfulness and inadequacy: “Lord, depart from me, I am a sinner” (Lk 5,1-11). The life of the sinful woman is transformed (Lk 7,36-50). Jesus’ visit to the house of Zacchaeus brings salvation to his house (Lk 19,5-9). The repentant thief receives assurance of salvation (Lk 23,39-43). In all these and many other instances, Jesus who has come, not to condemn the world, but

to transform and save (cf. Jn 3,17), restores the lost dignity and hope of those concerned and offers them opportunity for salvation. In the encounter with him, sinners experience the unconditional love and care of God which surpasses and overcomes human failure and sinfulness. This is in line with the overall pastoral mission, vision and orientation of Jesus – namely, “to seek and find what was lost” (Lk 19,9), i.e. the restoration and renewal of communion with God that was lost by sin. What this means is illustrated with the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Mt 18,12f par) with which Jesus justifies his meal fellowship with sinners (with actual sinners who had not yet, i.e. prior to their meeting, shown any sign of repentance). The parable presents God as reaching out to sinners even before they show any disposition to turn away from sin and turn back to God. Whether the sinner accepts this invitation of God and responds appropriately (i.e. returns to God) by accepting God’s offer of salvation is another thing. The acceptance of God’s invitation and offer of salvation marks a new beginning. This is exemplified by the Parable of the Lost Son or the Merciful Father (Lk 15,11-32). It is appealing to interpret the return of the son religiously and piously as “repentance”. The real transformation, and that is what is characteristic for this story, however, takes place with the action of the father who does not allow the son to finish confessing his sins and who, even before the son could open his mouth, takes him into his arms and with a kiss gives him the sign and assurance of forgiveness and restoration. Repentance is here ultimately and factually not what the son had to do before being forgiven and accepted back, but what he could do after being forgiven: his reaction and response to the gestures of his father. The forgiveness not only restores the father-son-relation, but also constitutes a new relationship between them. And this new relationship is the foundation for a new behaviour³⁵. Thus, repentance in the teaching of Jesus is living from the salvation offered by God; it is living from the forgiveness of sins; it is living in the hope of the ultimate realization of salvation for the world in the βασιλεία of God. Repentance occurs on account of the forgiveness which God has already – i.e. a priori – offered to us. Ours is the response – acceptance in faith or rejection.

³⁵Cf. Merklein, “Umkehrpredigt”, 123-4.

The Question of Translation into Today: Μετανοία as Pastoral Theme and Goal in the Local Church

The above expositions show that μετανοία – though not the central theme of Jesus’ preaching – is an aspect of his mission that is so important that it forms part of the commission of the exalted Jesus to his disciples, namely, “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem” (Lk 24,47). This commission of Jesus was faithfully carried out by the early Christians as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles³⁶. All of this goes to show that repentance is first and foremost God’s gift, but also our task as Christians.

God’s gift in Christ to humanity is first and foremost the gift of salvation which is already present, but the full realization of which is reserved for the eschaton. Through baptism, we are incorporated into Jesus Christ and thus become members of his Mystical Body – the Church. It is the foundation of our relationship with God as his beloved children. Being children of God is God’s gift and our privilege, responsibility and task – it is at the same time *indicative* (we are already children of God) and *imperative* (we should be or rather live the life of the children of God). Μετανοία as returning to the original relationship with God could mean for us, living out our baptismal calling and commitment under the conditions and within the environment of our existence as individuals and as a local Church. It is a call and commitment that recognizes the dignity, sanctity and inviolability of life and the equality of all human beings before God. It is a call that reminds us that all that we are and all that we have come from God; that without God we are nothing and can do nothing. Μετανοία could also mean, living our lives as faithful members of the ecclesial community who listen to the Word of God, celebrate the Sacraments as signs of God’s indwelling among us, live in respect and obedience to constituted Church authority (in doctrine and morals). Μετανοία could also mean, living a life of genuine Christian witness in the larger society, in our

³⁶ Cf. Acts 2,38: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”; 3,19: “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord”; 5,31: “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins”.

rural communities, in our places of work, in our families, in our dealings and encounters with our fellow human beings, in our dealings with nature and creation. Μετανοία could mean, living a life that is responsible and responsive to the needs of our neighbour: to his/her need for care and love, for availability and a listening heart and ear, for encouragement and inspiration, for understanding, reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Μετανοία could also mean, living in joyful hope with an eschatological focus and orientation.

