

Preaching Repentance in a Narcissistic Age

Psalm 51

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As I begin to write these words, I have just come from the service of Evensong at King's College Chapel in Cambridge. There we heard Psalm 51 sung by the beautiful voices of the deservedly famous King's College choir. The service was worshipful and uplifting, as it regularly is for me. But I was struck by a sense of tension between that liturgical and musical rendition of Psalm 51 and the profusive *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* that is implicit in the psalm, a text that is given to us—according to its superscription—as a prayer that belongs to the acts of covetousness, murder, and adultery by the political leader of the land. I left the Evensong service with a large sense of incongruity and a wonder if this great penitential prayer has lost its edge, if it is possible for it to become a prayer that we wish to pray or need to pray.

There are various features of our contemporary life that work against Psalm 51 again becoming truthful for us:

1) Focus upon the self is intense in our culture, but it is entirely uplifting and zealously resistant to any negative words about the self. Twenty years ago one of the most popular books among clergy was *I'm OK, You're OK*. It is still very difficult for anyone to say, at least in the moral sphere, "I'm not OK," and even less likely that one will risk saying to another, "You're not OK."

2) There is a large inclination within us not to take responsibility for our misdeeds and thus not to confess them as sins. That is nothing new. It is as old as the Garden of Eden and that first human response to the first question of moral accountability: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). It is somebody else's fault, or even God's.

But this unwillingness to accept responsibility, to discern and accept moral accountability seems especially acute in our time. There seems to be an increasing tendency to assume or claim that someone else has really brought about the trouble that seems to have our fingerprints on it. That is true not only for ourselves but as we look at others. Obvious cases of brutal crimes may be the exception, but social analysis has taught us to analyze and look for a pattern of causation that reduces blame, that distances personal accountability from the act as the various "contributing factors" of environment, heredity, temporary insanity, provocation, and the like are uncovered that account for the act in a way that leaves little room for one to say "I have sinned." In the past months, the *New York Times* told of a grandmother who made her granddaughter eat a poison drink that killed her, and the article focused on identifying who in the social agencies did not spot the problem. The moral evil was not named. Blame must be somewhere else—in the structures of society in this instance.

3) The autonomy of the self is not only a post-Kantian dogma but a lived reality for most people in the Western world. In his great study of the modern identity, *The Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor notes that the cultural turn toward personal fulfillment, which Philip Rieff called "the triumph of the therapeutic," produces modes of life with a kind of shallowness:

Because no non-anthropocentric good, indeed nothing outside subjective goods, can be allowed to trump self-realization, the very language of morals and politics tends to sink to the relatively colourless subjectivist talk of “values.” To find the meaning to us of “our job, social class, family and social roles,” we are invited to ask questions like this: “In what ways are our values, goals, and aspirations being invigorated or violated by our present life system? How many parts of our personality can we live out, and what parts are we suppressing? How do we *feel* about our way of living in the world at any given time?”.... Community affiliations, the solidarities of birth, of marriage, of the family, of the polis, all take second place.¹

T.S. Eliot has identified the modern mentality in another fashion in his play *The Cocktail Party*, when Celia Coplestone says to Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, the psychiatrist and soul doctor of the play:

I’ve never noticed that immorality
Was accompanied by a sense of sin:
At least, I have never come across it.

When asked by him what was the point of view of her family on these matters, she says:

I had always been taught to disbelieve in sin.
Oh, I don’t mean that it was ever mentioned!
But anything wrong, from our point of view,
Was either bad form, or was psychological.

In contemporary society, there is a growing focus on the moral life of prostitutes and celebrities. Whatever may cause our absorption with the behavior patterns of such folk, our tendency is often to view their peccadillos as bad form. Or if the problem of the celebrity moves into the sphere of injustice, the response on the part of the person(s) involved may be one of ignorance of the problem or formality, as when Frank Gifford passed out \$100 bills to garment workers who made his wife’s line of dresses at very low wages.

Toward the end of his book Charles Taylor investigates “the search for moral sources *outside* the subject through languages which resonate *within* him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision.”² It is that sense of sources outside oneself that resonate within one that underlies the conviction articulated by the psalmist whose outcome is a powerful challenge to the self’s autonomy because human fulfillment is, in this context, understood to lie in a community ethos that is both highly relational and shaped by an external reality that has called it into being and given it both blessing and direction, the God against whom “I” have sinned.

Psalm 51 thus presents itself to us as a large challenge and in a double sense. It challenges the common self-understanding of our time, and it challenges the preacher who would set its word abrasively against the contemporary ethos. To take it up, however, may be to offer the congregation a deeper view of the inner self than the bland

analyses and therapies of our time present and, ultimately, to uncover both the truth of our inward selves, our souls, and a “mechanism” for dealing with that truth. In pursuit of a deeper and more truthful understanding of the human self, the following reflections on Psalm 51 are offered.

