

Psalm 51: 1-4,6,10-11,16-17

A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had violated Bathsheba.

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ 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.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

This psalm is in the genre of what are called “penitential psalms”. The dictionary definition of penitence is: “the action of feeling or showing sorrow or regret for having done wrong.” The psalm as it is composed and expressed is an act of penitence before God. For what? The heading tells us. It identifies this psalm as a psalm of king David and the occasion of its composition is David’s having committed grave sin. One of his top military commanders was a man called Uriah. Once when the army and its commanders were out on the field of battle and David was back at the palace, he took a stroll on the terrace and spotted a beautiful woman bathing. Her name was Bathsheba and she happened to be the wife of Uriah. But David was so taken with her he wanted to claim her for himself. Clearly Bathsheba had no say in the matter, even as David as King came to claim her in secret. The only way to claim her openly as a wife, however, was if Uriah was no longer alive. So obsessed was David with wanting Bathsheba for himself, he had his top general, Joab, arrange an accident on the field of battle, ensuring Uriah was killed. How awful this story is all around.

But then, there was the prophet Nathan. Like any good prophet, Nathan is committed to truth and justice with little thought to his personal welfare. He confronts David with the sin he has committed. And here's the one admirable thing David does. He does not deny it, justify himself or get angry and threaten the prophet with death. He accepts the judgement and carries deep regret and remorse about what he has done. He will also accept some difficult consequences as they unfold and interpret them as a fitting judgement upon himself. Rather than burnt offerings and sacrifices, David gives to God the only worthy sacrifice he can make in all this: "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

What about you? Perhaps you have not committed a sin as great as king David's. But any of us commit sin, whether we're caught doing it or it lives in our hearts and memories. All of us commit sin, whether those affected know we are to blame for their suffering or not. Even as being found out can be totally devastating for us, sometimes it is the opportunity to confront the truth and seek out a pathway for repentance toward healing and possible reconciliation. The danger for us is if no one knows and we are not found out. Sin then remains in our hearts and consciences, our memories and our regrets. This psalm is an invitation to confess the sin and seek to make amends. It is an invitation to purge our hearts, experience cleansing and refreshment, becoming ever more transparent to truth.

Psalm 51 is an invitation to trust that, as Jesus declared, "the truth shall set you free." Do you believe the truth will set you free? What truth needs to be set free in you?

PRAYER: We need you, O God... We need your cleansing as much as your renewal. We need your truth as much as we need healing and comfort. We need to be confronted by your call to rise up higher and do better, even as we need your grace and forgiveness for doing worse. Meet us where we are. Forgive us for sin acknowledged and hidden. Forgive us sin that has caused pain and hurt to another even as it may seem petty to us... Transform us through your love not only as we absorb it within, but as it may manifest outwardly as care and concern, and a commitment to pursue truth and justice in all our dealings; Amen.