

THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS

I rejoice in the fact that our faith encourages us to face reality. And reality for all of us includes failure. It includes getting things wrong and knowing what to do about it. It seems to me that as we live in an age with smoke and mirrors a lot of the time, trying to escape who we really are and trying to get out of the way of any sort of sense of culpability or accountability even. These psalms are extremely helpful, because they bring us up to reality.

I want to say at the beginning that we shouldn't go away from here this morning with a massive 'guilt trip'. Previous generations of Christians – of both Catholic and Protestant hue – have really tended to emphasize the sense of human guilt and human worthlessness. I had a colleague once who was a great devotee of what in some circles is known as 'worm theology'. Taking the key words from Psalm 22, verse 6, 'I am a worm and not a man', this view of humanity universalises the psalmist's expression of dismay at his circumstances into a viewpoint which is both individual and a comment upon the wider human condition.

This is when you can see nothing good in yourself at all. You're always down on yourself, very conscious of being a sinner, of being unworthy of God. Strangely enough this sort of idea can take root in churches where they are supposed to celebrate forgiveness and grace and the goodness of God.

My prayer is that that isn't what we go away with, but that we go away with a solid dose of good realism about us as human beings, and about God, and God's forgiveness and God's grace ... The fact that we can come to a realistic assessment of things before God.

LORD, we accept that today we don't always really manage these things terribly well in the church, and can sink into a horrible sense of guilt and unworthiness, without any apparent way out of that double bind. And yet we want to be realistic: we want to stand before you honest and true and realistic and accept that we fail regularly; we get things wrong and sometimes we just don't know what to do with ourselves. So we pray that you will lift our eyes – not upon our own failings, not upon our inadequacies, which are many - but rather upon you the God of all grace, of all forgiveness, of all kindness, and of support and help and love. So we commit ourselves to you, looking for a good balance in all these matters. In Jesus' name, Amen.

With its tally of 150 psalms the Psalter is a large anthology; it's a little bit overwhelming... If you have a book of poems with that many in then you'd wonder which to read first, which to turn to. Unfortunately Scripture doesn't give us much help in knowing what sort of psalm we want: it just gives a number 51 or 32. Until you get really knowledgeable about the psalms you wouldn't know what that number means.

If I said 'what's Psalm 61 about?' you probably wouldn't have a clue. So what you have to do is focus on those few that you can look at and make sense of. Psalm 23 for example – probably everyone here knows exactly what that psalm is about.

There are seven penitential psalms. Seven seems to me a little bit like an arbitrary number, but it is a number that comes from tradition. St Augustine identified four of them that he thought were penitential psalms: expressions of human failure and the need for God. But by the time you get to the Reformation they had become seven – a number which theologians

and the Bible rather like. So we group things in sevens, and they are psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

Some of them are really famous. Psalm 51 particularly is a famous one, and some of you might be familiar with Psalm 130. Psalm 51 has a very famous musical setting, as has Psalm 130. The church has found that these two psalms really do express something that is quite important to us – particularly, for Anglicans and Roman Catholics where you have the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent. Those are times of the year when you are encouraged to examine your life. In Advent and in Lent you are encouraged to prepare for Christmas and Easter with a little bit of introspection; a little bit of thought about your spiritual life.

These psalms have often been used in this. One very famous man – if you are Roman Catholic you’ll remember his name immediately – Bishop John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester who opposed the annulment of Henry VIII’s marriage, which wasn’t politically a good idea in the 16th century. He opposed it because he felt it was wrong, and also he felt that Henry’s proclamation of himself as head of the church was also wrong. For his pains he was beheaded. That was a concession for John Fisher. Prior to that they were probably going to do worse things to him! It won’t surprise you to note that he was also a friend and associate of Sir Thomas More, who went the same way just a month later. His feast day is on July the ninth.

I’m telling you about John Fisher because he wrote a treatise on the penitential psalms – he thought they were seven good psalms to read and reflect upon and to use as the basis of prayer during Lent and at other times when you wish to go into some sort of self-examination and thought about your spiritual life. All of them have been set to music; great poets have re-translated them and put them into modern wording.

I have to say right at the outset, that we have a bit of a problem in a lot of churches about the whole idea of sin. It is the word that nobody wants to hear, as though it is a conspiracy to make you feel bad about yourself. Or you’re accusing me of things. Or you’re trying to make me feel guilty. I think it might be helpful if we see it as failure: as a sense that before God, we don’t always do that well. Very often we aren’t as good a Christian as we’d like to be.

