

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.

Thursday March 4

1 John 1:1-10 – undeceiving ourselves

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

4 We write this to make our joy complete.

5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

6 If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

A face stares out at you out from the television screen. It's a man wearing a hospital gown and an oxygen mask; he's clearly scared. Then another face, a woman dressed in surgical scrubs and with another mask; she looks exhausted. Then another scared hospital patient and another exhausted hospital worker. All staring at you, all of them saying nothing. Then a printed message on the screen: 'Look them in the eye and tell them you are doing all you can to prevent the spread of Coronavirus'.

Some of the statistics have been shocking: figures for infections, hospitalisations, people so ill they need days or even weeks on ventilators. Then the deaths, each one leaving behind bereaved loved ones who couldn't be at their bedsides at the point of death, their places taken by yet another exhausted nurse or doctor. We blamed the figures on the virus. It passes so easily from one person to another, and especially this new mutation that started in Kent back in December. Remember that printed message on the screen: 'Look them in the eye and tell them you are doing all you can to prevent the spread of Coronavirus'. How much should we blame on the virus, and how much on *ourselves*?

It's been so easy to be careless with social distancing, with wearing masks, with washing your hands. The restrictions were relaxed a bit over Christmas, we faced the temptation to bend the rules as far as we thought we could get away with, and look what happened. Infection rates went through the roof. I can blame it all on other people of course, but those people in hospital were asking me: '.... Tell them *you* are doing all you can ...'.

Then I hear words about PENITENCE from John's first letter in the New Testament: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us". We're not talking about breaking some religious rule designed to stop you having a good time. The great commandment 'love your neighbour as yourself' that Jesus draws our attention to is far simpler than that, but as we've found out in the past twelve months, very challenging. What we've seen in our hospitals is a stark reminder of what happens when we don't take it seriously enough.

And that's why what Saint John said needs saying again:

'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'

Or as the ancient Christian writer, Augustine of Hippo put it: 'Before God can deliver us we must undeceive ourselves'. And I'm not inclined to argue with him.

Friday March 5

2 Chronicles 7:11-16 – repenting of what?

11 When Solomon had finished the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the LORD and in his own palace,

12 the LORD appeared to him at night and said: “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.

13 “When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people,

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

15 Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.

16 I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.

“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

So says God to King Solomon when the construction of the new temple in Jerusalem was completed many centuries ago. His words are recorded in the Old Testament, in the Second Book of Chronicles chapter 7. I've often heard Christians come out with these words at times of crisis – a command ('REPENT'), and a promise of forgiveness and healing. Given the content of this promise, it's no surprise that it resonates so strongly at a time like this. But I find myself asking: what exactly is it that we need to repent of? Today and tomorrow, let's think about that a little more deeply.

Yesterday we recalled the second great commandment of the Jewish and Christian faiths: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. Well, have I? I could decide to put my own interests ahead of others; all sorts of other things then follow. I start objecting to restrictions on my personal freedoms: one 83 year-old became a minor celebrity last year when she said in a TV news interview that she didn't 'give a sod' about restrictions put in place to protect people from the spread of the virus. I easily forget that the restrictions are not just about protecting *me* from other people; it's about protecting other people from *me*. Remember, scientists tell us that there are many ordinary people like me – like us - walking around carrying the virus but without any symptoms; they don't know they've got it. If we then ignore the restrictions, or get careless, other people catch it, some get hospitalised, some get very ill indeed, and some of them die.

Something similar applies to masks. I could say, 'I don't need to wear a mask' or 'I object to wearing a mask'. Again, the point about wearing masks is not so much to protect me from other people, as to protect other people from me. So there are two different attitudes I could take. One is to put myself and what I chose to do first. The second is to decide that I'll start doing all I can to protect other people from catching the virus. That is what REPENTANCE is all about.

Saturday March 6

Isaiah 24:1-8 – spoiling creation

- 1** See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants—
- 2** it will be the same for priest as for people, for master as for servant, for mistress as for maid, for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor.
- 3** The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The LORD has spoken this word.
- 4** The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish.
- 5** The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.
- 6** Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left.
- 7** The new wine dries up and the vine withers; all the merrymakers groan.
- 8** The gaiety of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the revelers has stopped, the joyful harp is silent.

"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. " Yesterday we thought about those words of God to King Solomon. In a word: repent! But again the question we explored yesterday: what exactly does REPENTANCE mean?

Part of God's promise here is the healing of the land. But in a stark vision that the Old Testament prophet Isaiah paints in chapter 24, the earth lies devastated as a result of people's sin. Now fast forward to the present day: massive floods in Bangladesh, to out-of-control forest fires in California and increasingly frequent droughts in Africa. The results of global warming are there for us all to see on the TV news. Tragically, most of the human suffering that results is borne by the world's poorest people. We've heard less talk of climate change recently, because this pandemic faces us with a much more immediate threat. Yet there are scientists warning us that there is a possible link between climate change and a raging virus.

