

The Freedom of Forgiveness

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Ash Wednesday—10th February 2016
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Psalm 32

Introduction

What happens when, on the spiritual way, we fall? What happens when we desert the river of life, the bread of heaven? Are we merely casualties along the way, detritus of the spiritual journey?

That is the subject the psalmist addresses in Ps. 32. The psalmist being a good teacher uses his own experience of this matter to instruct the congregation.

The joy and freedom of the forgiven sinner.

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

We always need to start a journey with the psalms with Psalm 1 and reflect on the word righteous. This Psalm like Ps 1 is a psalm about what it means to be righteous.

Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Here are a couple of questions to help us understand this idea of righteous. 'How can we shape our lives so that they reflect the life of God?' Or 'How can we order our way of living so that it reflects God's love and justice?' In other words, how can our lives be rightly coordinated with God's life?

This psalm makes it clear once and for all that the righteous are not the morally perfect but the restored fallen. If we have made the choice not to be living a life rightly aligned to God's life or, if by sheer apathy, we have let the whole thing slip so our lives are dominated by our own concerns then this psalm addresses us.

It addressed the people of the post exilic period too. On the basis of the prophets they felt they needed to turn again to align themselves with God. They needed to do that personally and also publicly. This psalm is addressed to public worship. (See also Daniel 9, Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9)

That is why the words used here for sin are "missing the mark", "wilful rebellion" and "guilt." This is Israel's basic vocabulary of sin. And it describes simply letting God's agenda slip.

What hope is there?

That is why the Psalm begins with the proclamation of "Good News." To be forgiven is good news; because to be forgiven is to be restored to right relations with God.

Remember we have been seeing as we go how prayer is relational, how it is part of lining ourselves up with God's life, bearers of God's justice and truth, mercy and peace.

The prayer for forgiveness is no different. The prayer of forgiveness is not just cleaning up some dirty little guilty secrets of mine so that I can get on with my life. Forgiveness is the restoration of relationship. And as far as this Psalmist is concerned the relation with God is the primary one. Without that all the rest are skewed by my needs.

The righteous are so because they are forgiven.

Paul uses this Psalm in the most extensive exposition of justification by faith in Romans 3-4 (4.6-8) so now the church reads this psalm in the light of the work of Jesus Christ and faith in him.

This is the most fundamental happiness, the foundational good news; that restoration is possible, reconciliation open to us.

Grace permeates everything. The psalmist has no idea why or how God hold such restoration open to him. That must wait until Good Friday and Easter. All he knows is that God just does. All he knows is that he has mistrusted God and walked away. God offers the way back. Sheer grace. No strings. Welcome home.

Of course, all this is nonsense to the ears of moderns who have much more sophisticated ideas of happiness; tablets, booze, technology, fragile commitments.

So how do go about the business of receiving this forgiveness?

The crucial importance of confession

This is the human path to forgiveness. God's way is to forgive sinners and we do not acknowledge his grace unless we present ourselves to him as sinners.

The confession of sin is part of the prayer of the pilgrim. Confession is not about some penitential flogging of oneself; nor is it simply turning up on God's doorstep and saying, "Well here I am. I am sure you are pleased to see me. Let's get on with the job and forget about past misunderstandings and my little peccadilloes."

Well, no. We know that does not work in ordinary human relationships. There must be taking of responsibility; matters of justice must be dealt with and matters of spurned love, the overreaching of power all must be placed in the mix. It becomes quite complicated and in some cases never gets resolved.

But if we do not take such matters seriously then restoration is not really possible. Ask any victim of abuse. Without confession that encompasses all of the above-responsibility, justice, love, power and reparation-the words are an insult.

Just as this psalm instructs this is the way the whole people of God should respond to grace.

Therefore, let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

Of course there is another way that we might act. Instead of taking responsibility openly in words we could keep silent about it all, never say anything. We might get away with it.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
Selah

But again we know that this is no solution. When we wrong a wife, a husband, a parent, a friend, a child-someone with whom there is a conscious relationship-and we refuse to put that wrong into words, so that there is speech able to be dealt with, the wrong is retained and sheltered and begins to become a living, or better, dying part of us.

The silence must be broken in the presence of the other. Look at the emphasis in this Psalm, "I acknowledged to you...I did not hide...I will confess to the Lord."

Otherwise sin harms, it hardens, it diminishes.

The same holds true for churches and more broadly of nations, too. The same is true of the relationship with God. Adam is the biblical type.

In our day we think that this talk of sin is unhealthy. Trivializing sin so that it is about how much chocolate we eat is unhealthy. Hiding it is unhealthy. Remember sin is refusing to live out God's justice and love due to each. Taking responsibility for our refusal in these matters is critical to all well being.

The indivisible unity in this psalm is "I confess ... I forgive."

The basis of this necessary sequence is faith. Confession is the knocking which opens the door, the seeking that finds, the asking that receives. Confession is confession of faith in God. It is the action of trust that God is a God who keeps promise.

So it is clear that confession of sin must be made with integrity

Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

In other words, even confession can be sinful. The psalmists find deceitful words, false witness, lying utterly repugnant because of the irreparable damage they do to human life, the injustice they perpetrate and the hatred they engender.

In confession we are open to the same duplicity. We deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (1John 1.8-10).

St Augustine in his commentary on this psalm warns: "Do not claim the right to the kingdom on the grounds of your own justice, nor the right to sin on the grounds of God's mercy."

That is, do not claim confession as some kind of good work nor as freedom to easily presume on God's mercy. Both ways are deceit.

Confession and repentance belong together. Repentance is the clarity of mind that gives insight into our true state. It is not an emotion but a great understanding: And issues in a true assessment of the situation for us and others.

On the other hand, the practice of repentance can become so routine, so shallow, so inconsequential, lacking in real seriousness wanting no growth, no change that it is a presumption on mercy and a belief in cheap grace.

For the Christian the cure for deceit comes from keeping the crucified Christ in view as God's judgment on and pardon of our sins.

The way of rejoicing

As difficult as this psalm is this is the path of rejoicing. Happiness and joy do not come from human achievement but grace, the freedom of forgiveness, the setting free of life. Confession is not a work but an act of trust that God keeps promise. It is pure faith.

This psalm ends and psalm 33 begins as celebration of God's steadfast love, his unerring justice his promise to be for us in Jesus.

This is not a gloomy matter. It is a sobering matter but not a sombre one. It brings us up short but it opens up a life. It clears our mind and opens up the future.

And that life and future is one lived joyfully. Conclusion

I understand that we do not readily think of ourselves as being sinners; nor are we inclined to think of our corporate ills in this way, until perhaps they hit us financially and we call it greed.

Maybe if we could take this psalm to heart we could both be happy and find justice and compassion among us.