Scripture, and particularly these psalms doesn’t let you get away with running away from that. They challenge and encourage you to think a little bit about your own feelings in respect of that – which is why this morning I began with prayer, asking God, to turn our faces towards him – the God of all grace and all forgiveness.

I want to look at three of these penitential psalms. To begin with, number 130. It’s often referred to as *De Profundis* – ‘Out of the Depths’. Oscar Wilde, reflected on his own experience of being put in Reading Gaol on the accusation of homosexuality 100 or so years ago. And of course, it broke him. Being there was a dreadful experience for him and he wrote a poem reflecting on his own agony, and he called it *De Profundis*. He actually quotes from the beginning of Psalm 130.

(Here the speaker showed a copy of a painting - *Out of the Depths* by Mary Sullivan. Maybe it’s something you’d care to look at as you engage with the psalms.)

<https://fineartamerica.com/featured/out-of-the-depths-mary-sullivan.html>)

Strangely this is one of the so-called 'Psalms of Ascent'. These are gathered together in the psalter and concern pilgrims going up to Jerusalem at the time of festivals who would sing or speak to each other. Usually they're pretty chirpy – you know: pilgrims going along, having a sing-song, enjoying the togetherness. Yet in the middle of this is Psalm 130.

There's a feeling that I think mirrors a sense of dejection, even depression: a sense of despair. It's not totally black, because in the middle of that feeling the psalmist is turning to God. One of the terrible things when you're in that sort of place in life is the feeling that there's no-one to speak to. And you've got no word to say. You don't know what to communicate. Perhaps there doesn't appear anything to communicate. And there seems to be that sort of feeling in the psalm.

Out of the depths I cry to you. O Lord.
Lord hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
To the voice of my supplications.

If you, Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,
So that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning.
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him there is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
From all its iniquities.

Is that a place where you've been? I don't think I have, strangely enough. Reflecting on it I'm conscious that life being what it is, at any time, I might be there, and there's this sense of being in the depths. That's a particularly awful place for an Israelite to be – water was a frightening place with nasty beasts in it. You might get drowned. There's this sense of being swamped and engulfed. So the imagery is that of the depths, of sinking down, of not knowing how to get up.

And yet, and this is one of the wonderful things about studying these psalms, the psalmist has a voice, and in these words he uses this voice to speak to God. Being able to talk and having a sense of being heard, is so important. You might find, as I might, that there are moments when we cannot make up our own words to say to God or to anybody. But in Psalm 130 we have words that we can speak.

I've noticed that in these early verses of the psalm the idea of hearing is repeated: 'Let your ears be attentive. Hear me. I want you to hear me. Nobody's listening. But will *you* hear?' At those moments when nobody seems to be attentive to your thoughts, or pain, or troubles, there's a statement of faith here. 'I believe that you're always listening, your ears are always open.'

There's a point in this psalm where the psalmist talks about iniquity, or sin, or things having gone wrong. Maybe it is what the psalmist him/herself has done. But something is wrong. Perhaps it's a sense that the whole world is wrong; everything failing. Everything is going down, and nothing seems to be right. And you sense the despair: of lost powers, of not wanting to go on, of being engulfed, swamped, and perhaps, of guilt.

We are told by psychologists and counsellors that, at the moment of grief and pain, one of the things that you feel is guilt. Could I have done something? ... Yet very often, of course, it's an unreasonable observation. You couldn't have done anything. But you still feel it. I remember when my father died I felt – in fact all my family felt – a great despair. But also a sense that we could have rung the hospital sooner or we could have done something. Couldn't we have seen the signs? But no. He went very quickly and when they took him from the house, he was already dead.

The sense of guilt didn't strike me particularly. But it did my mother and sister. You have to face up to it. That feeling can't be suppressed. The wonderful thing about this psalm is that from the beginning of verse 3 there is acceptance that if you were the judge of all this, not one of us could cope in the future.

'But there is forgiveness with you'. Here is this lovely sense that whatever the truths or otherwise of our sense of guilt with God there is forgiveness. You can name the fact that you feel guilty, but that you can also say – however true or otherwise it might be – that with God there is always forgiveness. With God there is grace. He knows that we probably did fail at various points. We can't help that.

Once you've faced up to the guilt or despair that you're feeling, the psalm takes you on to something which I think is very hopeful. 'I wait for the Lord.' There are some lovely words here, 'in his word, I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.'

