

18th February 2024 – Lent 1 – Pathways of Prayer – Psalm 51 ‘The path of holiness’

A 47-year old man stands on the roof of his palace in Jerusalem and looks out over his city, his kingdom. It is a fine spring morning, the time when kings usually go off to war – but not this year. For this king has *arrived*, he has achieved everything God has asked of him. His borders are secure, his land is prosperous and experiencing spiritual renewal, the ark is safely back in its proper place, the city of Jerusalem, the city of the great king.

He has everything he wants, and yet he is restless, bored. He’s too comfortable, he craves excitement. It’s the season when kings go off to war, isn’t it? But there’s nothing more to fight for. And so he stands on his rooftop, looking out.... On a rooftop nearby he spies a beautiful woman, bathing. At first, he looks away. He shouldn’t be gawping like this, he’s not a voyeur. He has many wives already. But he looks again in her direction. She is beautiful, and in a moment his eyes are hooked, his passions aroused. He feels that frisson of excitement he’s been missing. But who is she? And could she be his? Of course she can. He’s the king, he can do whatever he likes.

I’m sure many of you will recognise that moment. It’s a famous story from 2 Samuel ch11. The woman is Bathsheba, and the king of course is David. And that moment sets off a chain of events which leads to disaster, doesn’t it? David commits adultery, arranges the murder of Bathsheba’s husband, and is then dramatically challenged by the prophet Nathan. Judgement is pronounced on the offspring of David and Bathsheba’s relationship, and despite a week of David pleading with God, the child dies.

Today’s reading takes us into the heart of that tragic story – because Psalm 51 is the prayer that David wrote in repentance. It may very well have been the prayer he uttered hour after hour, day after day that week. Or it may have been written immediately after the baby died. Either way, it captures the dramatic intensity of a man repenting and humbling himself once more before God.

Today we begin our Lent series, Pathways of Prayer. Over the next few weeks, we’ll look at different ways to pray, different themes of a vibrant life of prayer. Some of them will be normal to you, others I hope will broaden your horizons. **Appropriately for Lent, we begin with prayer as the path of holiness.** The word holy means ‘set apart for God’, and this Psalm of all Psalms is perhaps the most heartfelt prayer to recover one’s set-apartness, to re-dedicate our lives to God.

There is so much in this psalm, but to help us through it today, it really splits into three sections – each of which is essential to a flourishing spiritual life:

The first is **a deep awareness of God** – this is the first third of the psalm, verses 1-6. And it begins: ‘Have mercy on me, O God.’ The first line of the psalm is also the summary. David cries out from the depth of his heart. He recognises his need for God, and describes the fundamental orientation that all of us must make in order to experience the riches of intimacy with God: first and foremost, we need God’s mercy.

It is a cry not just of repentance but of honesty, of humility. The best definition I heard of humility was ‘a true understanding of yourself’. That includes your strengths, but it also has to acknowledge our flaws and faults, too. As David declares: (v3) ‘I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.’ Nowadays this kind of language is sometimes scorned as ‘worm theology’ – but pretty much all the great saints and all the great devotional writers on the spiritual life start here...

It's not where we *end* – or indeed where this psalm ends – but it has to *start* here. Indeed, it's the start point that Jesus commends, too, in his powerful parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Who is commended by God: the upstanding, self-righteous leader, or the one who throws himself on his knees and simply cries out, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'? Jesus' verdict: 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.'

Our debt is ultimately to God – yes, we have wronged others and may have to seek their forgiveness; but, as David insists in v4, 'against you, you only, have I sinned.' As the old Prayer Book puts it in its standard confession for communion, our 'manifold sins and wickedness' are 'most grievously committed *against thy Divine Majesty*.' If we are to get anywhere in the spiritual life, we have to start by recognising and confessing that our sin, our selfishness, matters to God, it shrivels our souls and stains our relationships, it stops us being who we were made to be.

From this place of awareness (both of self and God) comes the second reflection today: **a deep hunger for God** – this is the middle section, verses 7-12. Deeply aware of how much we need God's mercy, it's natural to ask for restoration. And let's note that this is a two-stage process: the first is cleansing: 'wash me,' David prays (v7), 'and I shall be whiter than snow.' When it comes to our sin, we can't wash ourselves. Like Lady Macbeth frantically scrubbing away at the blood on her hands, it just doesn't go. Only the Lord can cleanse us both from guilt and shame.

But we also need to look beyond forgiveness – what happens next? v10: 'Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast Spirit within me.' Verse 10 is both the literal and theological centre. It reminds us that the goal is not to wallow, it is to change. 'Godly sorrow leads to repentance and leaves no regret,' St Paul says in his second letter to Corinth. And let's observe that David prays **both for a steadfast and a willing spirit** in these verses. We need *both*, don't we? If we're tempted, we need both to be firm and also willing. If we only do the right thing grudgingly, we can't last long. It's a very practical prayer, this, and can I encourage us to make it ours whenever we feel tempted to do wrong: ask for a steadfast *and* a willing spirit to sustain you.

Hunger for God is a hunger that eventually is always satisfied. Not as quickly sometimes as we would like, but always in the end. Don't just take my word for it: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for... what does Jesus promise? ... for *they will be filled*.'

And that means, thirdly and finally, the final reflection today: the outcome of the first two sections is **a deep thankfulness to God**. After the night comes the dawn. With forgiveness and renewal comes both praise and fruitful living. (v15) 'O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.' There's no better feeling than being forgiven, is there? We feel liberated, like a weight off our shoulders. And sensing this freedom, David renews his determination to share the love of the Lord wherever he can: (v13) 'Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.' Evangelism, DL Moody famously observed, is simply one beggar telling another where to find the bread. David knew this 3,000 years ago: knowing the Lord's forgiveness released him to share the grace of the Lord with others. It's not hypocrisy, it's honesty. It only becomes hypocrisy when we share the forgiving love of God, thinking that we don't need it ourselves!

But David knows he needs it. And, I suspect, most of you do as well. Let today be a word for you. Use this psalm, take heart from this psalm. Find forgiveness, freedom and fresh strength from this psalm. And, this Lent, may all of us grow a deep awareness of the Lord, a deep hunger for this gracious Lord, and a deep thankfulness for all of his mercies. Amen.