Because of climate change, many species of birds and animals are on the move. That brings some of them closer than ever to towns and cities, with the increasing threat of diseases they carry jumping into the human population. That has already happened in the 20th century with Ebola and HIV. Is this how the Coronavirus pandemic started? Possibly, although by no means certain; experts from the World Health Organisation were recently in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where it all seems to have started, and they have not discounted this. The city certainly has a huge market where many wild animals such as pangolins are being traded on a daily basis.

Strangely, there are people who believe the pandemic is a hoax; there are plenty who will say the same thing about global warming. We can bury our heads in the sand if we wish, but from

teenagers such as Greta Thunberg to 90 year-olds such as Sir David Attenborough, the warning voices will continue to alert us about failing to switch to a more thoughtful and responsible use of the precious resources that Planet Earth provides us with. And that means that the REPENTANCE God challenged people to in the days of King Solomon apply equally to us. We have power as never before to render large expanses of this planet uninhabitable by selfish and careless use of resources; but with more responsible and thoughtful lifestyles, we still have time to repair the enormous damage we have done.

Monday March 8

Luke 10:25-37 – who is my neighbour?

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

27 He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Even in *University Challenge*, where some of the best brains in the country are on show, it's the question on the bible that can stump them. But even when most people know little of what's in the bible, the story of the Good Samaritan rings bells in people's heads. ‘Who is my neighbour?’ is the starter for 10 in Luke's Gospel chapter 10. A Samaritan is the hero, risking his own safety by stopping in bandit country to rescue an injured Jewish traveller. It's the Samaritan rather than one of the religious people in the story who's the goodie. On the one hand, he represents the enemy: Jews and Samaritans didn't get on. On the other hand, the Samaritan came from up north. He was someone who lived *somewhere else*. This was the man who acted as a neighbour.

So who is *my* neighbour in the pandemic? It's not just the people I know: the health care worker a few doors up the street, or the frail old lady one door down. It's the people I might get too close too in the supermarket if I'm a bit careless; or the person in the queue in front of me, buying a coffee and a scone at the local takeaway. Then I see TV news pictures of people fighting for breath on a Covid ward in my local hospital. How did they get infected? Was I in the chain of infection that put them in there, frightened and not sure of whether they'll ever come out alive? The way a virus spreads means that people like that are also my neighbours, whether I realised it or not.

And who is looking after them? That nurse or doctor who is probably exhausted, possibly suffering from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, as we now know some are. They too are my neighbours. What about the man up the street whose business has folded, or who's now out of a job? The way the virus spreads, often through our carelessness, lack of concern or downright selfishness means that these people too are my neighbours, whether I realised it or not.

Then think of the astronomic sums of money the government is having to borrow to keep the country's economy afloat. That will have to be paid back over many years, not just by us but by our children and their children. They too are, or are going to be, my neighbours. So think again to that frightened patient in intensive care, struggling to breathe, and recall the TV advert that challenges you to say: 'Look them in the eye and tell them you are doing all you can to prevent the spread of Coronavirus'.

Tuesday March 9

Philippians 2:1-11 – laying aside my ‘freedom’

- 1** If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,
- 2** then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.
- 3** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.
- 4** Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.
- 5** Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
- 6** Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
- 7** but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
- 8** And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!
- 9** Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,
- 10** that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
- 11** and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Today, let's dwell one more time on the theme of REPENTANCE. Many people have been trying to comply with restrictions on our individual freedoms to help limit the spread of the pandemic. At the same time, there have been anti-lockdown protests in London, Belfast, across Europe and in other parts of the world. Do the protesters have real concerns that the rest of us should be aware of, or are they simply being selfish?

It's important that if I'm willing, for a while, to lay aside up my freedom to go out and enjoy myself any way I wish, I need to make sure I know why I'm doing it. So here goes. Firstly, I'm doing it for the sake of others. As one Northern Ireland MLA said, 'This is about us taking responsibility for one another'. That's the nearest I've heard any politician come to the second great commandment: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Secondly, I'm thinking about who said that – Jesus, widely acknowledged beyond the Christian faith as a great teacher; in Islam he is the second greatest of all the prophets. But he is also the one whom Christians worship as God the Son, because the scriptures reveal him as far more than a great teacher, or even *the* greatest teacher of all time.

In the New Testament you find Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi. In chapter 2 he explains how their relationships with each should work: "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." What follows shows us how his mind was working. Look at Jesus as our example, he was saying to them: Jesus was in very nature God, but, he went on "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!"

What does he mean by Jesus ‘making himself nothing’? However dimly I see through the mist to the glorious reality of this, it does mean that he gave up his position with his Father in heaven to come to live in our midst and then go to His death. For my sake – for all our sakes - he laid aside all that was His by right. Emily Elliott’s 19th century hymn, still a firm favourite in many churches, puts it beautifully. It starts like this:

‘Thou didst leave Thy throne and thy kingly crown / when thou camest to earth for me’

In due course, I shall look forward to taking up freedoms laid aside for a while. I’ll go to church; I may even find myself leading a service or preaching. Let’s continue to lay aside for a while some of our freedoms and stay with the restrictions. Like you, I hope it won’t be for too much longer now.