I love the way that is repeated. It's as though the psalmist is saying that my waiting is even *more* than this experience tends to express. Then he turns out from himself to say to everybody: 'Israel, hope in the Lord... There *is* 'steadfast love.' That word which in the New Revised Standard Version is translated as 'steadfast love' is a Hebrew term which actually means 'covenant love' – the love which is neither sentiment nor emotion. It includes both, but fundamentally it's a love that commits itself in covenant. God make a covenant with you. God is committed to you. God won't desert you.

Think of all those things that people say to each other when they get married. Big deal things – sickness and health, to love and to cherish, 'til death us do part. That's the sort of love we're talking about. We say those sorts of things in a marriage service by intention. God, of course, is fully able to carry it all out.

Also with him is the power to redeem. He can bring any situation into good things. Israel, in the wilderness as slaves can be redeemed. Israel as exiled can be redeemed. Disaster can be redeemed. We as human beings can move from our despair and our disasters into a state of forgiveness and better things. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities. It's a lovely psalm, and leaves me with a picture – 'more than someone who waits for the morning' – more than someone who is looking out, waiting for light to come from the horizon.

The psalm, of course, is an actual gift for anyone who's in that situation. If you're in that situation now, then it's a gift to you. If not, then it's one to store away to think about and remember just in case that moment comes. As I say, I don't think I've been there myself.

Hoping for the future is not wishful thinking. People sometimes say to you when you're in despair, 'Cheer up! Everything will get better.' Or 'It could be worse!' 'Cross your fingers.' But hope in God is not like that. There's a very real sense that anybody putting their hope in God are talking about steadfast love, about One who can act to redeem, One who is worth waiting for. Psalm 130 is a magnificent psalm which is worth taking to yourself as an important one to identify and nail down.

Let us move on to Psalm 32 which is said to be a Psalm of David. The psalm's setting is someone who has experienced forgiveness, who knows forgiveness, and knows forgiveness before God.

'Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven
Whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord
Imputes no iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit.'

This is very psychologically acute, because, of course, telling yourself lies is one of those things we engage in an awful lot. We tell ourselves little white lies. God isn't conned. He isn't deceived by it. Happy is the person who owns up, who's straight before God. I remember once or twice in the past when there's been a choice which I know I've had to make – and I know other people have been in the same situation – where there's been a choice and you have to decide: do I want to be honest before God in this? Or do I want to take the easy option. The psalmist seems to be encouraging us to take the hard option and to be honest before God.

And he talks about acknowledging his sin. Not hiding what he's done. Instead confessing it, and coming straight up with it. Generally, these days we hate doing that. Hate fronting up to where we've failed. Hate fronting up to the idea that we may not have been consistent with that wonderful ideal of who we think we are.

But David has got what many of us would call integrity. He's become honest with himself and the psalm expresses that.

'Let everyone who is Godly pray to you
That you many be found.
Surely when the mighty waters rise
They shall not reach them
And then this lovely verse:

You are my hiding place
You will protect me from trouble
And surround me with songs of deliverance.'

Now that's a concept which occurs in many places in Scripture – God being a hiding place; a secure place; a stronghold. There are times, of course when he is the only stronghold, because everything else has fallen away and is defeating us.

At the end of the psalm there is, again, the idea of being in a community of people and helping other people to understand. It's one of the signs that you are getting better that you can encourage other people, when you can use your own suffering, your own pain and your own failure to say to people 'I know what it's like; I trusted in God and this is a good place to go. A place where God will look after you.'

And the last verse says,

'Many are the woes of the wicked
But the Lord's unfailing love
Surrounds the man who trusts in Him.'

Surrounds anybody who trusts in Him... Once again you've got the idea of God's unfailing love.

There's so much encouragement here. And so much realism. I often feel I want to say 'don't fob me off. Don't tell me any bland truisms that it will be all right. It'll be OK. Tell me something that is strong and real. And about God who I do believe can help us in times of need. And take some of those images – the watchman waiting for the morning. The stronghold. The person who will surround us and be a hiding place in those moments when you actually need protection.'

Of course there's a great deal about sin in all of this, of us as human beings doing the wrong thing. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament reflect a great deal about it. I just want to suggest three areas where this is what the Scriptures are often talking about.

Firstly sin is not just a matter of doing naughty things. It is damaging when we talk to children as though sin is about stealing a sweet or being bad-tempered. That often comes from the idea of breaking a boundary, of doing something that you ought not do. And that's transgression.

But another sense of sin is that of just falling short – and which of us doesn't fall short all the time, like someone firing arrows at a target, never quite getting there, never quite feeling that we're good enough, never quite measuring up to the standards of perfection that maybe God has for us and which we certainly have for ourselves. Always falling short...

