

The way the cookie has crumbled means that twice now in sequence I have been tasked with speaking on the subject of confession, repentance and forgiveness. In the interests of clarity, I think this could be expressed as ‘getting it wrong, putting it right’.

We step aside today from our series in 1 Samuel to look instead at a Psalm written by David on the subject of getting it wrong, putting it right. It is one of the great Psalms – by which I really mean that it is well known to many. It is one of seven Psalms which are described as the ‘Penitential Psalms’, in other words Psalms which express sorrow or regret. Offer me a biscuit afterwards and I’ll tell you where the other six are to be found.

[Psalm 32]

Many of the Psalms are heavily poetic. This one, I suggest, is not. It is, as I read it, very authentic, by which I mean that it describes an aspect of the human condition. And it does so better than any self help book or doctor’s consultation ever could: sin, guilt, repentance, restoration. Sin, guilt, repentance, restoration. Indeed you could argue that this Psalm contains the essence of the whole gospel, because it lays out the way back to God: Getting it wrong, putting it right.

On the bank holiday, Ella played in a football tournament at the Soccerdome in Docklands. It’s two full size indoor soccer pitches side by side, under a massive cathedral-like roof. We got there early and the place was almost empty. I clapped my hands at a good practice shot, and my clapping echoed and repeated many times as if it has been created in a sound effects studio. We quickly switched to shouting ‘hello!’, and the word echoed and faded: ‘Hello, hello, hello ...’.

This Psalm has, if you like, a pre-echo. As is often the case with the Old Testament, it points forward to the person of Jesus. Why does the Lord not *count our sins against us* (verse 2)? Because of Jesus. And only because of Jesus. Let me make that crystal clear: we do not and cannot make ourselves right with God. All the forgiveness we have, we have because of Jesus, As the apostle Paul says, his goal is to be found in Christ, *‘not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith’*. You may know the phrase ‘clothed in

righteousness divine' from the hymn '*And can it be*'. God clothes us with Christ's righteousness. Put another way, God says we are alright with him because of Jesus. You and I can never earn our forgiveness. We can be forgiven once and for all and be declared to be alright with God.

Is that the end of the story? Are we then free to do entirely as we like? No, of course not – our hearts can and do grow cold. Hence this Psalm.

It is only for the helpless. I'll say that again – it is only for the helpless. It is not written so that you can beat your chest at the end and say, '*I have triumphed*'. Or conquered sin. Or become a better person. At any branch of any major bookshop you will find shelves groaning with self-help books designed to make you feel better about yourself. If you absorb this Psalm, though, what you might pick up is a sense of relief. It deals with what the Christian should do if his or her heart grows cold. Getting it wrong, putting it right.

And if anyone tells you that the Bible is a poorly stitched together blanket of stories, history and worthy sayings fit only for the school assembly hall or the crematorium, then you should politely but firmly refer them to this Psalm: the Bible is a living document which vibrates with God's passion for his people; the next time you look down from the Number 8 bus at the swarms of humanity in Brick Lane, Bishopsgate or Bethnal Green Road and wonder how God really relates to us, think of the rhythm of this Psalm (sin, guilt, repentance, restoration) and the way in which God coaxes each of us back to him lovingly and gently. Getting it wrong, putting it right.

What first catches our eye is - sin. We simply do not trade in the currency of '*sin*' or '*transgressions*' in our time. A '*sin*' is, by its definition, an act against divine law. It is much more fashionable and eye-catching to emphasise grace at the expense of sin. But grace cannot be understood unless sin is first understood. And therein lies the greatest tension at the heart of the gospel: sin separates, Jesus restores. But still our hearts grow cold.

Anyone living in Bethnal Green a hundred years ago would have understood immediately and perfectly what the word '*sin*' means. There is a church in Kingsland Road in Dalston which used to have one of those '*Wayside Pulpit*' posters displayed on its notice board – and it thundered '**THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH**'. Which of course is true: see Romans 6:23. It's not very Dalston, but it's true. That law is written in our hearts: The wages of sin is death. *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* - 1 John 1:8. So, sin is the essence of the human condition, and is our natural state.

