

**SERMON – 27/3/22**  
**'Forgive us our sins'**

Psalm 51:1-17

'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.' (Ps.51:17)

As we continue to think about what it means to be disciples of Jesus by developing our relationship with God through prayer we come this morning to the subject of repentance and confession, the seeking and finding of forgiveness and the sharing of that forgiveness with others. Jesus teaches us to pray: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." But the question is, how? Where are we to start?

Psalm 51 is renowned as *the* penitential psalm. The words we have read this morning have been taken on the lips of millions down through the ages as one of the most expressive prayers of repentance that have ever been written. Musicians have been inspired time without number to set this psalm for solo voice or for choir, to express personal confession or to lead others to the place of contrition. One of the most sublime pieces of choral music ever written was a Latin setting of this psalm *Miserere mei Domine* by Gregorio Allegri composed for exclusive use in the Sistine Chapel in St. Peter's in Rome – a rich choral framework for two choirs standing in different parts of the building, a top C for the boy trebles, if you ever listen to classical music on the radio you will doubtless have heard it. The famous story is told of the precocious Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart who having heard it sung there promptly went out and wrote down the music for it from memory and let it loose in the world outside the gates of the Vatican!

The psalm obviously left its mark on Thomas Cranmer, author of much of the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*, who borrowed from it liberally in creating services that have stood the test of time – anyone who has ever been to an Anglican service of Matins or Evensong will recognise the call to worship taken straight from v.15 of this psalm: 'O Lord, open Thou our lips; and our mouth shall shew forth Thy praise.' But in more than just forms of words, what this psalm offers as a model of confession

has found its way into the very format of Anglican worship in such things as the Prayer of General Confession – words that bear careful reflection and use both public and private: 'Almighty and most merciful Father, We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, We have offended against thy holy laws, We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, And we have done those things which we ought not to have done, And there is no health in us: But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us miserable offenders; Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults, Restore thou them that are penitent, According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord: And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.'

The legacy of this psalm is colossal, but what of its origins? Again, we are fortunate to know exactly why this prayer was composed, because we are told in the marginal introduction to the psalm itself – 'For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.' It is worth our while reminding ourselves of that sorry episode in the life of David, because it gives us a real insight into the reasons behind David's prayer and the words and phrases he chooses. You'll find it in 2 Samuel 11 & 12.

Although Israel was at war with the Ammonites, King David stayed in Jerusalem. "One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman washing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, 'She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.' Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her." (2 Sam.11:2-4)

Now Bathsheba fell pregnant and David tried to cover his tracks. He called Uriah back from the front ostensibly to find out how things were going and suggested to him that he spend some time with his wife. Uriah, however, remained loyally at the palace, sleeping with the servants rather than returning to the marital

bed. Despite David's best efforts over the coming days, Uriah would not go home and sleep with his wife. So David sent Uriah back to battle with a note for the commander in chief to send Uriah to wherever the fighting was fiercest. As a result Uriah was killed and after Bathsheba had mourned her husband, David took her as his wife and she bore him a son. Then, in one of the gems of OT literature, the prophet Nathan comes to David with a parable to declare to him the Lord's displeasure at his actions.

"The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, 'There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.' David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, 'As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.'

Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!' (2 Sam.12:1-7)

Like Peter when the cock crows in the Gospel account of Jesus' trial, David is convicted of his sin here and it is out of that context that this psalm comes:

"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." (Psalm 51:1-2)

Understanding its origins is helpful, but on its own that is not enough, because as well as being a commentary on another part of Scripture – those chapters from 2 Samuel – this psalm is also handed down to us to help us in our prayer life and in our relationship with God. Thomas Cranmer was not the only one to recognise that confession is good for the soul. There is plenty of Scriptural evidence, not least in the psalms themselves. In Psalm

32, David writes, 'When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long... Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" – and you forgave the guilt of my sin.' In these and other passages we are reminded that we are *all* sinful, that we *all* stand under judgement, and that we *all* need to seek God's forgiveness but Jesus makes a very clear link between our need to ask God for pardon and the equal need we have to offer forgiveness to others in the same way.

We may not have committed adultery or murder as David had but there are lessons here for us to reflect on - David learned them the hard way but they are here to point us a better way. Let me simply highlight them this morning and invite you each to take time today to reflect on how they apply to you.

The first thing we need to do is to acknowledge our sin – as we saw quite recently in the First Letter of John, 'if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves.' (1 John 1:8) David says here, 'I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.' (v.3) What about us?

Secondly we need to recognise that our human nature is sinful – 'Surely I was sinful at birth, says David, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.' (v.5) When we are honest with ourselves about the inbuilt bias we have to choose the wrong path we open ourselves to God's transforming influence on our lives.

Thirdly we need to pray not only for pardon for the wrong steps we have taken but for the strength and ability not to take those wrong steps in the first place. David prays, 'Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.' (vv.10-11) What we need is the internal revolution – the new birth – that only God can accomplish within us in Christ.

And finally we need to allow that transformation to take us from the place of prayer to the living of a changed life, to teach others the way of salvation (v.13), to live in praise of God whenever we open our lips (v.15), and not just to put on a show of religiosity but to walk humbly before God and before others. 'The sacrifices

of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.' (v.17)

As we pray and as we live the Lord's Prayer, let us seek to worship and honour God; let us seek first His Kingdom and commit ourselves to doing His will; let us trust the Good Shepherd to supply all our needs; but let us also humble ourselves in recognition that we fall short, time and again and, changed for the better by our receipt of God's pardon and by the indwelling of the promised Holy Spirit, let us be as generous in forgiving others as God graciously forgives us.

### Prayer

Lord, I am not worthy to stand before you, for I have sinned and in the stillness I confess before you the many ways I have fallen short. [Silence]

Through what Jesus accomplished on the Cross, have mercy on me and make me clean. Change my life entirely and go on teaching me the wisdom I need to live the new life of the Spirit that I may forgive others the way you have forgiven me and that I may live in humility a life that is always pleasing to you, for I ask it in Jesus' name.