

**Oct 11th 2015 (1662 Communion) Series: OT Prayers. After Abraham:
David: God listens to sinners Ps 51.1-19; Luke 19.1-10 (Zacchaeus)**

This is the second in a series of sermons on OT prayers. Psalm 51, a famous psalm of contrition and penitence, which we heard read just now, has always been regarded as David's confession to God after the most shameful incident in his life. The writer of 1 Kings (15.5) says "**David did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.**" I'm sure you all know the outlines of the story: let me remind you very briefly. (2 Samuel 11) It all started in the spring, when David had sent his army off to ravage the Ammonites, but stayed at home himself, even though, as the writer pointedly says, it was the time of year "**when kings go forth to battle.**" He was strolling on his roof in late afternoon when he spotted a woman bathing, "**and she was very beautiful**" the writer adds. After asking who she was, he sent for her. As he was king, she probably had little choice. And sure enough, she became pregnant. So far, so bad, and already there are several unanswered questions, like "why was David not away fighting with his army?" and "why was Bathsheba bathing in full view of the palace roof?" And did he really not know who she was, and that her husband was away on active service?

Then David went on to make things much, much worse, by summoning her husband, Uriah the Hittite, back from the battlefield, hoping that he would have his audience with the king, then go home and sleep with his wife, and so cover up David's part in the pregnancy. But Uriah, whose behaviour went, you might say,

well beyond the call of duty, refused to go home while the rest of the army was out in the field, even when David made him drunk. So eventually David arranged for Uriah to be stranded in the most dangerous part of the battlefield, where he was killed. In effect David murdered him, and when Uriah's death was reported to David, the king said "Oh well, don't worry. These things happen in war." What an extraordinary story! Here is David, the greatest of the OT kings – a hero if ever there was one – behaving like a villain. And the chronicler pulls no punches, telling the story bluntly and revealing David's guilt in full. It would be a bold novelist who risked sending a plot like this to his editor! Truth is surely stranger than fiction! But of course the whole point of the story is God's mercy. It's not so much about the great man David, although it is in part, but its main purpose is to show how even a very special man like David, chosen by God to accomplish great things, which he did, could sink to such depths of villainy and still come back to God and be forgiven and carry on doing God's will.

Now in a way, this is a sort of "nuts and bolts" topic. "God listens to sinners" is the title. Sin and forgiveness are everyday realities for us, a central aspect of our Christian lives. And the bible is full of material on just this subject. So what can we learn from this particular incident, and the story of Zacchaeus?

1. First and most obvious point: David's sin was terrible, but nevertheless he knew that God could and would forgive him. Verse 7: **Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow,** and verse 8: **Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.** Isaiah, in his very first chapter, picks up the same very striking simile in the

familiar words: (Isaiah 1.18) **“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”** So if we make the excuse “surely God will never forgive me” – we’re wrong. If this is my excuse for not asking forgiveness, probably at heart I don’t really want to be forgiven. Or I’m clinging on to a sin I don’t want to give up. So we really do need to long for forgiveness, and when we have confessed, then God can respond to us, deal with our sin and pain, and make us whole again. Zacchaeus, for instance, in the second reading, was absolutely determined to catch Jesus’ attention. You may be sure there were plenty of shouts of derision, or worse, when he climbed the tree. Tax collectors weren’t exactly flavour of the month in Judaea. But he persevered, with wonderful results. David rounds the psalm off in verse 17 (I see 18-19 as a sort of PS) **“A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”** And it’s a further truth that the more contrite we are, the more God can use us. The weaker we are, the more God can show his power. Quoting Jesus directly, Paul wrote to the Corinthians **“My power is made perfect in weakness”** (2 Cor 12.9) This is one of the great paradoxes in our faith, isn’t it? We think of power as something we’ve gained by ourselves. If it’s muscle power, we’ve built it up by our own efforts - on the exercise bike. No, I don’t have one either! Or we’ve been granted power by those who think we’re worthy of it. But God can only give us his power and work through us when we admit we’re unable to do something in our own strength. And we have to take that step of faith and trust God to provide his power. The context for this remark of Paul’s was when he was describing his weakness – we don’t know what it was – and he says

he asked Jesus three times to remove it, but he said no, **“my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”** In other words, the more we rely on God, the more he can do through us. It’s not an easy concept, when on the human level we are encouraged to think that self-reliance and self-confidence are the key to success.

2. The story of David and Bathsheba is in lurid technicolour, on a big screen, it’s got sex, violence, the lot. None of us is ever likely to be sinning on quite such an epic scale! It also happens over a period of several months. The baby was born before Nathan plucked up the courage to go in to David and tell him what was what. Or think of Zacchaeus in the NT passage. How long had he been feeling unhappy with his job? Perhaps ever since becoming a tax collector he had felt increasingly guilty about it. Or maybe he’d only recently come to realise that what he was doing was wrong. It can take us time before we come to our senses concerning a particular sin. But at any rate the same sequence of temptation, sin, remorse, confession, forgiveness, restoration, is happening every day in our lives. There’s almost something routine about it. Sometimes perhaps we feel that nothing ever changes, and we wish God had made things just a little – or a lot - easier. Why did he do it this way? Why did he allow sin to come into his perfect creation? How long have we got? Maybe I should be looking at my diary! Don’t worry – not this morning! But it helps to remember that we’re all in this together. We all feel we’re much worse than the next person in the pew at times – depending on who you’re sitting next to - but this whole process is the daily experience of all Christians.

