

## Lament and Lent

As 2019 is the 'Year of Lament' in the diocese, a good place to deepen our understanding of 'Lament' is to look at one of the Penitential Psalms, in our case Psalm 51. Lament is the feeling or expression of sorrow or sad regret. It can take the form of a complaint before God. It is not a denial of faith but the honest expression of a wounded faith, sometimes wounded by sin. Using lament faithfully is recognising that there is no easy fix but we can trust in God who is able to create a clean heart and renew our spirit (Psalm 51:10).

Now Psalm 51 often makes us feel a little uncomfortable even though it is one of our Ash Wednesday readings. In so many ways, to admit to sin in today's culture goes against the grain. The word 'sin' itself is seldom understood and is often held up to ridicule. Instead we look to 'mitigating factors' to explain away or even justify wrong doing. And to describe the effects, origin and consequences of sin just seems to go against popular insights of modern psychology like valuing the self. Others accept the reality of sin, but deny or ignore their own sins. Still others use sin as an opportunity for entertainment, delighting in the exposure of others caught in sin, or even parading their moral failures before a prying public.

For King David there was ultimately only one way to deal with sin: admit it, confess it, and ask for forgiveness and restoration. And Psalm 51 shows him doing precisely that. In total contrast to the pretence of confession practised by so many today, David's prayer expresses utter brokenness.

So before we look at the psalm itself, let's remind ourselves of what led to it and what exactly was the sin that David was admitting. It was rooted in

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the events described in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12. From his palace roof one spring afternoon, David saw a beautiful woman called Bathsheba, desired her for himself and committed adultery with her. He had her husband, Uriah the Hittite, sent into the hottest part of the battle with the Ammonites, where he would be certainly killed and in fact was killed. He then proceeded to take Bathsheba as his wife. It was only when the prophet Nathan was sent by God to rebuke him, did he feel his guilt, confess his sin and plead for mercy. His simple, 'I have sinned against the Lord', in 2 Samuel 12:13 is here elaborated into a prayer for God's mercy in cleansing and renewal.

As we consider Psalm 51 this Ash Wednesday let's use this time to understand God's mercy, the need for it, the expression of it and the results of it.

Firstly then, the need of God's mercy.

No one can appreciate his need of God's mercy until he has seen the gravity of his sin.

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Consider for a moment the night sky in all its wonder and magnificence. When we are young we think of the sun waking up at the same time as we do and the stars come out at night when we go to bed. But as we grow up we realize the stars are there all the time. It's only when the earth revolves on its axis and our half of the planet is shaded from the sun that the stars, that are there all the time, begin their magnificent, illuminated display. It's only when the sky goes black that you see the glory of the shining stars. In order to understand God's mercy, love and grace we need to see the black night sky of our spiritual condition, the gravity of our sin. That is how David begins.

Verse 1 and 2. READ.

In these verses there are three words used to describe sin. They are 'transgression', which means crossing a boundary, 'sin' which means missing a mark, and 'iniquity' which means the depravity of our nature. Behind these three words lies the important recognition of the essence and origin of sin.

The essence of sin is revolt against God. Verse 4, 'Against you, you only, have I sinned and done evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.' It is true David had sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, against his family and nation, but first and foremost, he had offended against the love and law of God. He had coveted, stolen, committed adultery and murder and, in doing so, had broken four of the last five commandments. This brought him under the just judgement of God. The Apostle Paul quotes our verse 4 in Romans chapter 3, when he is showing the unswerving justice of God in his dealings with men. It is because we are under the judgement of God that we need the mercy of God.

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Now, if the essence of sin is rebellion, then the origin of it is in our fallen human nature. Verse 5 describes it, 'Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.' This does not mean, of course, that the wonderful process of conception and birth are in themselves sinful, but that our human nature from its first beginnings has been infected with sin. As we inherit it from our parents, it is twisted with self-centredness. Just ask any young mother if their hungry infant waits for a convenient moment to demand their next feed! This is 'original sin', and David came to recognise it when his sinful passions of lust, cruelty and insatiable greed overcame and overthrew him.

It is when we see ourselves as we are, on the one hand rebels against God and under the judgement of God, and on the other hand prisoners of a corrupt nature, that we come, like David, to despair of ourselves and cry to God for mercy. We need God's mercy because of our sin.

Then secondly here we notice the expression of God's mercy.

God's mercy meets the sinner's need by granting them pardon and purity.

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In praying for pardon, David uses two vivid, understandable metaphors. First, he asks God to 'blot out' his transgressions. In verse 1, it is 'blot out my transgressions', and in verse 9 it is 'blot out all my iniquity'. This word means the removal of writing from a book. We'd call it 'white out' or 'delete'. He seems to think of his sins as a list of offences on a charge sheet that he is accused of, or a catalogue of debts that he cannot pay. He pleads that the entry be deleted. Secondly he acknowledges that his sins have defiled him and prays that God will wash and cleanse him, as in verse 2. Then the black stains of sin are removed and he becomes whiter than snow. Verse 7, READ. In certain Old Testament rituals a bunch of hyssop is dipped in blood or water and then ceremonially sprinkled. So here hyssop is a symbol of divine cleansing. How wonderful to experience this cleanliness.

But David knew he needed purity as well as pardon. God demanded 'truth in the inner parts' as verse 6 puts it. Yet as he acknowledged in verse 5, his very nature was corrupt. Only the creative power of God could make him a new person. So he prayed as in verse 10, 'Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me'. He longed for a new nature with new and pure desires and for a spirit both 'steadfast' in verse 10, and 'willing' in verse 12. He seems to have known too, before the full New Testament revelation has been given, that such a new nature and spirit could only be given to him by the Holy Spirit himself. Who of us has not desired these things and prayed this prayer of verse 10 for ourselves?

If God in his mercy would grant him both a clean conscience and a clean heart, the sorrow which his sin had caused would be turned into joy and gladness. Verses 8 and 12. READ.

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Here is the expression of God's mercy and before that, the need of God's mercy.

Now thirdly, the results of God's mercy.

Verses 13-17. READ.

The last part of our reading is devoted to the results which follow an experience of God's mercy that cleanses and renews. David resolved here that his attitude to both human beings and God would be different.

First he accepts his responsibility to his fellow human beings. He has sinned against them; now he will serve them in a new way. When his own transgressions have been forgiven, he will 'teach transgressors' God's way, so that they can return to him. He prays to be delivered from 'bloodguilt' in verse 14. David does not pray in this psalm to avoid the consequences of his sins; rather it is the guilt of them that burdens him.

His second responsibility is towards God. He will use his lips in worship as well as witness, 'O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise'. It is this that God desires, not sacrifice or burnt-offerings. He does not mean that no sacrifice at all is pleasing to God, but that the kind of sacrifice he chiefly desires, especially from a sinner like David, is a broken and contrite heart. And then, when he is forgiven, he can offer the further sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

The two results of God's mercy show a changed person, ready to witness to others and worship God.

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Personal repentance is the foundation of biblical Christianity and the essential starting point for personal faith in Jesus Christ. What saves us is Jesus' cross, resurrection and ascension - all three. Hebrews calls this 'looking to Jesus', the one who opened the way to God and continues to pray for us. God's grace enables the forgiven sinner to find acceptance and strength to live differently. Hebrews warns us that we need this promise of a way back to fullness of life.

Our great confidence is God's mercy that is held out towards us. May this Lent be such a time for turning away from sin and turning towards our merciful God. The foundation for lament is understanding this mercy of God.