And, thirdly, sometimes it's a sense of rebellion that we experience, shaking our fist at the world or at God.

So sin is very complex thing and I don't think we have to go into the depths of analysis, but just to observe that it is a very complex thing. In the words of the psalms we can find comfort and help and forgiveness.

I now want to spend a little time on what is probably the most famous of the Penitential Psalms – Psalm 51. The psalm is always associated with David and one of the events in his life where he really fouled up. We tend to think of David as one of the great heroes of the faith, and a bit of a plaster saint, perhaps – someone who was a great leader, a great warrior, a great psalmist, and a great role model. Certainly Jewish thinking would encourage us to think of him in that sort of way – one of the great people who shaped Israel.

I remember some years ago when I decided to read the whole life of David in Scripture I came to the conclusion that he was a bit of a bounder! He lived quite a special life, but, my goodness, he did a lot of terrible things! One of them is this famous incident where he takes a fancy to Bathsheba, the wife of one of his generals called Uriah. He arranges for her husband to be put in the front line of a battle where he will be killed, and meanwhile David, who avoids the battle and stays at home, gets to work on Bathsheba who has no choice in the matter. She is often depicted as though she was the bad person, like Eve, who gets blamed for giving Adam the fruit, as though he had no part in it by reaching out and taking it.

[The speaker referred to *Bathsheba at her bath* by Rembrandt.

See <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/baroque-art1/holland/v/rembrandt-van-rijn-bathsheba-at-her-bath-1654>)

She is sitting by her water pool with a letter in her hand and a look of resignation on her face. Because what choice did she have? If the king says ‘Come hither’, you go. Or you die. So Rembrandt shows a certain amount of sympathy for Bathsheba in this situation.

But there’s no sympathy really to be had for David. He was wrong. What he did was despicable. He had a man killed and he took the man’s wife – not just a matter of sexual sin: the Bible doesn’t make a lot of that. But he’s dishonoured Uriah, and broken an important contract between a man and a woman. Then, we’re told in those two chapters of 2 Samuel, that Nathan the Prophet goes to him and reveals to him that he was wrong: you were the man and you were wrong. It took quite a lot of bravery on behalf of the prophet to go to the king and tell him he was wrong.

Have mercy on me, O God
According to your steadfast love;
According to your abundant mercy
Blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.

(No attempt at all to cover it up here!)

Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
And done what is evil in your sight,
So that you are justified in your sentence
And blameless when you pass judgement.

Indeed I was born guilty,
A sinner when my mother conceived me.

(Ultimately David sees it as having offended God. For goodness' sake, he had certainly offended the family of Uriah. He'd certainly offended Bathsheba. But ultimately he gets it right – that all of that misdeed was actually an offence to God. God has higher standards than that. What has really been terrible is that it has broken his relationship with God.)

You desire truth in the inward being,
Therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow,
Let me hear joy and sadness;
Let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins
And blot out my iniquities.

(He just wants a sense of forgiveness. He wants it all to be put right, and to be cleansed.)

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And put a new and right spirit within me.

(Notice how inward all of this is. It's all very intimate. In fact this is what makes this psalm so precious as though David almost miraculously allows people like you and me see what was actually in his heart. In his black heart which had done this dreadful deed. He lets us know that more than anything he wants a clean heart. He wants forgiveness, to be restored to friendship with God. He goes on to say that he wants God to restore him to the joy of salvation. Then again he turns outwards again.)

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
And sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed O God,
O God of my salvation,
And my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

There's definitely a sense in which what David has done may not be like anything you and I might have done in the past. But the profundity of his feeling; the desire for cleansing; the desire for a clean heart and a new and a right spirit is the sort of thing that you and I, I think, can identify with. It's one of the reasons that Scripture says in another part that God regarded David as a man after his own heart. Not that he never sinned, failed or did anything wrong. But it's all about him wanting to be right before God. Almost a sense of being washed in water, cleansed...

One of the very attractive things I find on Easter Saturday in this church - St Michael's – and many other churches - is the practice of having a service where we renew our baptismal vows. I rather enjoy it down by the font with a sprig of rosemary where we are splashed with water. It's dramatic, and it's a lovely sense of 'Here we are. Good Friday happened yesterday; Easter Sunday, with the resurrection and the hope that comes from that, is

tomorrow. And this Easter Saturday we will renew our baptismal vows – renew that sense of cleansing that baptism is all about.’

Create in me a clean heart, O God.

(The speaker plays Allegri’s *Miserere*,

See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36Y_ztEWINE

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