Living a life of μετανοία involves constantly examining those factors that foster or hinder a deeper and more committed relationship with God in our local setting. Helpful could be the question: What understanding of God, of Jesus Christ, and of the Church underlies our current religious life and practices?

Who is God for us?

As a local Church, we might observe that our worship of God is generally motivated not so much by the love of God, but first and foremost by fear and our own needs. There is fear of forces beyond our control whose power and influence are believed to be so pervading and overwhelming that we need the intervention and protection of God to withstand and overcome them. These forces are projected as ancestral spirits, demonic forces, deities, etc. Our perception of and ensuing relationship with these forces are somewhat ambivalent. There is on the one hand our feeling of fragility and vulnerability towards the influence and our apparent powerlessness in the face of these forces. On the other hand, there is the belief that these forces can be controlled, manipulated and used by certain persons either for good or for evil purposes. Out of fear of these forces, we seek protection and guidance from God who is believed to be more powerful. The overall impact of this way of thinking is that we see “enemies” everywhere against whom we seek protection and against whom we attempt to use the power of God to subjugate or even destroy. That is why we “cast and bind”. That is also why we invoke “Holy Ghost Fire” on people we perceive to be enemies, and use religious articles and sacramentals – including holy water and even the Most Holy Eucharist! – more or less as “amulets” (οἰουμόκη) and weapons of cosmic warfare.

Another motive for worshipping God consists in our desire to satisfy our basic human needs, especially the needs that pertain to our

material well-being, security and comfort. This is evident in our petitions (for instance, Mass intentions, prayer of the faithful at Mass, “prayer points”, etc.). We see material possession as a sign of God’s benevolence and blessing, indeed as reward for our piety, religiosity and moral probity. On the other hand, we see poverty, crisis, difficulty and suffering in all their multifarious forms as signs of a curse. Unfortunately, so-called “men and women of God”, even within our Church, exploit the ignorance and religious gullibility of our people by practicing all forms of questionable “packaging and marketing strategies” (including simony) to cement this erroneous view, and by talking people into believing they (the purported “men and women of God”) could “release” them from such curses and thus open up unlimited avenues of material “blessings” for them – of course, all in exchange for money! They thus extract money from people who follow them and in turn flaunt their ill-gotten wealth as merited visible “signs of God’s blessing”. The effect of this materialistic religiosity or religious materialism is that God is misrepresented not only as controllable, manipulable, but also buyable: with money you can make God do what you want; you can bribe your way through!

The historical and theoretical background of this way of conceiving and relating with God is perhaps a misconception and misappropriation of the traditional African conceptual religious worldview in which there is in the world and in the life of individuals an interplay of the material and spiritual realities or forces. Generally, the traditional African worldview colours and influences not only our current materialistic conception of God and “give-and-take” or transactional relationship to him, but also other cultural-religious practices, especially at pivotal points and intersections of human life: marriage, birth, death, burial, etc. These nodal points and intersections are readily avenues and opportunities for syncretistic practices that make many of us “externally Christians but intrinsically non-Christians”³⁷. While it is respectable, for instance, to give honour to the dead, certain ritual practices and funeral ceremonies bespeak an eschatology that is this-worldly

³⁷ J. I. Okoye, *Let us Worship God in Spirit and Truth*, xi.

oriented and that violate in theory and practice the Christian belief in life-after death.

Who is Jesus Christ?

Within this cultural-conceptual background, Jesus of Nazareth is conceived to be the point or medium of contact (not mediator!) between God, who is believed to be all-powerful but far and distant, and human beings. He is conceived as surpassing in power and manifestation all the other forces that are perceived to be active in the world. That explains some of the fantastical names and appellations given to him in popular Christian piety (*ogwonnụọrià; utugbajiriigwe, dibia ka mmụọ, ikukuama n'onyà, agadagbachiriuzo, dike a na-akpa ogwu n'anya*, etc.). There is resultantly an overwhelming desire to follow the Christ of our own design and wish: especially a Christ without the cross and therefore a discipleship without suffering. “Suffering is not my portion” is the motto. In contrast, the gospel narratives show that there can be no genuine discipleship without the cross and no genuine relation with Jesus which excludes his and our own crosses. A cross-less Christianity is not only no Christianity at all; rather, it is also a travesty and betrayal of Christianity.

What is the Church?

