

Psalm 51 – Ash Wednesday Sermon – 22 February 2023 (Rev Phil Wootton)

The gift of forgiveness is one of the most wonderful things the Christian faith offers. Critics sometimes accuse religion of being about making people feel guilty and ashamed of themselves. A superficial view of Lent, when our focus is on penitence, can give that impression. But the reason for penitence is to receive forgiveness, which is like a great weight lifted, a heaviness of heart released, a deadened spirit turned to new alive-ness. It's said our society is one that tolerates everything but forgives nothing. Christianity offers an alternative which accepts human fallibility and deals with it ... and the means of dealing with it is repentance and forgiveness.

St Paul summed up the human problem: 'All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God;' and also the solution: 'All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ' (Romans 3: 23-24) The question is not about our need to be forgiven, or God's willingness to forgive, but how we know we are forgiven. For, although God's forgiveness can come in a moment, human nature often requires longer for us to take it on board. Christian tradition offers us the whole season of Lent, the journey from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday, to take it on board. We are given resources – not least the lengthy liturgies of penitence in today's service, leading up to the imposition of ashes. Another wonderful resource is the penitential Psalm, Psalm 51, which is what I want to reflect on this evening.

Psalm 51 is for meditation: a long Psalm, using different words for similar ideas, to give time to chew them over and absorb what is said.

Begin penitence with God's character. If we begin with our own problems and wrong-doings, they may well overwhelm us. Forgiveness is based in the infinitely loving character of God. It will be, 'according to your unfailing love, your great compassion, your abundant mercy.'

- 'Mercy' is God's grace and unmerited favour.
- 'Steadfast love,' is God's covenant loyalty.
- God's 'compassion' is like that of a mother for her child.

Like the Prodigal Son returning to the father he had abandoned, the penitent comes back to God no longer fit to be called God's child, but with assurance able to cry out for mercy, because God is mercy-full.

Then we have to face the facts. Admit our transgressions, our iniquities, our sins.

- 'Sin' evokes a picture of aiming at a target and missing, falling short of the goal or the expected standards.
- 'Iniquity' is a deliberate act of going astray: 'I didn't mean it,' doesn't cut the ice.
- 'Transgression' is an act of rebellion against lawful authority, not simply stepping over a line in the sand or mere law-breaking; it's rebellion against God.

Using all three words together acknowledges how comprehensively we have messed up: no ifs, buts or maybes; no self-justification, no excuses, no 'considering the circumstances' – the confession is far-reaching and complete.

Verse 4 says, 'Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.' This can cause us a problem. We ask, what about the people sinned against? Ultimately sin is an affront to the holy God. At the deepest level, whatever the sin, we sin against God. But we do have to deal with it at a human level too. I was interested to hear a Jewish Rabbi speak about Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In Judaism there are religious rituals to be observed during the day. But, the rabbi said, primarily how you spend Yom Kippur is by calling on everyone you might have upset,

offended, or in some way have an imperfect relationship with, and try to rebuild. It's a typically practical and down-to-earth approach, one we might learn from.

Pray to God: 'blot out my transgressions; wash away my iniquity; cleanse me of my sin.'

- 'Blot out' evokes the final ledger, God's record of sins committed – rub this item out from the final account.
- 'Wash me thoroughly': not two minutes in the shower, but an hour in the washing machine! Or, in ancient times, clothes washed in the river, rubbed and scrubbed, trampled and slapped on the rocks, and rung out to dry – that's washed thoroughly until clean.
- 'Cleansing' is about ritual purity, outward rituals representing a changed heart and readiness to re-enter the presence of God and worship once more, our relationship restored.

Three characteristics of God; three descriptions of sin; three terms for forgiveness; but then three positives prayers that God would do the deep work inside me that will transform me from this perpetual sinner to the person God wants me to be.

- 'Create in me a clean heart, O God.' In Biblical thought the heart is the centre of the human person, the seat of all feeling, thinking and willing. It's a prayer for a new act of creation, renewal on the inside.
- 'Put a new and right spirit within me' – a disciplined, determined spirit, that won't allow me to be dragged back into my old ways; a life-giving, creative Spirit that's always present within me.
- 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation.' The guilt of sin has been crushing, even to my bones, but forgiveness and returning to God's presence fills my heart with joy unconfined.

Finally, three vows:

- 'I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.' I've known what it's like to go the wrong way and come back: I've got an authentic message to share, so others may enjoy God's mercy too.
- Second, 'my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.' Worship is a natural, heart-felt response to forgiveness, but often we still lack the words. We need God's grace: 'O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.'
- Thirdly, while the conventional response might be bringing burnt offerings, bring a sacrifice of a different sort: 'a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.' I will not return to my arrogant old ways. I will not follow the devices and desires of my own heart. I come, as St Paul in Romans, offering my body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, a truly spiritual act of worship.

People sometimes flippantly say, 'Oh, God will forgive me: it's what he's good at.' But forgiveness is not to be taken for granted. Grace is not cheap. What we receive as a wonderful free gift was achieved at the immense cost of the death of Jesus, Son of God. The journey from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday gives us time – time for us to sensitize our consciences to harms we may unconsciously be doing; time to amend our lives and our life-styles and do things differently; time to seek and receive and know the forgiveness that flows from the Good Friday cross. The journey of Lent is not about feeling guilty: it's about allowing in God's loving mercy, so that God may restore us to the joy of his salvation, and bones that have been crushed by sin may once more rejoice.