1) The psalm is about the terrible reality of sin and what is possible in the face of that reality. One cannot miss the heaping up of vocabulary for sin. The terms “sin,” “iniquity,” and “transgression” are repeated throughout the psalm.³ There is no hiding behind euphemistic expressions, no avoidance of the reality that evokes this outcry. Wrong has happened, and the praying one of this psalm is acutely aware of that and of his or her—the superscription, of course, says this is David—accountability, his or her sin-iniquity-transgression. The psalm thus sets itself in a single context, but one with much elasticity. That single context is the unmistakable fact of wrongdoing that not only cannot be denied or suppressed but obviously has taken over the very soul of the wrongdoer.

2) The prayer of a sinner for help that is this psalm, therefore, does not arise out of the sense of a general condition of sin but out of the acute consciousness of real and terrible misdeeds, of specific acts. This is the case despite the apparent depiction of a general and original sense of sin in verse 5 [Heb. v.7]. While it may be possible to read that verse in such a way, it is more likely that the reference to being conceived and born guilty and sinful is an expression of the depth of the sinner’s conviction of sin. The poetic form of this prayer leads one to see here a powerful expression of this overwhelming sense of guilt. The cry of verse 5 is not an analysis of the human situation but the feeling of one whose sense of sin is so great that it seems to have been there always. Such an overwhelming feeling is truthful but not generally descriptive of the human condition.

That this is the case is reinforced by the superscription, which is given to us as an interpretive indicator of the context in which these words are to be understood. They are the outcry of one who was both “a man after God’s own heart” and an adulterer-murderer. This prayer belongs specifically to the occasion of adultery and murder. Generally when the community of Israel, or the individual within that community, confessed their sins, the heart of the confession was, as it is here, the words “We/I have sinned,” and that acknowledgment regularly referred to a specific act of transgression that has been described in the narrative or the text that leads into the formal confession. It is rare that such a confession is made as a general claim. It is in reference to a quite identifiable act.⁴

One notes further that generally the words for wrongdoing in the psalm are in the singular. While the singular can refer to a broader reality, it suggests primarily the specific sin that has elicited the prayer of confession. There is a repeated plural form, “my transgressions” in verses 1 and 3 (cf. v. 13). When that is seen in relation to the superscription, it suggests that the multiplicity involved is not to be understood as a vague, undifferentiated assortment of sins great and small—“whatever,” in the colloquial language of our day. Instead, “my transgressions” are the quite specific, concrete, interacting, and interrelated complex of acts around David’s taking of Bathsheba, at a minimum acts of coveting, adultery, and murder, but in fact encompassing also misuse of royal power, sexual assault, conspiracy, and betrayal. The psalm invites us to that searching of the soul that is not content with a superficial acknowledgment of a propensity for sin or sins generally, but a confession of the very

real and often complicated acts that have betrayed and undone another—close at hand or far away.

All of this means that Psalm 51 may not necessarily be preached as always and universally applicable to the congregation but in order to make it available when the soul has truly and specifically sinned and is stricken with that recognition, aware that what one has done is not “bad form” but sin, in fact the conviction to which Celia Coplestone comes in Eliot’s play.

3) The problem that sin presents in this text is wholly a problem with God. In apparently stark contrast to the information provided by the superscription, the psalm speaks of a sin that is *only* against the Lord (v.4). But the disjunction between the superscription and the text is only apparent, not real. The connection of the text to the David and Bathsheba story is precisely through the line “against you, you alone have I sinned” (v.4a; cf. 2 Sam. 12:13) “and done what is evil in your sight” (v.4a; cf. 2 Sam. 12:9). It is in Nathan’s judgment speech against David that the sin against Uriah is seen as a despising of the Lord and the word of the Lord (2 Sam. 12:9).

The need for repentance rests in the fact that transgression and sin, however heinous the effects on human beings, are at root a terrible violation and disturbance of the person’s (or community’s) relationship with God. If earlier ages have seemed to overstress the reality of sin and guilt, they have at least done so in the certainty that God grounds our life and it is not self-grounded. The problem of preaching repentance is the problem of preaching about something that assumes theonomous existence when we live under the implicit assumption of autonomous existence. While the Bible knows about human reconciliation when offences are committed against a brother or sister (for example, Gen. 33; 50:15-21), and Jesus’ teaching calls for such reconciliation before gifts are brought to the altar, that is, brought to God (Matt. 5:21-26), forgiveness in the Old Testament is an act of God because the sin against the neighbor is always more deeply a despising of God.⁵

Preaching repentance, therefore, is different from preaching reconciliation and restitution. The latter is an important human act, fundamental to Christian community. Reconciliation and restitution are also more comprehensible to the modern spirit, which tends to assume that the deepest relationship is with the neighbor and so focuses on mending that relationship.⁶ But again, the thrust of scripture is that reconciliation is fundamentally God’s work in Jesus Christ and is God’s overcoming of the yawning gap in the relation between ourselves and God that our sins have created (2 Cor. 5:18).

