

TRUSTING THE JOURNEY

Psalm 51: 1-12; Luke 15: 1-10

Have you ever felt bad about something you did, really bad? Let me read the opening words of Psalm 51 again: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” Clearly, the Psalmist is feeling regret and remorse about something done, using words like transgression, iniquity and sin to describe it. What was it exactly? We’re not given details. However, like many psalms there is a heading that’s given, and the heading gives some context. We’re told that the author of the Psalm is King David. We’re told that he wrote this Psalm, and I quote “when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” OK. Some explanation required...

David was the most celebrated King in Israel’s history. But David also made mistakes, mistakes that really hurt people whether that was his intention or not. Hurting another person is also hurting God according to Jesus. That’s the way it goes. What we do to others we do to God and that heightens the badness of it. And someone who has lots of responsibility like a king, affects a lot of people by their decisions and actions. They’ve got that much more to be accountable for. OK. So what did David do? Here’s one of his big mistakes as recounted in the biblical book of 2 Samuel:

David had made a success of himself as a king. He had won many battles and built up his kingdom. He was very popular and very much loved. He had wives and children. And finally, he had some time off. So, one day, on his palace roof, enjoying a lazy afternoon, he looked across his palace and saw a woman bathing in her courtyard. She was beautiful. She had no idea anyone was watching her. But David was watching and he was captivated. He asked his court staff to find out who she was. Her name was Bathsheba he was told. She was the wife of Uriah, an army commander. But David wanted this woman. He lusted after her. And being a king and one who had done so much for his people, including Uriah, he should be able to have what he wants, no? He had earned it.

But how was he going to do this? It didn’t matter what Bathsheba wanted. That’s not the way the world worked in ancient times. If you were a king, you could make things happen as you wanted. But what about the consequences? David had Bathsheba brought to him. She knew the deal. It wasn’t her choice to refuse even if she wanted to. And so, David had his way with Bathsheba. But then came the first problem. Bathsheba got pregnant. David was told. What was he to do? He didn’t want Uriah to find out. It was disgraceful to do that to your own army commander.

So, David called up his top general: Joab. Joab was great at what he did, but he was also brutal and ruthless and that could come in handy at times. David asked Joab about Uriah. Well, he was told, Uriah was a top commander in the army, much loved by his men. That was a problem. “Have Uriah come home as a reward and a break for his hard work”, David tells Joab. So Uriah came home after being away for months. David acknowledged him, thanked him for his service and told him he had earned an overnight break at home. The goal, of course, was to have Uriah sleep with his beautiful wife. No worries explaining the pregnancy then.

But David hadn't factored in the kind of person Uriah was. His men were still out on the field fighting away from their homes. Uriah couldn't in good conscience go home and enjoy himself. And so, he slept outside instead. He refused to have a night off with his wife as the privilege of being a commander. No wonder his men were so loyal. Ok. Plan B. David invited Uriah over to the palace the second night and made sure there was lots of great food and wine. He ordered Uriah to eat and drink and made sure Uriah was nice and drunk. You know, drink and loss of inhibitions go together right? But again, Uriah refused to go home and enjoy what none of his men could enjoy.

So what about a plan c? Now things got really ugly. David had Joab plan an assassination. This way he could even claim Bathsheba and the child for himself. But how could he do this when her husband was very much alive, popular and surrounded by his men? Well, he had to die on the battle field and it had to look like a genuine casualty of the fighting rather than a sabotage. Joab worked up a plan. They would make an assault on the enemy and make sure Uriah and his men would lead it. Knowing Uriah, he would be right in the thick of it with his men. Once they approached the enemy line nice and close, Joab would sound the battle horn. The enemy would rise up to attack. And then, Joab would sound the horn to retreat, making sure Uriah and his men would be at the front of the enemy's counter-attack. Overwhelmed and surrounded, what do you think would happen to Uriah and his men?

Ok. David says, do it, and let me know when it's done. And so it was. Uriah was killed. Bathsheba was now a widow. David claimed her as his new wife. It was supposed to be an honour. But isn't this an awful story? So why was David celebrated as a king beyond his success on the battlefield and the building up of the kingdom? Why was he seen as the kind of person who could be the author of this psalm?

Here's the thing. Israel had priests, but also prophets. Priests made sure weekly worship and rituals for all important occasions would happen. Prophets, however, were the mouthpiece of God keeping the king and the people honest and accountable before God. God was above all, even the king, and prophets were there to remind the king and the people that no one was above accountability to God. So what did God think about what David had done? Nathan the prophet goes straight into the court to tell David. He confronts him and he

condemns him on behalf of God. Nathan even predicts some serious consequences to befall David because of his sin. We rarely imagine all the consequences of our actions until it's too late.

