

Address from Belinda Speed-Andrews for Passion Sunday

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

You walk in and there he is crouched on the floor in a foetal position, trying to hide from this cruel world, behind the curtain, sobbing his heart out, deep heart-wrenching sobs; utterly broken and ashamed. Is that you? Has that ever been you?

Psalm 51 is a powerful psalm, a psalm that recognises our vulnerability, our sinfulness, our brokenness and the psalmist is on his knees, in the dust, seeking and begging for God's merciful forgiveness.

Interestingly this psalm is read on Ash Wednesday as well as today, the fifth Sunday of Lent or as it is commonly known, Passion Sunday.

On Ash Wednesday we began a journey of soul-searching, of re-discovering our relationship with God and begin a stripping away of all that takes us from God. Perhaps the repetition of Psalm 51 today is a reminder of that searching and seeking for God's face before we begin that final walk through Holy Week with Jesus towards the light of resurrection and new life. Perhaps too it is a time when we recognise our complicity in the brokenness of the world around us.

For want of being melancholic, the last 2 or 3 weeks have been tough weeks, here in this parish with the tragic fire, which took young lives, the discovery of a WWII bomb which has affected people in both material, & emotional ways and not least the cruel and violent death of a young girl walking home from a friends house. At SWMTC where I work we too have had numerous cases of sadness, with deaths of family members, and serious illnesses and brokenness among our students. There are times for me as perhaps for you that I reach emotional saturation; there are no words, in fact words are no longer useful. We perhaps scream out why, why, how long O lord?

Psalm 51 is a passionate admission that life is a mess; it is a yearning for a return to all that is holy and good. The psalm dares to imagine that this is possible. It is the best known psalm of confession, written it is thought as a prayer from David after his episode with Bathsheba and the subsequent death of Uriah. But in reality it could be a prayer of any of us. We are all guilty of sin, a distancing of ourselves from God, either consciously or unconsciously. Our unconscious independence as if we are in no need of God. What David realised was, he needed to start again and to do that he

pleaded with God to 'create in me a clean heart, O God; and put a new and right spirit within me'.

David recognises that for this to happen he has no control over it; he recognises that only God can do this; 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit'. And in order for this transformation to happen the psalmist approaches God empty-handed, not proudly, not making demands, not setting conditions and no self-sufficiency; he comes with a broken spirit and a contrite heart. This is the man broken and ashamed crouched in the dust full of shame and self-loathing. None of us really want to go there if we're honest.

A few years ago a lady was sitting on the edge of her daughter's bed. Her daughter was 17 maybe 18 years old and she had just failed her AS levels the previous June and now she was faced a few months later with her trial exams for her re-sits. Panic had taken over; she was sobbing her heart out petrified that she would fail again although her Mum had always told her that what you put in you got out - that hadn't worked though the first and there was no guarantee it would work this time either. The daughter was almost paralysed with fear. Her Mum didn't know what to say and there was no easy way to alleviate the fear if at all. The pain her Mum felt was unbearable because she had no idea where to go from here. And then her Mum remembered; and she said to her daughter, if I could take away all your pain and fear I would do it in a heart beat but I can't, but I really want to. And so her Mum laid out her daughter's options got up and walked out of the room and burst into tears.

It not only costs us to bear our souls, to open the very inner core of who we are before God to seek the forgiveness as the psalmist did, it also costs the one who forgives. Just like the Mum with her daughter. It wasn't only the daughter who was suffering it was her Mum too. God enters into our pain and our guilt, our hurt and our yearning. It costs God to forgive us. One of the other readings for today is Hebrews 5 and the writer tells us that 'Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears' and in our pain and our yearning God begins to work a newness. Forgiveness is not easy, it is not casual and that is why the cross is at the centre of the gospel, the reality of Jesus suffering, and God suffering in the life of Jesus, for our new life.

God's ability to make new is not like a bulldozer though, crashing through and shoving everything aside. It is like the painful suffering of the mother in my story just now, as she suffers together the hurt of her daughter, in order that that her daughter

may be restored to hope and joy. Walter Bruggeman argues that, God has in Jesus, in the cross, in the gospel experienced the brokenness that must happen in order that we can have a new change. The cost is never easy, never casual. It costs God, God's own self and God is ready to answer our prayer with God's own self-giving. It is as though God in Christ hears our prayer, 'create in me a clean heart' and God answers yes, but it is not as simple as you think. I cannot act as if your wrongness does not exist, but I will take the wrongness into myself, and you need not be burdened with it.

I wonder at times how the world has come to this. There is so much beauty, in people, in creation, in art, in music, but there is also immense cruelty and depravity and when we look at the topics we have been learning about in our lent group; county lines, sexual and labour exploitation all in the name of money and power I know I long for us to be able to start again. These are big issues, perhaps beyond our comprehension And I am constantly challenged by where we begin. I don't have the answer but perhaps the answer is to begin with myself and yearn for new & clean heart, for a right spirit.

And the message I hope we can all take from the readings this morning is that we can start again; the cycle of discrimination, the cycle of war and depravity can be broken. God, in Christ offers us a new chance, a new beginning. But it is demanding. We have to let go of our ultra-egos, it is a broken heart, and end to self-sufficiency and any pretence to being right. The Gospel is not advice it is assurance and that assurance is that what we cannot do for ourselves is given us.

If it had been possible I would have had all the readings this morning, so may I encourage you to delve into them as I hope you ponder on my words this morning. I want to finish by reading from Jeremiah 31: 31-34. The sin of the world need not go on, the cycle can be broken, we have been assured of that in Jesus. Let us together then seek the joy we are promised this coming Easter as break the ache and turn it into joy; to be forgiven is to receive new energy for life.

'Behold the days are coming....I will make a new covenant, a new set of relations, a new community, and a new communion. It will not be like the old covenant which you broke. In the new covenant I will put my Torah, my requirements, my expectations, in your heart, and everyone shall know what I require. They shall know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more.'

Amen.