

## "There is a way that seems right, but that way ends in death" A Sermon for Ash Wednesday

By Grant LeMarquand

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement. . . . Wash me and I will be whiter than snow. . . . Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me (Psalm 51:1-4, 7b, 9-10).*

THE recitation of *Psalm* 51 is an important part of the traditional service of repentance on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. It is the psalm of someone in great depth of sorrow for sin: "I know my transgressions, / and my sin is ever before me" (51:3). Somehow the psalmist has been made aware this sin is against God: "Against you, you alone have I sinned, / and done what is evil in your sight" (v.4). The petitioner, although knowing that punishment is deserved, still pleads for mercy: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean, / wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow . . . / Hide your face from my sins, / and blot out all my iniquities" (vv.7,9) The text does not tell us what crime has been committed, but the superscription of the psalm gives us a story to go with the prayer: "A Psalm of David when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone into Bathsheba."

### A story of lust and intrigue

The canon provides us with a narrative context, a "big picture," through which it makes sense of these desperate pleas for forgiveness. Do you remember the story? It is a tale not only of lust and adultery, but of murder and political intrigue. Although Israel is at war, King David stays in Jerusalem. Apparently he is now powerful enough to let his generals direct most of the hand-to-hand fighting. And so, while his troops are off "ravaging the Ammonites" (2 *Samuel* 11:1) the king is home having an afternoon nap (11:2). The nap is followed by a later afternoon stroll on the roof of the palace. As chance would have it, David spies a woman, Bathsheba, bathing. The Bible tells us David's own thoughts: "The woman was very beautiful." He sends for her, he lies with her, he impregnates her. His troops are ravaging the Ammonites; he is ravaging another man's wife (11:2-5).

When David hears that the woman is pregnant, he immediately attempts to hide his sin. He arranges for her husband Uriah, who is a soldier, to be put on the front line, and he is killed (11:6-21). Bathsheba becomes a wife to the king.

A year passes. The child of David and Bathsheba has been born. Life seems to have returned to normal. David has begun to think that perhaps he has escaped scandal, that his actions will not become public knowledge. But David's sins were not hidden. God saw — "The thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord" (11:27). God has sight, and God saw. "Almighty God unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid" (*The Book of Common Prayer*).

God saw. And God remembered — and so sent Nathan the prophet. For the most part, Old Testament prophets appear to have been a rather fearless lot. Their messages are usually words of judgment and hope addressed to the nation as a whole. Yet sometimes they speak out against the sins of individuals: Deborah rebuked Barak for his sloth (*Judges* 4:8ff.); Samuel challenged Saul's disobedience (*1 Samuel* 15:22ff.); Elijah denounced Ahab for murder and injustice (*1 Kings* 21:17ff.); Isaiah reprimanded Ahaz (*Isaiah* 7:1-13); John the Baptist confronted Herod (*Mark* 6:14-29).

And so, conscious of having a message from God, Nathan the prophet comes to David. But notice the prophet's wisdom. He does not begin with "Thus saith the Lord" — he will get to that part in due time, but not yet. Instead, like another prophet who knew he might not be held in honour, he tells a parable, a story. Nathan said to David:

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him (2 Samuel 12:1-4).

The details of Nathan's parable bring out the selfishness, the heartlessness of the rich man. He had no thought for the poor man, or for the affection in which he held his lamb. The rich man was inconvenienced and had no desire to sacrifice anything of his own abundance. Hearing the pitiful story of the injustice and cruelty carried out on the poor man by the rich man David is, quite rightly, enraged. In his righteous anger he pronounces the king's royal judgment on the rich man.

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb four-fold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity" (2 Samuel 12:5-6).

"The rich man deserves death," David cries. For a sheep? A bit extreme, perhaps, so David quickly revises his judgment. The rich man must make a four-fold restitution, which is exactly what God's law actually did proscribe in such a case: "When someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. The thief shall make restitution, but if unable to do so, shall be sold for the theft" (Exodus 22:1). The rich man must make this payment, David says, "because he had no compassion," or as some translators put it, "he showed no pity."

### **David's reaction**

Now David's reaction, we note, is the correct one — it is anger at injustice, oppression, greed, and violence. It is (on one level at least) righteous anger. But now Nathan's trap is sprung: "You are the man" (2 Samuel 12:7). You are the man. With this one phrase David's righteous anger is shown to be self-righteous anger. Immediately David realizes that he has condemned himself: he has pronounced his own judgment. But Nathan drives home the point. He points out that God had chosen David, that God had anointed him as king, that God had delivered David, saving him from Saul, that God had given David all the privileges and powers he could have wanted. God even says that he would have given David more if he had wanted it (12:8). And there is more — David's action against Uriah and Bathsheba reveals a disdain for God and his commandments: "Why have you despised the word of the Lord?" (12:9).

And it was not just that "you did it secretly" (12:12). David *knew* what he was doing was wrong. He did not act in ignorance of God's law — he knew the law so well that he could recall the appropriate punishment for sheep-stealing. He acted deliberately. Not that David thought of it as deliberate disobedience at every step. No doubt he rationalized each decision; he justified each step. Can you hear his thoughts progress from lust to adultery, from deceit to murder?

"Why not have another woman — you have several concubines already."

"She's only the wife of a foreigner; and wouldn't she be better off as wife of the king? This would be good for her."

"Better to try to pass off the paternity as Uriah's — better not to have a scandal."

"If Uriah does not cooperate, he has brought the trouble on himself. A scandal would not be in the national interest."

The human mind seems to have an endless capacity for self-deception. We can find excuses for every imaginable kind of sin and evil — which is why the commandments that forbid such acts as coveting a neighbour's spouse, committing adultery, and murder are truly gifts from God. Left to ourselves we are all too capable of a self-deception that covers up the most blatant sinfulness.

"There is a way that seems right . . . / but its end is the way of death," says the book of *Proverbs* (14:12). David chose the way of death and tried to pretend that it was right. Now he is confronted with his own guilt. Nathan's parable with its terrible explanation has come as the word of the Lord. And David is caught — and he knows it: "I have sinned against the Lord," he says (2 *Samuel* 12:13). It is a very simple confession, but one that leaves us with hope. Sin has its consequences — the child of the adultery dies — whether by the direct action of God or because God has somehow built sin's consequences into the moral framework of the universe, I do not know. What I do know from this story is that God can and does forgive even the most grievous, deathly sin and evil.

"There is a way that seems right . . . / but its end is the way of death." That is true, but God has another way: not the way of evil — that is the way of death. Not even the way of obedience — for that, it seems, is impossible. God's way is the way of forgiveness, the way of restoration, the way of reconciliation.

You were dead through the trespasses and sins. . . . All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved (*Ephesians* 2:1, 3-5).

Recently a priest of the Anglican Church of Canada found himself in the position of offering pastoral care to a married couple accused, and later convicted, of child neglect so grave that their baby died. The reaction of many in the community was disgust and anger. How could anyone commit such an evil act against the most innocent in our society? Some in the Church showed a similar revulsion towards the priest who attempted to reach out with Christ's love to the guilty parents.

Part of the message of the story of David, Bathsheba, and Nathan is that human beings are capable of unimaginable evil. But the other part of the story is that God forgives. To pray *Psalms* 51, "the Psalm of David . . . after he had gone in to Bathsheba," is to remember, at the beginning of Lent, the possibilities of our own depravity. It is also to remember the reality of God's forgiveness: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (*Psalms* 51:10).

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