

Psalm 51, Ash Wednesday, February 17th 2021.

Psalm 51 – main text.

Joel 2: 1-2 & 12-17; 2 Cor 5:16- chapter 6:10; Luke 15:11-24

God of every blessing. I invite you now to shape my soul with your words in the psalms and inspire my life with your works. Teach me to walk with you in your ways and teach me how to pray. Amen. (every Lent Sunday).

Many people have a favourite psalm. Or part of a psalm, they turn to when they seek to find words to express praise, thanksgiving, pain or complaint. What would be your favourite psalm or part of a psalm?

Across Lent, each Sunday we will focus our preaching upon the psalms.

Walter Bruggemann says: "The book of psalms constitutes a resource for faith among us that when we attend to it faithfully, always yields more of **grace and truth.**"

John Calvin said about the psalms: 'I have been accustomed to call this book, I think, not inappropriately "An anatomy of all the parts of the soul," for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not *here* represented as in a mirror. Or rather the Holy Spirit has here, brought to life, all the griefs, sorrow, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men and women are prone to be agitated about.'" To immerse yourself in the psalms is like being in an anatomy class!

Psalms can help us see again how things really are. The situation may not have changed. But our perspective has. We see clearly... I wear glasses, and I am pretty short sighted. Already at school, my eyesight became poor, so when I played football I was never sure who I was passing the ball to down the pitch – I just knew they were my team due to the colours! And I didn't like swimming – as I just could not see anything really when in the water. But then I got some prescription goggles and suddenly, it was clear. It enabled me to do things, to live as I had wanted...

Now, listen to Calvin about the Bible...

“The Bible is like a pair of glasses: it enables us to see things we could not see at all before, to find meaning in what was an unidentifiable blur. We can see where we are. The world, itself may not be any safer, but our place in it is more secure, our movement through it more certain.”

Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is **astonishing**. The mere fact it is there. The mere fact that David utters these words.

David – the shepherd who became king, the one given the promises by God, that someone from his line would be raised up by God, whose kingdom would endure forever.

Months, maybe years, after those promises in 2 Sam 7, David as a king, began an affair with the wife of one of his soldiers – Uriah. Uriah was one of the 30 Mighty Men, men who served in battle with him. David’s mightiest, most trusted warriors. Maybe like a special forces unit. Uriah was totally loyal to him; and David had an affair with Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba. David was already married at the time. She became pregnant. So he brought Uriah home, to hear about the current military operation he was involved in. David’s plan. To hear the report then send him home David’s hope, Uriah would sleep and have sex with his wife, and so the coming child, could be claimed to be Uriah’s. But Uriah didn’t go home, he slept where the rest of the king’s servants slept – next morning when David asked why he didn’t go home, he said, ‘how could he when the Ark of God; his fellow soldiers of the Mighty Men, and the rest of the army were in fields? How could he enjoy comfort when they are not?’ David persuades him to stay one more night – gets him drunk hoping he will wander home, on default mode.

But Uriah did the same thing again. So the next day, David plans his death – suitable for a Macbeth play. He writes a letter. The letter says put Uriah where the fighting is worst and then abandon him, so that he will be killed by the enemy. Uriah took the letter – his own death warrant. He left, to serve the King again on the battlefield.

He gave the letter to General Joab – Joab a man himself comfortable with nasty actions. And Joab, in the next mission, placed Uriah on a dangerous mission and Uriah was killed. I hope you begin to have something in your soul, ‘that is awful’. If this was a film, and you saw all these steps, your soul cries out ‘NO.’

That is why Psalm 51 is astonishing. To think that David would dare pray that prayer, dare even to ask for forgiveness. I mean our instinct may be – why bother talking to God. You have done some awful things. And to add to it – you were a king. You were given great promises, you had God’s blessing upon you. Even Saul – your predecessor – didn’t do that much!

That is why it is astonishing. Despite all he has done. David comes to the LORD God. He believes he can ask for forgiveness, to become clean, to be restored in a relationship with God, to be used by Him once again.

Psalm 51 gives us hope. We can feel it is too bad what we have done. We have hurt others. We have damaged ourselves. Let God down badly.

How can we come to God? We can.

David did.

Whatever your sin, you can come to the Father.

But **who** do we come to? When we come in our sin, failure, destruction, what is the image of God we have? This is crucial. Pete Greig says: “After more than twenty-five years in pastoral ministry, twenty of them teaching on prayer, I have come to the conclusion that most people’s biggest problem with prayer, is God.”

What he means – and I agree – is that if we see God as always unhappy, disappointed, that he isn't really interested in reconciliation, in fact he is just itching to press the red button and to put the foot down, like in the film *Inside Out*. Then as Greig adds: "If that is how you picture God, I really don't blame you for trying to avoid his gaze."

You don't like prayer. And when you sin, deep down you feel, God won't restore it to how it was...

Jesus gave us model of prayer – we include in every worship service – 'Our Father'. Grieg asks - what *do we* think as we say this? "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name." Do we just say it – we see it as a heavenly handshake, a ding dong on heaven's door, before we get down to business, 'How are you?' as the Northern Irish greet each other.

Our Father. Chew on that word. Like enjoying a good meal. That is the One you approach in prayer.