So how does David respond? Does he claim he's the king and he can do whatever he wants because God is not around and Nathan is only allowed to speak and to exist because the king allows him to? Does David deny what he has done, or blame all kinds of circumstances for leading him to it? Does David look for some pity and understanding from God and the prophet because he's so overwhelmed with stress and responsibility he needs a little bit of room to mess up here and there? He's only human after all. No. David takes the hit. He accepts all that Nathan tells him. He deserves the condemnation. David trusts the journey of confession wherever it must lead. He will make reparation where possible, face the consequences of what can and cannot be changed, and the hope that he will become the better human being and better king the people and God deserve. This is what distinguishes David as king. He faces his flaws and mistakes again and again, he takes responsibility and he pays the price in the suffering he endures and the reparation he must make.

And yet, there is also cleansing and renewal in the journey of confession. Truthfulness and confession are cathartic if you trust the outcome. David will grow as a person in wisdom, personal insight, and compassion for the situation of others. Mistakes faced and responsibility taken will make him a better human being and a better king, even though they will also cost him.

David is a good counter-example to so many of our own politicians and heads of state today. In the face of corruption or injustice, how often do our politicians deny what they have done or try to shift blame on their opponents? On the other hand we have truth and reconciliation commissions. The power of such commissions is that transgressions, iniquities and sins are faced and named in all their truth. Confession is called for through the sharing of stories. People are invited to listen and take responsibility. But how do we trust the journey of confession when there is fear of what may happen? What if we are overwhelmed with guilt and shame and what if there are serious consequences involving costly reparation? Isn't it easier and safer to just downplay things, deny them or explain them away? Are we responsible for so much that happens after all? There's always someone else or some circumstance that can be blamed, no?

But here's where David and our Psalm can teach us a thing or two. Confession is overwhelming and fearful unless we trust the journey and where it will take us. If we trust that confession will lead to us becoming better human beings, more fulfilled with healthier relationships and more genuine inner peace of conscience, then isn't it a question of faith more than anything? We need to trust, and that requires courage because there is risk that

we will be rejected, shamed and condemned rather than given a way through to becoming better human beings.

Our psalm speaks to the inner journey of ourselves before God: “you desire truth in the inward being... purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow... create in me a clean heart, O God and put a new and right spirit within me.” Truthfulness is about confession, which then leads to inner cleansing. Inner cleansing is cathartic and liberating. Such catharsis and liberation creates space in us for a clean heart and a new spirit to grow in us. The journey of confession also humanizes us so that we are more understanding of others rather than more judgemental. The more we deny our own sin, the more judgemental we become of the sins of others.

And this brings us to our gospel reading. If we have the inner journey of confession between God and us, then the outer journey of confession is between us and other human beings. How do we face others we have wounded whether that has been our intention or not? Taking responsibility is hard because the consequences are not in our hands. Jesus is in conflict with religious authorities who are more than ready to condemn everyone who isn't like them. But God's moral law is about love above all else. It takes a lot of love to believe that change is possible in people who have messed up. God rejoices when the lost are found. How about you and me? Do we need to believe in others or in ourselves when it comes to change? Can we trust the journey of confession even if makes us vulnerable to the judgement or rejection of others?

David took the path of facing his sin and taking responsibility for what he could and could not make right. Uriah was dead. That couldn't be made right. David interpreted the death of his first child and other trouble with his family relationships as a consequence of his actions. But he never questioned what he deserved. He came to gratitude before God for giving him another chance to try to be a better king. He tried to live with better integrity and greater transparency. Whether he would succeed would be a judgement others would make on his legacy.

What about you and me? Perhaps our sins are not as great as those of David. Perhaps our mistakes haven't wounded as many people or as seriously. But taking the journey of confession seriously in our lives, having a higher standard of morality for ourselves, having greater mercy and understanding for the sins of others, believing In God's rejoicing over us like a woman finding a lost coin or a shepherd finding a lost sheep... This is a journey we are challenged to make again and again throughout our lives and our relationships. But the question is, do we have enough faith to trust the journey?

Let us pray: Give us faith, O God, faith in your love which is deeper, stronger and more enduring than any challenge we must face on our journey of confession... Cleanse and renew us, give us a clean heart and a new and right spirit; Amen.