

Psalm 51.1-12

Have mercy on me, O God, in your enduring goodness:
according to the fullness of your compassion
blot out my offences.

Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness:
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I acknowledge my rebellion:
and my sin is ever before me.

Against you only have I sinned
and done what is evil in your eyes:
so you will be just in your sentence
and blameless in your judging.

Surely in wickedness I was brought to birth:
and in sin my mother conceived me.

You that desire truth in the inward parts:
O teach me wisdom in the secret places of the heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean:
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me hear of joy and gladness:
let the bones which you have broken rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins:
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God:
and renew a right spirit within me.

Do not cast me out from your presence:
do not take your holy spirit from me.

O give me the gladness of your help again:
and support me with a willing spirit.

Matthew 6.1-6, 6.16-21

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’

Psalms 51 is perfect for Ash Wednesday. The poetry of its words admit fault, desire new direction, and seek relationship- all at the same time, and all fitting the start of Lent.

In the season of Lent we are made aware of sin and death, and of the possibility of new life in Jesus.

Sin is not a concept easily recognised these days. We don't talk about it much, even in Christian circles, and we are unlikely to think of ourselves as sinners. It is seen as a rather outdated concept.

Perhaps that's because our ideas about sin and what it is are incorrect- we don't really understand the Biblical concept of 'sin'. We tend to see sin as something other people do, and we take great delight in the deliciousness of other people's sins. Not only the gossip magazines and columns but a great deal of our TV programs and movies, and our books, focus on crime, murder, adultery, revenge- you name it.

We also make the mistake of seeing 'sin' as something external, something people DO, like swearing or taking drugs, stealing, cheating- all of those nasty things. According to Scripture, sin is much more internal than external in nature and is much more about what goes on inside us.

If we think in terms of cause and effect we could say that sin is the cause and sins are the effect.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus offers us a warning about the dangers of 'practicing our piety before others': the insidious sin of doing right things for wrong reasons.

Jesus assumes that his followers will pray, fast, and give alms. We are of course familiar with prayer, and with giving to the church or to charities; perhaps not so much with fasting as a spiritual discipline.

What Jesus is saying is that when we do these things, we should do them without drawing attention to ourselves in order to receive any kind of reward. He is talking about our motives.

If I give money to a good cause so I can get a tax rebate, what are my motives? If I serve on a committee because it will look good on my resume, what are my motives? If I volunteer for the church so that people will see what a good person I am..... you know what I'm saying.

Lent gives us the opportunity to examine our motives, to look inwards and be completely honest with God and ourselves. Not one of us is without sin; I don't have to be a serial killer or a con-artist to be a sinner, because my sin is much more likely to be well hidden- from myself as well as other people.

Sometimes it can be difficult for us to discern our own motives because they are deeply buried. I might do a great deal of good things to help people, but that may be because I have a deep-seated need to earn a sense of worth or the respect of others. Or I might force myself to go to church and pray because I am terrified that God will reject me.

Jesus told us to store up treasures in heaven and not on earth, because our hearts are where our treasure is. There is nothing wrong with having nice things unless those things are more important to us than following Jesus. Again, it's about what is in our hearts.

When we receive the sign of the cross in ashes on our foreheads, we are reminded that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. This is a good reminder that this is not all about us- it's about God, the God who actually wants a relationship with us, who wants to forgive us and help us to live better lives.

Let us take this season of Lent seriously, examine ourselves honestly, confess our sins unreservedly, turn to God and open ourselves completely to God's loving, cleansing, new life.