

SERMON – 22/2/26
'Forgiven!'

Psalm 32:1-11

1 John 1:5-10

"Happy are those whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs are pardoned." (Ps.32:1)

Are you happy this morning? How happy are you, I wonder, and why? Are you happy enough to 'rejoice' and 'be glad' and 'sing' as our reading from Psalm 32 this morning exhorted us? If I was only able to have one Book from the Bible on my desert island I think it would have to be the Psalms. I have often used the Psalms as the basis for my daily devotions and there really is something for every mood and season in life. During these next six weeks of Lent I have decided to take the Psalm from the lectionary as the basis for our reflection as we journey towards Calvary with Jesus (who, according to the Gospels, quotes from the Psalms more than any other book of the Bible during His earthly ministry).

In this morning's Psalm, David describes the happiness or blessedness (which is another translation of the word in the original Hebrew) that comes from the experience of being forgiven and I want to explore that a bit with you but also to unpack what leads to forgiveness and what follows from it that we might learn something about the fulness of life Jesus came to offer us.

Where to start? The place any consideration of the Good News should begin is the bad news about our sinful human nature. It's where the book of Genesis takes us immediately after the story of Creation; it is the message of Jesus as He picks up the mantle from John the Baptist – 'repent, for the Kingdom of God is near'; it is the place that the apostle Paul begins in his great exposition of the Gospel in the Letter to the Romans; and it is therefore where we need to begin. If we are to talk about the happiness that comes from forgiveness we need to start with why forgiveness is required in the first place, namely because we have sinned. Now that immediately makes most of us want to change the subject.

The classic human reaction to being accused of doing something wrong or of being less than we should be is either to try and brush it under the carpet or to deny it completely. It's not just for legal reasons that people from the greatest to the least in the land strenuously deny any accusations that are levelled against them. It's part of our human condition.

In the Psalm, David has sinned and has either been accused or his conscience is pricking him, but his initial reaction is to say nothing or perhaps it might have been 'No comment'. And before we start wagging our fingers at others we need to recognise that David's reaction is one that all of us will have made. When trouble-makers are rounded up in the school playground and charges are made, the cry immediately goes up, 'It wisnae me!' Perhaps the offenders are just trying to avoid punishment or perhaps they genuinely haven't considered their actions to be wrong, but the end result is the same – sin is denied and it is a story that is as old as time.

Co-incidentally we were looking at Thursday evening's Lent Study at the opening chapters of Genesis and we considered how Adam and Eve were deceived into thinking that what they were doing was not wrong at all, but the result of their sin was a desire to hide from the God who had indeed forbidden them to do what they had gone ahead and done and when they were found out they each tried to pass the buck. Adam says, 'It wisnae me' – it was the woman. Eve says, 'It wisane me' – the serpent deceived me.

The thing is that sin is not as easily undone as that. Denials or silence will not hold the consequences at bay for long; pretending that what you have done or failed to do is not sinful at all is no answer either; and trying to pass the blame on to others only aggravates the problem. God's response to sin is that it must be dealt with like a cancer before its malignant influence spreads and causes even more harm, as we see in the far-reaching impact of what happened in the Garden of Eden – pain, enmity, trouble, hardship and ultimately death, a return to the dust.

The psalmist describes it in these terms: "When I did not confess my sins, I was worn out from crying all day long. Day and night

you punished me, LORD; my strength was completely drained, as moisture is dried up by the summer heat." (vv.3-4) David's sin was weighing heavily upon him, and that is the experience of many whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.

The way out of the problem is found in the next verse of the Psalm: "Then I confessed my sins to you; I did not conceal my wrongdoings. I decided to confess them to you, and you forgave all my sins." (v.5) There is the wonderful turning point which is the prelude to the happiness and joy with which our Psalm begins and ends, because it tells of the repentance that allows for the sin to be really dealt with and which leads in the grace of God to the assurance of forgiveness.

So what is actually happening here? I'm sure you have all witnessed the scenario in which a child who has acted wrongly is persuaded to admit to having offended and then is asked to apologise for their crime. As a matter of course the one receiving the apology, whether it is another child or an adult, is expected to accept the apology and the matter is declared closed, perhaps with a formal shaking of hands. You are often left wondering whether those involved may just be going through the formalities required in polite society or whether there is a genuine reconciliation effected by the process but at least the grievance is being aired and dealt with to the satisfaction of the adjudicator. It is something akin to this that is going on in the episode that lies behind our Psalm. David finally stops pretending that he is innocent and owns up to his sin, God is satisfied that David is genuinely penitent and declares him to be forgiven. There is no mention of a sacrificial offering having been made as required by the Law of Moses but perhaps it is taken for granted that that ritual would have been undertaken. Certainly David is assured that his transgressions have been forgiven and his sins 'covered' (which is the word used to describe what the blood of the sacrifice did for the guilt of the sinner). David can also speak about the Lord 'not counting his sins against him' which is the same expression that is used in the Book of Genesis about Abraham who by faith was *counted* righteous instead of sinful. And all of that points forward to what would take place as a result of the self-offering of Jesus, the Lamb of God who by His death

on the Cross takes away the sin of the world. 'Father, forgive them,' Jesus said of His executioners from the Cross 'for they do not know what they are doing.' As we read also this morning from the First Letter of John, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing." Christ has exchanged His innocence for our guilt and from His pain and grief comes our happiness, the true blessedness that David experienced as a foretaste but which we can enter in its fulness through faith in Christ.

But that takes us to a springboard where we must not rest, and David also describes that well for us in this Psalm.

'Therefore, he says, let everyone who is godly pray to you.' (v.6) You know how it is when you have wronged someone – it leaves an atmosphere between you and any communication between you is stilted – but once the matter has been properly resolved you can talk freely again. So it is with the forgiven sinner and God – the way is opened for us into the very presence of the Lord and we can speak freely and without hesitation in prayer.

Secondly, David writes: 'You are my hiding place; you will save me from trouble.' (v.7) By the forgiveness of our sins we are accepted by God into His presence not only in prayer but in person – He is our Deliverer who will welcome us one day into His eternal Kingdom when 'the great flood of trouble' that is death 'comes rushing in.' If we have died with Christ through repentance and faith then we will also rise with Him, washed and forgiven.

Thirdly, David proclaims God's message to us: 'I will teach you the way you should go; I will instruct you and advise you. Don't be stupid like a horse or a mule, which must be controlled with a bit and bridle to make it submit.' (vv.8-9) If we have experienced the reality of God's forgiving grace it is incumbent upon us to let our relationship with God grow and develop by learning from Him and walking in His way. Particularly we are to learn by submitting to the enabling of the Holy Spirit how not to go on sinning, for that is the greatest fruit of our redemption.

And finally we end where we began, with joy and praise. How happy David was to have his transgressions forgiven, his sin covered – is that your experience of God in Christ? How happy David was to be counted righteous in the eyes of God – that is the Good News that I proclaim to you in the name of Jesus. David wanted the whole world to share his joy. 'You that are righteous, be glad and rejoice because of what the LORD has done. You that obey him, shout for joy!' (v.11) Let's join David in testifying to the Gospel that is ours in Christ.