

Psalm 32.

1. *Happy the one whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sin is covered.*
2. *Happy the one to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile.*
3. *For I held my tongue; my bones wasted away through my groaning all the day long.*
4. *Your hand was heavy upon me day and night; my moisture was dried up like the drought in summer.*
5. *Then I acknowledged my sin to you and my iniquity I did not hide.*
6. *I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*
7. *Therefore let all the faithful make their prayers to you in time of trouble; in the great water flood, it shall not reach them.*
8. *You are a place for me to hide in; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with songs of deliverance.*
9. *'I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; I will guide you with my eye.*
10. *'Be not like horse and mule which have no understanding; whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you.'*
11. *Great tribulations remain for the wicked, but mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord.*
12. *Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; shout for joy, all who are true of heart.*

Refrain

Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord;
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

Psalm 32 is an individual thanksgiving, and is one of the penitential psalms. It was probably used in the temple on the occasion of a guilt offering.

The psalm opens with two beatitudes (vv.1 and 2), both beginning with the word happy (or blessed). In vv. 3-6, the psalmist speaks of his feeling of separation from God and his forgiveness. In vv. 7 and 8 he speaks of his receiving the grace of God, then he instructs the worshippers like a teacher, and invites them to praise God with him (v.12).

The feeling of separation from God is expressed by the words, transgression (rebellion), sin (wandering away), and iniquity (distortion). Because he has not admitted his condition either to himself or God, he feels very guilty, to the point of

wasting away (v.3, 'For I held my tongue; my bones wasted away through my groaning all the day long').

But once he has admitted his guilt and has acknowledged it before God, he is forgiven and returned to a relationship with God with no reservations. (v.1 'Happy the one whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sin is covered. '), and God's forgiveness brought healing and blessing.

Then he goes on to say that the person, who calls upon God will not be overwhelmed when trouble comes in like a flood (v.7, 'Therefore let all the faithful make their prayers to you in time of trouble; in the great water flood, it shall not reach them'). Suffering may lead to confidence in God's saving power (v.8 'You are a place for me to hide in, you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with songs of deliverance.')

Verses 9 and 10 appear to be spoken by God. and the psalmist is assured of God's saving presence.

Finally (v.12), the psalmist realised that, when he opened himself to God, he felt the steadfast love of the Lord all around him.

The concept of forgiveness is one, which we do not always find easy. Jesus, in answer to Peter's question about how many times we should forgive, said, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.', which means that mercy should be without limit, because that is how God behaves (Psalm 103: 'The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness').

If a pupil misbehaves in class, he may be reprimanded or punished, but that has to be the end of it. If we keep on mentioning it, it will cause resentment, a feeling that he isn't liked or that he is being treated differently from everyone else.

Sometimes, if a serious crime has been committed, we may feel that the sentence is too lenient. For example, the relatives of someone, who has been killed, may feel that they have been denied justice. In cases like this, it may take a long time to be able to find any sort of forgiveness.

Yet, we cannot move on if we are unable to forgive. The trouble is that failure to forgive can breed a festering resentment. It can lead to extreme anger and cause stress, anxiety and depression. It can develop into hatred and, maybe, further violence (look at the situation in the Middle East, where conflict has lasted for years). It can destroy us and our communities and go on for a very long time. If we cannot forgive, it may damage us more than that person, who has done us wrong.

Learning to forgive may be beneficial to our mental and physical health, help us to look to the future with more hope and develop our relationship with other people.

But it will take time. If we look back over our lives, for example, when someone close to us dies, we may feel that we could have done things differently, feel guilty at not having done enough or not having behaved in the right way. Guilt is corrosive. So, we may need to forgive ourselves, something, which we don't always find easy. In Psalm 32, the psalmist speaks of his bones wasting away (v.3).

Jesus teaches that within God's love there is a safe place, where we can find healing and deliverance. This is echoed in Psalm 32, v.8, 'You are a place for me to hide in; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with songs of deliverance.'

In the end, the psalmist invites us to rejoice that we are forgiven by God and that our guilt is put away. We are not to be stubborn like horses and mules (v.10. 'Be not like horse and mule which have no understanding'), but to be open to God's steadfast love. Then we shall rejoice, be able to look forward, free from resentment and guilt and able to face the future with confidence and in peace.

Prayer

Almighty God,
who called your Church to bear witness
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:
help us to proclaim the good news of your love,
that all who hear it may be drawn to you;
through him who was lifted up on the cross,
and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever,
Amen.

(Collect for Trinity 13)