

Sermon: Ash Wednesday

Text: Psalm 51 (v. 1)

Theme: God's mercy in forgiving us

Goal: To stress the need of deep repentance and of faith in God's mercy shown in Jesus to receive forgiveness and a new life

Dear Friends,

Introduction: The Title of this Psalm says: "A psalm of David. When the Prophet Nathan came to him after David committed adultery with Bathsheba." It is not just a prayer asking for forgiveness. It has a tragic story behind it, involving adultery and murder. Strictly speaking, David was condemned by God and could have lost his throne, like it had happened with the previous king Saul.

I – The sin

David was established as a king and was living a good life if we compare it with all the war campaigns he had led the years before. He didn't need to go with his army to war anymore, but was able to stay at his palace while his commander went with the army to war. One day he saw a beautiful woman in the garden of the palace and he called her to his room; and they had an affair. She went back home and after some weeks she told David that she was pregnant. Her husband was with the army in the war. David made arrangements to put him in front of the battle so that he was killed. After a while, David took the widow as his wife to his palace. (1 Samuel 11).

It is easy for us to condemn David. Of course, he did something very wrong, sinning against the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandments. But can we throw the first stone? (John 8:7). Who has never committed adultery? Jesus said: "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart"

(Matthew 5:28). Who has never murdered someone? The Apostle John wrote: “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him” (1 John 3:15).

## II – The judgement

God didn't like what David did, - as He doesn't like when we sin. But He loved David as He loves us. He wanted to solve this problem. God sent His Prophet Nathan to talk to David. In a very diplomatic and smart way, the Prophet told a story to the King. (It is worth to read the whole story in 2 Samuel 11 and 12.) The King had to judge the characters of the story; and David condemned the evil one. As soon as the King gave his sentence, the Prophet replied to him: “You are the man! Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?” (2 Samuel 12:7,9). David acknowledged the sins he had done, and said: “Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

God is right when He judges us and when He condemns us. This is what we really deserve. We don't have anything to offer to God to pay for our sins. We deserve condemnation. Therefore, we confess in our Services: *I, a poor and miserable sinner, confess to you all my sins with which I have ever offended you, and justly deserve your punishment now and forever.*

## III – There is forgiveness

David didn't try to justify himself. He acknowledged his sins and he was deeply repented. He was aware that God could reject him as King Saul had been rejected by God due to his disobedience. Therefore, he humbled himself before the Lord, asking for forgiveness. He did not remember any of his good deeds or merits he had as a King, but as a poor and miserable sinner he relied only on God's grace, and he prayed: “Have mercy on me, O

God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.”

It is a prayer of faith, a prayer of someone who had experienced God’s mercy before; and he trusted the Lord. *Note the piling up of synonyms: mercy, unfailing love, great compassion; blot out, wash, cleans; transgression, iniquity, sin.* (CSSB, Footnote Ps 51:1-2).

Don’t try to excuse your sins, as Adam and Eve did, pushing the guilt to someone else. Confess them always in humbleness, repentance, and faith. Don’t “babble” the Confession at the beginning of the Service as a vain repetition. Confess and believe. We have a merciful God, who forgives us for the sake of Jesus.

Lent is beginning again today. We will follow all the steps of Jesus on His way to the cross. Let us never forget how much the forgiveness of our sins cost. It was *not with gold or silver that our sins were paid; but with the holy, precious blood of Jesus and with His innocent suffering and death* (2<sup>nd</sup> Article of the Ap. Creed, Luther).

#### IV – A new life

David would not fall in depression due to his sins and sadness. Although he had spent a whole week fasting and praying, laying on the ground, he wanted a new chance. He prayed for this and God was gracious to him.

His prayer is repeated by us in our liturgy when we sing: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

The joy of forgiveness shall fill us every Sunday with energy to face a new week under God's blessing. When we receive the Holy Absolution, we believe that the words of the pastor spoken on behalf of Jesus *is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself* (Small Catechism, Confession). When we receive the bread and the wine, we believe that we receive the true body and blood of Jesus given and shed for us for forgiveness of our sins. Jesus Himself is present and offers Himself to us in a straight fellowship and communion. Therefore, we call the Sacrament a Holy Communion.

Conclusion: Martin Luther, in the first stage of his life before he realized that salvation is by faith and grace only, found great comfort reading and praying the Psalms. God was working in his heart, comforting and guiding him to the truth, showing him how merciful God had been to David and to others in the Old Testament time. The same mercy of God was available to Luther and to all through faith in Jesus. Eventually Luther grasped this and stopped trying to pay for his sins; but he relied only on God's grace and mercy in Jesus. And he proclaimed this mercy and love of God to all through his preaching and writings.

Beginning today, Ash Wednesday, we will follow Jesus not only to the cross, but to the empty tomb, rejoicing with the women and with the disciples because our Lord is alive and is among us with His grace, mercy and love. Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2017