What does sin do? Sin brings guilt and shame. David, the author of this Psalm, knows this only too well: he was a man well acquainted with guilt and shame: he had sent Bathsheba's husband into battle, and indeed into the front line of the battle and to certain death, so that he could steal her for himself. In this Psalm he describes the physical force exerted by guilt resulting in physical pain, wasting away and an almost physical separation from God: psychosomatic pain? Real pain with a physical cause? Who knows – but a physical sensation nonetheless.

And we all know what guilt feels like: the American preacher Tim Keller describes guilt as being like the '*tapes playing over and over and over again*'. How many of us can honestly say that we don't have a painful memory of an act or an omission which causes us to feel guilty, perhaps years later? Calling it to mind makes our faces prickle with shame.

There are many ways for us to divert shame or guilt, or to try to fend it off: overwork, self-medication in the form of drink or drugs, being cynical or critical of other people. But in the end they are merely that: diversions, which drive the problem deeper. We can reform ourselves and we can change our outlook and our motivation and indeed our own behaviour. But we cannot lift the burden of sin.

I don't know if you've ever had to prepare a CV. It's short for *curriculum vitae* which is the Latin for 'the course of your life'. I look at a lot of CVs where I work, prepared by trainees who want to work as lawyers. They are all of course keen to list their achievements, and quite right too. But what would your Christian CV look like? The Christian CV has only one line: *a sinner, saved by grace*. Everything else is a bonus.

In verse 5 we are encouraged to acknowledge our sin and not cover up our iniquity. The picture is of sin being uncovered and being covered by God. We cover our sin, it eats away. But there is great relief in confessing it. I was doing some weeding in what is laughingly referred to as our garden last week, and among the weeds (and I have long struggled to tell the difference between weeds and plants, but I think these were weeds) I found some nettles. Or, should I say, they found me. I don't possess any gardening gloves – a "garden" our size doesn't justify that, and I'm no more likely to wear marigolds than I am to wear a suit of armour or a pantomime horse outfit, so to get rid of the nettles I had to just give them a really good tug; I had to quite literally grasp the nettle. If I didn't, they would only grow back. It hurt, but at least they were gone. It cost me something to uncover them. It hurt. But there was great relief in getting them out.

In his book *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky has the main character Raskolnikov confessing, years later, to the crime of murder, when he had thought that he could commit murder and live without any notion of guilt. The process of confession brings great relief to Raskolnikov.

Put another way, there is a power and relief in shedding the load and making confession of our sins a regular habit. You may know the story, not I think by Dostoyevsky but a Russian story nevertheless, of the man who is riding his horse and cart into town. On the road he passes an old woman who is bent double under the weight of the firewood she is carrying on her back. He stops and offers her a ride into town. She accepts, and he helps her climb onto the back of the cart. After a few minutes he looks round and sees that she is sitting in the back of the cart. But she is still carrying the stack of firewood on her back.

So Psalm 32 says: lift the burden of your sin by making your confession. To whom? Shall we shout it from the rooftops? In all its gory detail? Probably not. Confess it to God. Perhaps share it with a trusted friend. It is a very personal matter. There is no formula except, I suggest, this: I must be sincere in my confession. Confessing is not a religious act – that is what the Pharisees did, and we know what Jesus thought of them. It is not to be done with trumpets or fanfares, or by posting on Facebook. Verse 5 simply says, '*then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity*'. Confessing is an intimate act, done quietly but sincerely.

I am regularly accosted by chuggers in Fleet Street near where I work. A 'chugger', for those who don't know, is a charity mugger. All red jackets and clipboards and cheesy smiles. Last Friday week I was virtually assaulted by a young man who started waving his arms at me a good 20 metres before I got to him; more fool me for going out onto Fleet Street at 11am when it was quiet. I did my best to avoid his gaze by studying the chewing gum formations on the pavement and, when that didn't work, by waving at an imaginary friend on the opposite pavement. Too late: '*How are you today?*' he said. Honestly? He didn't care. Had I said, '*Actually, my arm's just fallen off, and I've just learned that my whole family has been eaten by zombies*', I'm confident that he'd have said, '*Oh, that's nice!*'.

His approach to me was utterly insincere. Likewise, God can separate out a sincere approach from an insincere approach. The test is whether we uncover our sin: do I make full confession? In my work in court I am very used to hearing half a confession. "*Did you or didn't you do such and such?*". "*Well, sort*

of", comes the half-baked answer. It is painful to hear the whole gruesome story dragged out of someone under cross examination.