Jesus describes the Father in the Parable of the Lost Sons.

The younger son. He was unhappy. Wanted to see the world. He wanted his inheritance now. He causes offence. He causes dishonor. And he personally, says by his action – I wish you were dead, so give...

then he heads off ... you know how it goes.

But with the pigs, he decides to go home 'Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired me. So he got up and went to his Father.'

So when you come to the Father. What response will you get?

Jesus teaches.

The Father saw him, ran to him, and punched him.

No, he didn't.

The father saw him, closed the door and for two years never talked to him, he lived with the father's pigs. No.

No. He ran. He hugged him. He kissed him. My son was dead and now he is alive, he was lost he is found. Get a ring, get a robe, get a sandal. Kill the big calf – we will celebrate he has returned.

Now. Does that change how you feel about coming to God?
Jesus is saying: No matter how much you are in the pig mess, come to the Father,
he wants you home, to reconcile, to restore you.

The opening verses of the psalm are key.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love.
According to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions,
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

He has sinned grievously, he has broken trust, he has broken many of the Commandments. Yet he begins, with the vocabulary of grace. See the words. Mercy. Steadfast / Unfailing Love. Compassion. Some translations say 'Abundant mercy' – it is a word derived from the same Hebrew word as 'womb' – so it is often translated compassion.

These words take us to Exodus 34:6-7 "And Yahweh passed in front of Moses proclaiming: "Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness rebellion and sin."" God's self description. These words we also heard the prophet Joel say and place his hope in. Until this moment, these words perhaps a theory to David. A nice verse to memorise.

Now for David, he depends on it.

God this is who you are. Forgive. Show mercy. Give compassion. That is who you are...

This is how God has described himself. When did he say this? Well, we remember the Golden Calf. Moses goes up the mountain. Soon the people and Aaron are building a golden calf on the ground. After Moses has destroyed the calf, he goes back up the mountain. In the midst of this great failure, and a question, how will God treat Israel now, after he gave them so much and after how they have now acted. Even in such pain and sin, God says to Israel this is who he is – not that he chooses to be on this occasion,

but that **he is always** loving, merciful, gracious, compassionate.

The great failure of David. He has been given so much. These were capital offences and he deserved to die. But God allowed him to live. David is saved by grace. There are the outworkings and punishment for his sin among his family. But his relationship with God is restored...

This psalm is not only about reality of human sinfulness but it about the reality of God's amazing grace.

When you are in your sin, the God you come to, is the God of amazing grace. We can use this psalm to give us the words to bring to God our sins – but the psalm as we personally pray it, reminds us 'this is your God'. The psalm reminds us – as we feel we are in the pig pen – there is hope, we have a God of love, mercy, grace love. Human sin does not have the final word in our human condition.

“Cleanse me and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.”

He knows if God forgives, *he is* forgiven. God will not hold over him the sins. Corrie Ten Boom, when preaching to prisoners who had done horrific things and would be in prison for the rest of their lives, some faced execution, would point to Micah 7: “Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his

inheritance? You do not stay angry for ever, but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us, you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

She would then add: and by that sea, God puts a sign. “No fishing allowed.” If God has chucked it in, then don’t go getting it out, he has forgiven you.

John, the apostle, 60 years after the cross, wrote to assure Christians. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.’ Confess our sins to the father. Cleansed. Washed. Whiter than snow.

Paul tells us “God made him, who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5). Your sin, placed on Christ...so you can have peace with God. You can return to him and be restored, cleansed, forgiven.

The psalm, as we read it and meditate upon it, encourages us **about the fruits of forgiveness.**

* A desire of a new changed life. ‘Create in me a clean heart, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

*He is recommissioned into God’s work – he will teach others God’s ways .

*He will bring his praises to God. ‘O Lord open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.’ Words used in many Anglican services. Where does it come from – from here.

*He knows God doesn’t want religion in response. God wants his heart, a living sacrifice – he humbly offers himself to God. ‘A broken and contrite heart you do not despise.’

*he is renewed / has new heart for the well being and prospering of the rest of God’s people.

Paul told the Corinthians, that God’s intention is create new. ‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come..’

And not only new, forgiven, but also commissioned –not just Paul but all of us to be ambassadors for Christ, we who have been reconciled to him, to bring that message of reconciliation to others and we represent him. Forgiven. New Creation. Commissioned for service.

Conclusion.

We all sin and fall short of God's glorious standard.

Psalm 51 is a testimony of there is always amazing grace, no matter how bad it goes.

We are always invited to come to the Father – the psalm is there, David came, so can we.

God is full of compassion, steadfast love, and mercy and grace.

With forgiveness, David declares, and thus encourages us, when God cleanses us – we are CLEAN. Whiter than the snow we have seen around us. Even if we don't feel it, in the eyes of heaven – we are clean, white, the sin thrown into the sea.

And with forgiveness, David says he will experience other fruits: invited again into God's work, he will bring praise, he will offer up his life to God afresh...

With these encouragements, with glasses on our face able to see clearly, we walk through this Lent...

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen.

With these thoughts in mind, about the God to whom we approach, we come to an extended time of penitence as is traditional on Ash Wednesday. A chance to reflect on how we are doing, to repent where needed, to restart reboot ourselves.

Please turn again to the liturgy.