

Psalm 51.

1. *Have mercy on me, O God, in your great goodness; according to the abundance of your compassion blot out my offences.*
2. *Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.*
3. *For I acknowledge my faults and my sin is ever before me.*
4. *Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,*
5. *So that you are justified in your sentence and righteous in your judgement.*
6. *I have been wicked even from my birth, a sinner when my mother conceived me.*
7. *Behold, you desire truth deep within me and shall make me understand wisdom in the depths of my heart.*
8. *Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.*
9. *Make me hear of joy and gladness, that the bones you have broken may rejoice.*
10. *Turn your face from my sins and blot out all my misdeeds.*
11. *Make me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*
12. *Cast me not away from your presence and take not your holy spirit from me.*
13. *Give me again the joy of your salvation and sustain me with your gracious spirit;*
14. *Then shall I teach your ways to the wicked and sinners shall return to you.*
15. *Deliver me from my guilt, O God, the God of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.*
16. *O Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.*
17. *For you desire no sacrifice, else I would give it; you take no delight in burnt offerings.*
18. *The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*
19. *O be favourable and gracious to Zion; build up the walls of Jerusalem.*
20. *Then you will accept sacrifices offered in righteousness, the burnt offerings and oblations; then shall they offer up bulls on your altar.*

Refrain

Make me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

Psalm 51 is an individual lament, and it is one of the penitential psalms, used especially on Ash Wednesday.

The psalmist begins by stating that God's mercy and steadfast love create the possibility of forgiveness.

In vv. 3-5, the four aspects of repentance are detailed:

1. recognition that sin has obtained control over one's life (v.3, 'For I acknowledge my faults and my sin is ever before me.')
2. understanding that sin is directed against God and not against other people. (v.4, 'Against you only have I sinned.')
3. willingness to accept responsibility, (v.4, 'and done what is evil in your sight.')
4. abandonment of all claim to merit. (v.5, 'So that you are justified in your sentence and righteous in your judgement.')

It recognises that in life there is temptation all around, and at no point since conception and birth can one claim innocence.

In the next section, (vv.7-9), God's nature is seen as desiring sincerity in a person's inner life. (v.7, 'Behold, you desire truth deep within me,') God alone can implant truth and purge (or clean) the sinner. Sin can be removed only by a sort of vigorous scrubbing and a cleansing agent as strong as the herb hyssop! (v.8, 'Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean,' - sounds a bit like caustic soda!!).

This leads to new life (clean heart) and a new life power (right spirit), characterised by great joy (v.13, 'Give me again the joy of your salvation and sustain me with your gracious spirit.')

This will go on to sharing the experience of God's love with other people. For the psalmist, this will be by teaching, by public testimony and by taking part in the temple services. (vv.14-16, 'Then shall I teach your ways to the wicked and sinners shall return to you. O Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.')

A broken spirit (v.18, 'The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit.')

has been replaced by conformity with God's will.

The last two verses come from the Exile period, when someone, who valued sacrifices, longed for the time when the ruined temple and its ceremonies would be restored. (v.19, 'O be favourable and gracious to Zion; build up the walls of Jerusalem.')

Sin means being separated from God, which for us is a sort of punishment. Cleansing means being reunited with God, which brings renewal, as it does when we mend relationships with other people. So, in Psalm 51, cleansing and renewal lead to rebuilding and thanksgiving. Underlying all this is the knowledge of the grace of God; this must be a reason for joy, which is why in this psalm the acknowledgement of sin is turned into gladness.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins

and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

(Collect for Ash Wednesday)