

Wednesday March 3

Psalm 51 – a case study

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.
- 5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- 6 Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.
- 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.
- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.
- 14 Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
- 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
- 18 In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem.
- 19 Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

After LAMENT and FEAR, a series of reflections on the important Lent theme of PENITENCE. If you went a church service on Ash Wednesday last year, it would probably have included Psalm 51, often called a penitential psalm. King David composed it, after being confronted by the prophet Nathan over his adultery with Bathsheba and the abuse of his royal power in engineering the death of her husband Uriah, a squalid and ugly episode recorded in 2 Samuel chapter 11. This psalm contains powerful words, like ‘transgressions ... iniquity ... sin’ that are echoed in the old service of Morning Prayer: here we are invited to call ourselves ‘miserable offenders’ with ‘no health in us’. Grim words, depressing even, as if there wasn’t enough going on at the moment to make you feel depressed!

You could easily dismiss this as an exercise in grovelling before an angry God. But after its sombre opening, Psalm 51 opens out into a vision of a loving God powerfully at work in those who are ... penitent. There is daring talk of joy and gladness, of a clean heart and a right spirit. The vision isn’t just about steering clear of wrong acts, but of profound inner transformation involving body, mind and spirit. It sees clearly into the heart of God, who “desireth not the death of a sinner but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live”.

With God we can be ‘ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven’. This, for Christians, is what the cross of Christ is all about. It also means that, although we may never have committed adultery or murdered anyone, there is still the security that invites us to be honest about where we know that we do fall short, whether in action, word, thought or motive.

You might think all this is irrelevant. Here we are, in a pandemic, and amidst all the depressing news are marvellous stories of things people are doing for their neighbours, or putting up on YouTube to

cheer us up. So if I'm supposed to be 'sorry', what do I need to be sorry about? That's what we're going to explore in the next few days. I had heart surgery three years ago. I didn't feel ill, or even slightly unwell. But I knew I needed the surgery. It's the same with penitence. I might feel good, doing all sorts of good things and seeing other people are doing all sorts of good things. But in the same way it came as a shock to learn that I needed heart bypass surgery, I might discover important things about myself when I take time to face this important theme of PENITENCE.