

Ash Wednesday – 2nd March 2022; Psalm 51:-

Ash Wednesday and the Season of Lent should involve a preparation for the celebration of the Resurrection and the joy and worship of Easter. As part of that preparation and taking the cue from the closing comments on last week's study, we look in detail Psalm 51. This Psalm is useful as a guide to our cleansing of mind and heart as we come to God the Father. Yes, as sinners! But sinners redeemed through faith in the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for us. Through him *"we can with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."* (Hebrews chapter 4, verse 16)

We begin by reflecting on Psalm 24, verses 3 – 5:-

"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from the God of his salvation."

These words stand as a recognition of the Creator. God as sovereign over all the earth must not be approached lightly! The moral requirements for approaching God are carefully set out by these questions, they are similar to those set out in Psalm 15. As we wait expectantly for the presence of the Holy Spirit the onus is on us to prepare ourselves for his coming. The Divine Entrance is pictured in verses 7 – 10 of the same Psalm 24.

Psalm 51 verses 1 – 2, A Cry for Mercy:- Notice that the psalmist neither pleads innocence nor shifts the blame to someone else. Since he knows that he does not deserve forgiveness, he pleads first for mercy, based on God's loving-kindness. In line with this mercy he asks that his transgressions (rebellions) be wiped out and that his iniquity (twistedness) be washed away.

Verses 3 – 6, A Confession of Sin:- *"For I acknowledge my transgressions"*. The psalmist emphasizes the fact that he knows and is constantly aware of his sin and acknowledges that it is more than sin against man. He also recognises the universal tendency towards sin (verse 5) but does not seek to excuse himself on this basis. The depth of his confession is apparent in his desire to open up the inward and hidden parts of his being – one of the hardest things there is for us to do.

Verses 7 – 12, A Plea for Cleansing:- The purging and washing are related to the ritual cleansing (remember the comment on 'hand washing' last week). The plea for a newly created heart and a renewed steadfast spirit shifts the emphasis onto inward cleansing, so vital for an effective spiritual life.

This is the part that is vital for us as we seek to serve our Lord in whatever way he calls us. In this context we need to turn again to the first Letter of John, chapter 1, verse 5 through to chapter 2, verse 6.

Verses 13 – 17, A Vow of Consecration:- *"Then I will teach"*, is a vow to testify to others how the Lord has pardoned his sin and restored him to fellowship. Read 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verses 18 – 21. The cry *"Be reconciled to God"* should be the missionary message from the Church to the world. In verses 16 – 17 the psalmist recognises that his sense of guilt and sin require more than the burnt offerings prescribed in the Law. ("The Day of Atonement" sacrifices are detailed in Leviticus chapter 16, especially verses 29 – 34: this is commented on in Hebrews chapters 9 and 10, especially chapter 10, verses 11 – 22). The offering acceptable to the Lord God is a broken spirit and contrite heart.

Verses 18 – 19, A prayer for Restoration:- Maybe the message here for us is that when individuals and the church recognise their need; then (and only then?) will the Lord give blessing and growth! Remember the traditional reading for Ash Wednesday from the Book of the Prophet Joel, chapter 2, verse 17 - *"Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say 'Spare thy people, O Lord, and make not thy heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"*

This is the kind of leadership needed as we witness to the world the love of God the Father, shown to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. (John chapter 3, verse 16)