And if we uncover our sin, God, if you like, covers it. I don't mean he covers it in the sense of quickly covering it back up in the style of '*I don't much like the look of that*'. But he covers our sin in the same way that you might say, '*Don't worry about that debt you owe, I'll cover it*'. In other words, I will cancel it. In all good war films, and during scenes of street fighting, one soldier will sprint towards the opposite building shouting '*Cover me!*' Soldiers call this 'covering fire', in other words, fire directed at the enemy to make him ineffective. In the same way, we are saying: God makes our sins of no effect if we confess them to him. You might know the line from the hymn which goes, '*Who stays our sin, and calms our lurking fear*'. 'Stays' is a word which gets lawyers like me excited: it means to 'stop'. We use it when legal proceedings are halted. So really, the same idea: our sins are stopped.

Let me make what I hope is an obvious point: when sins are forgiven by God, it does not free us to repeat the things we have just confessed with reckless abandon – nor does it mean of course that we can escape the earthly consequences of our sin. Sin has consequences. But God's forgiveness gets rid of the guilt.

And that forgiveness is like dropping a stone into the middle of a pond – watch the ripples spread out: a forgiven heart will find it so much easier to forgive others in turn. If you've seen *The Railway Man* you'll know what I mean. The story concerns Eric Lomax, who was a prisoner of the Japanese in the Second World War and who suffered great brutality, including torture, in captivity. After the war he returns to Scotland where he marries and does his best to settle back into civilian life. But he is tormented by flashbacks of his torture and in due course he goes back to Burma to seek revenge. When he goes back, he arms himself with a knife. Once he is back in Burma, he visits the site of his captivity, now a museum. The museum's tour guide is one of the Japanese soldiers, an interpreter, who was present while Lomax was being tortured. Lomax has a clear plan to seek physical revenge, and he comes close to achieving his goal – but in the end he relents and powerfully forgives the Japanese man, who has been truly repentant for what he put Lomax through. In fact, they become friends, and they visit each other in the years that follow.

I am not telling you this because of the impact on Lomax of forgiving the Japanese man. I'm telling you this because of the impact on that Japanese man of being forgiven. There is a moving scene towards the end of the film when the Japanese interpreter receives Lomax's forgiveness. You can see the relief

in his face and his gestures. He visibly relaxes, indeed he virtually collapses into Lomax's arms. He expected revenge, but received forgiveness; forgiveness for crimes committed 40 years before. Lomax's forgiveness of him opened up a whole new chapter towards the end of the Japanese man's life. He expected revenge, but received forgiveness.

What is this talk of God being a hiding place? Those words in verse 7 have made their way into a very familiar song. It takes some courage to acknowledge that God is our hiding place. Because if like most of us you like to be thought of as capable and competent, then the idea of going anywhere as a hiding place seems a bit weak and and childlike. A hiding place? Is that like a treehouse or something? Or a cave? I don't want to hide – I want to do stuff.

But actually this reference to the hiding place is very appropriate. This Psalm is very intimate, very personal. It is not describing, I think, the sort of confession a church as a whole might make, or an organisation, or a country: it is best done in private, just us and God. So the picture of a God himself as a hiding place becomes easier to understand.

Lastly this: we are encouraged not to be like the horse or the mule "*who must be controlled by bit or bridle or they will not come to you*" (verse 9). Well, thanks very much - I haven't galloped round a playground pretending to be a horse for quite some time. But the sense of the verse is this: don't have confession dragged out of you like the reluctant witness. But the sense of verse 9 is this: go willingly to God to ask for forgiveness, and go regularly. There's a Bible scholar from the United States called Cornelius Plantinga Jr who puts it very pithily: '*The problem is that sin is like garbage. You don't want to let it build up. Confessing sin is like taking out the garbage. You want to do it regularly because taking out the garbage is an extremely healthy thing to do*'.

And a healthy relationship with God is the most dazzling, the most interesting course you have ever studied. It is God who instructs us and teaches us the way we should go, who counsels us and watches over us. (verse 8). But it's not a distance learning course, or a correspondence course. God is very active tutor who loves teaching! Knock regularly on his door.