The problem of preaching repentance, therefore, is in direct proportion to the congregation’s conviction that its life really is grounded in God. Without that operative assumption, all talk of sin and repentance is received as anachronistic, a holdover from another time, an archaic “preacherish” way of talking about our problems. Preaching that evokes repentance is prepared for by preaching that confronts the congregation in inescapable ways with the reality of God.

4) Far from being “bad form,” or a vague acknowledgment of the preacher’s claims, the sense of sin articulated by the psalmist is a real and terrible experience. It has shaken the very ground of his or her being. It has taken all joy out of life. It has created a sense of being stained, of being so marked by the sin, that one is dirtied (vv. 2,7). The sin does not need to be pointed out in this case, or, if we take the David story as an interpretive clue, once pointed out it now overwhelms the sinner. The sin is real, and its reality is doing in the psalmist. No lament against enemies and oppression

carries any more pleading and beseeching tone than does this one. Look at the verbs: have mercy, blot out, wash me, cleanse me, purge me, wash me, let me hear joy, hide your face, blot out, create, put a new spirit, do not cast away, do not take, restore, sustain, deliver. The depth of the psalmist's awareness of his sin is matched only by the sense of need it has created. As much as any lament, this psalm is a cry for help. This person is undone as much as any speaker in the psalms. The destruction of this soul, however, is not by any external forces. It is by the terrible weight of the committed sin and the way it stares him in the face constantly. And so the psalmist cries out in desperation. Here is no intoned general confession of sins we never thought of until we read them out loud from the bulletin. This is trauma, desperation, a terrible burden that must be lifted.

5) It is the prophetic preaching of Nathan, however, that opens David's eyes. That context suggests to us there is a role for the preaching of the word that may, as indirectly as Nathan's parable about the poor man's lamb, create the ground for an apprehension of sin on the part of the congregation. The reading and interpretation of the psalm may break through the self-protecting veneer to allow the *mea culpa* to come forth when it has not, when the sin is really there but buried beneath or covered over by the veneer.

Such preaching will carry with it the learning of this psalm, that the transformation of the soul and spirit, the cleansing from the sense of stain—a powerful image not to be easily discarded as an outdated way of speaking—is God's act. If this psalm is a powerful confession of sin, it is more radically a fall upon the grace of God. The imperatives listed above make one aware that repentance in this psalm is not a merely human act. Indeed, repentance here is only implicit though very real. The focus of this psalm is on the plea for God's grace and compassion. It is Israel's oldest confession of faith that the God it worships is merciful, compassionate, and full of steadfast love (Exod. 34:7). That is the starting point of this psalm in verse 1. It is the "way out" for the sinner who is overwhelmed by the weight of the wrong that she has done. For Celia Coplestone, the way out was an act of atonement. The word of the gospel confirms that, but it is an act that has already happened and demonstrated the bent of God to be merciful, gracious, and compassionate—even before the worst of our sins. Thus, the critical word of the preacher is not only in the sermon. There is no more significant act in the service of worship than the assurance to the congregation "Your sins are forgiven." Those words are never said casually. If they are really true, then they have the capacity to turn the trauma of sin into the healing of redemption, the desperation of one convicted into the hope of one released. As they declare the reality of God's grace, no burden remains too large to let go and no stained heart that the Lord cannot wash clean.

Notes

¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 519

² *Ibid.*, 520

³ For a discussion of how the poet's pairing of the words for sin achieves a result "in which one is overwhelmed with the poet's sense of sin but not dulled by a monotonous repetition" see Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Studies in Hebrew Word Patterns," *Harvard Theological Review*, 73 (1980): 79–89

⁴ Cf. Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), chapter 7

⁵ In this connection, see the important work of Donald W. Shriver, Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford, 1995). While I would not see the encounter between

Joseph and his brothers as culminating in forgiveness, as does Shriver, his comment on Psalm 51 is very much on target:

On the surface, to say that David's adultery with Bathsheba was sin against God and God "only" is to reduce to trivial importance the multiple damages done to human beings in the incident. But the narrative associated with the later psalm (II Sam. 11-12) does not permit such an interpretation: there a child dies, a king suffers public humiliation at the hands of a prophet, and the future of his kingship suffers too. The point of Psalm 51 is that the God of Israel takes its sin more seriously than it does. As with the Greeks and many other religious traditions, God and the gods are protectors of the moral order, springing into actions of judgment and punishment when it suffers violation. But in the Hebrew case, the sense of personal affront to the divine is stronger; the one God of Israel is never on vacation from attentiveness to its sins (p. 29).

⁶ Note the centrality of the theme of reconciliation in the Confession of 67 of the Presbyterian Church (USA).