The desire for a cross-less Christianity leads people from one “church” to another, from one place of adoration or prayer centre or ministry to another. The competition in the Christian “religious market” is currently not only fierce and aggressive, but has also become dirty and unchristian. Fantastical promotional offers are made through electronic and digital media as well as bill-boards, and corresponding activities organized at strategic times and places. Purported and must-happen “miracles” are advertised and then simulated. People move from one centre to the other in search of breakthroughs, miracles, solutions to problems, protection and defence against enemies, and an effortless and immediate intervention of God in their lives. The religious market is booming and governed by the laws of demand and supply in a free market economy. That means also that allegiance and membership can change as rapidly as one feels the need. In Nigeria, anybody can

wake up any day and anywhere, establish a “church” and call it whatever name he/she desires, and people will troupe in their numbers – provided the founder and his lieutenants package their religious “wares” properly and attractively! At the centre is, however, not Jesus of Nazareth as the Crucified and Risen Lord, but an image of Jesus that is bereft of the cross, a kind of *deus ex machina* Jesus. People do not ask: “What does God want from me”, but want to command God and decree to him what he has got to do for them, when and how. Decisive is not the unfathomable will of God for me and for the world (his βασιλεία), but my will and wish which God has got to fulfil here and now! That the Church as the Body of Christ has historical and theological link to Jesus of Nazareth and to Christians of the Early Church does not seem to matter or be a source of worry. The proliferation of churches and prayer houses and especially the invasion of our catholic identity by some spurious groups who claim or profess to be “catholic” raises the question not only about conversion, but also of our self-understanding as Christians.

Conclusion

“The time is fulfilled, and the βασιλεία of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1,15). There is agreement among exegetes that this summary statement constitutes the program of Jesus. It defines his mission and ministry. When Jesus speaks of the βασιλεία of God, he is not thinking in terms of a territory or a domain where God reigns as sovereign king (as if there were territories outside his reign of power); he is thinking first and foremost about God and his will and plan for the world, for human beings, for history. Jesus presents the βασιλεία of God as something that is active and dynamic and, therefore, as something that is in the process of coming, of becoming reality – indeed, as the unfolding manifestation of God’s will and redemptive plan in the world and for the world. So, he could tell his opponents: “But if by the finger of God I cast out demons, then the βασιλεία of God has come upon you” (Lk 11,20). In his life and ministry, especially in his death and resurrection, Jesus embodies and inaugurates this reign of God as something that has begun to become reality in the world and in the

life of people. The βασιλεία of God refers to the sovereign will and activity of God in ruling over the world and bringing his plan and purpose to their fulfilment. The understanding the βασιλεία of God as the embodiment of salvation or as a Christian *terminus technicus* for eschatological salvation (eternal life or heaven) is a later development in the course of the evolvement of early Christian tradition and peculiar language³⁸. Jesus proclaims the βασιλεία of God as something that demands response – the response of μετανοία (conversion) and πίστις (faith). Both are God’s gift and at the same time tasks for us.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, one of the most prominent sages in the first and second century Judea, is reputed to have emphatically recommended daily μετανοία to his disciples. “Turn/repent/convert a day before thy death” (*Pirke Abboth* 2,10). His disciples retorted that no one knew when one would die. To that Eliezer replied: “The more should he convert today, since he may die tomorrow, and so will be found in conversion his whole life long” (*bT Shabbat* 153a). Μετανοία – conversion, repentance – is therefore a life-long process and task that demands conscious, active and continuous self-reflection, reconsideration, reorientation and realignment in relation to God. The good news is that in μετανοία, it is not we who find God, but ultimately God who finds; indeed, it is God who in Jesus Christ has already found us with his mercy and love that surpass our weakness and failure, and that overcome the darkness and loneliness caused by sin and isolation from God. Like the driver at the dead end, at the beginning of this paper, we can still turn back and begin again. Like the two friends in the shopping mall, reconciliation is still possible. Like the abusive father, there is still the chance to make amends and restore confidence and trust; and like the exiled Obiekwe, a new beginning means a new life. All in all, like the father in the Parable of the Lost Son or Merciful Father, God’s loving and caring hands are always open to embrace us and restore us to our proper place in his heart. Perhaps this assurance can help us not to be indifferent or afraid to heed the summons of Jesus: “Repent and believe the gospel” (Mk 1,15).

³⁸Cf. H. Merklein, *Jesu Botschaft*, 24.