3. **BUT** actually it's not always the same. And it's very important to remember this. Believe it or not, and it's sometimes hard to believe it, God is slowly bringing us to perfection. In Philippians chapter 2 Paul encourages his readers to **"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you , both to will and to work for his good pleasure."** He starts by hitting the ball into our court – **"work out your own salvation..."** but then reminds us that actually **"God is at work in you"**. As soon as we get stuck into that formidable task, we find God is getting on with it himself. I find that marvellously reassuring. The writer to the Hebrews is even more specific: beginning of chapter 12: **"let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"**. And again in the first chapter of Philippians: **"And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."** (Phil. 1. 6) It's an extraordinary thought isn't it, but also inspiring. God is slowly turning us into the perfect product at the end of the journey. And even though we might be slightly sceptical about this, if we look back at our lives and think what we might have been or where we might have gone, but for the grace of God, then it begins to make sense. And perhaps we realise it more forcibly as we struggle towards the end of that journey. Paul calls it a race at times. That sounds exhausting! I prefer the idea of a journey – that overworked cliché so beloved of the losing contestants each week in "Strictly"! So I'm told. But as far as the Christian journey is concerned, we're all winners in the end.

4. In a curious sort of way, it's sin that brings us back to God. We rejoice when things are going well, but isn't it easy to forget to say

"thank you" to God? I don't know about you, but when things are going well with me, at first I'm surprised and delighted, and usually remember to thank God. But after a bit, I begin to think, "Well, this is really only what I deserve. I'm not a bad chap really – I'm bound to meet with some successes along the way! Let's face it, I handle things pretty coolly!" – or thoughts to that effect! And gradually I forget about God's part in the good things and take them for granted – until it all goes pear-shaped – yet again. We're not automatons. We have free will. God allows us to sin, but lovingly picks us up again when we fall and turn back to him. He and we love the reconciliation. In fact because of our fallen nature we see and experience much more of God's mercy. Has this thought maybe chipped away ever so slightly at that huge iceberg of a question "Why evil?"

5. But there are one or two pitfalls here. One of them is touched on in Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 8. You could argue that as God shows his grace and mercy when a sinner repents, it is only logical to sin all the more so that God may show more grace to respond to all the repentance. Some smart Alec in Rome had obviously been suggesting this, but Paul kicks the idea firmly into touch. He has just ended chapter 5 with a rousing climax contrasting the law, sin and death with grace, righteousness and eternal life. You can almost hear him spluttering with indignation at the start of chapter 6: **"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!"** And this gives him the opportunity to expound the marvellous doctrine of being born again. He continues: **"How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized**

into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” And a few verses later: **“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”**

This is not an easy metaphor to get our heads round, but its import is clear: a real change has taken place in us, and it does make it easier for us to resist temptation.

7. Finally, in his first letter to Timothy, (1.15-17) Paul describes himself as **“foremost of sinners”** and goes on to say **“but I received mercy for THIS REASON, that in me, as the foremost of sinners, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.”** Now Paul was a pretty good example of a sinner – think how he persecuted the early Christians before his conversion. If God cd intervene in the life of Paul, who wasn’t even praying for forgiveness, how much more is he likely to answer our prayers, when we long for forgiveness? And, comparing the very insignificant (that’s us) with the very great (that’s Paul), why should not any one of us be an example, even in a tiny way, **“to those who are to believe in him for eternal life”**? What a privilege!

I suppose that without the existence of evil and therefore of the need for forgiveness, there would have been no need for Jesus to die. Then perhaps free-will would not have existed and we’d be programmed to do the right thing all the time. But this is largely fruitless speculation. The facts are: evil does exist and God did send his son to die on the cross. God has chosen to reveal himself

in human form in the shape of Jesus, and to make the unimaginably costly sacrifice which offered salvation to us, and at the same time showed how much he loves us. No other religion gets anywhere close to this. The God we believe in actually came to earth and **died** so that sinners might be forgiven. Paul says this to Timothy just before the passage I’ve quoted: and the way he expresses it shows that it’s in a bigger font, it’s underlined, it’s in bold and italics! He writes: **“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners”**. You might almost say it was his *raison d’etre*. So when we accept that forgiveness we’re completing the circle, we’re doing exactly what God desires. And when we pray a prayer like David’s psalm, or seek out Jesus to get his help, like Zacchaeus, we please God and ourselves too. It’s a win-win situation – a double whammy! Here is a verse which goes some way to summing it all up, Psalm 106.2: **Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord or fully declare his praise? AMEN**