

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Sunday 1 March 2026



St Peter's Notting Hill

Kensington Park Rd, London W11 2PN

Psalm 51: 1-12

When Pat emailed me last week to ask if I could preach on today's supremely important Lent subjects confession and repentance I nearly leapt out of my hospital bed shouting 'Hallelujah!' Fortunately, I restrained myself because if

I had performed such an exuberant acrobatic leap I would have brought crashing down to the floor a skyscraper sized infrastructure of drips, heart monitors, cannulas, oxygen tubes, intravenous flow lines of antibiotics and other medical impedimenta all of which were plugged into various parts of my anatomy to help me recover from my urinary tract infection. As you can see all those devices and some wonderful doctors and nurses did their job. I am back on my feet and fit as the proverbial fiddle. So praise the Lord and thank you for your prayers!

Here most appropriately I should give you all a health warning. However, physically fit we feel, none of us are anywhere near spiritual fitness unless we have worked hard – perhaps painfully hard - at the two high voltage challenges in the title of this talk: Confession and repentance. They are not exactly fashionable or user-friendly subjects. In the Church of England, which too often likes to fudge difficult subjects, we do say General Confession at varying speeds and levels of sincerity. But we don't often do intense face to face confessions to a priest as Catholics do, nor do we often let it all hang out with prayer partners to whom we have promised to be accountable.

The old Church of England rubric on confession consists of three rather lukewarm options: "All may. Some should. None must." They sound rather like gentle low level Pilates exercise class suggestions rather than trumpet calls to spiritual fitness. But if any of us thought we were going to have a gentle comfortable Sunday talk this morning our reading should have shaken us out of our comfort zones.

For Psalm 51 is the hardest passage in the Bible on confession and repentance. It has played its part in many poignant scenes in English history. For example, Sir Thomas More recited it after placing his head on the execution block. Lady Jane Grey, the nine-day-Queen met her end saying this psalm before the axe fell.

And going further back into Old Testament history this Psalm has its own story to tell about a libidinous King, a beautiful woman with whom the King committed adultery and the military murder of the woman's husband. Such a story would have made a great Hollywood movie if the cameras had been rolling in 1500 BC! But even without the cameras the script is still with us because it is written down in the second book of Samuel chapters 11 and 12 (do go and read it).

So before you say: "What's this got to do with me in St Peter's in Lent today in 2026?...." fasten your seat belts because we are about to unpack what is not only a most tragic example of how sin can destroy lives. But also one of the most inspiring examples of how confession and repentance and the power of the Holy Spirit can bring even the worst of sinners back to God.

Let's get the story out of the way first. King David at the height of his power and glory one evening gazed out from the rooftop of his palace in Jerusalem and saw a stunningly beautiful woman having a shower on her own nearby roof top. King David lusted after her and discovered her name was Bathsheba. He also discovered that she was married to one of his own military commanders Uriah the Hittite. He was away fighting a war with the King's Army against the Ammonites.

So David in a move of vile wickedness gave orders that Uriah the Hittite should be sent to the front line of battle where the fiercest fighting was taking place.

As David hoped Uriah the Hittite was killed in that fierce fighting. So back in Jerusalem the beautiful Bathsheba was now a widow. King David courted her, married her and made her pregnant. Great was his rejoicing until along came the uncomfortable figure of Nathan the Prophet who confronted David with his wickedness which of course included arranging the murder of Bathsheba's husband.

Thanks to Nathan, David recognised the enormity of what he had done and he composed this psalm which is perhaps the most beautiful prayer in the Bible for confession and repentance let's look at some of its verses carefully.

Verses 1-3 are an abject plea for God's mercy and forgiveness:

- ¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
 blot out my transgressions.
- ² Wash away all my iniquity
 and cleanse me from my sin.
- ³ For I know my transgressions,
 and my sin is always before me.

Now it's a good, indeed essential, start to anyone's confession to drop the excuses, drop the denials and fess up unconditionally. No if's, but's, omissions, suppressions or attempts at justifications since this is the only one possible starting point if you're reaching out to an all-seeing God who already knows each and every one of our secret sins anyway.

Now David understood this because he said something in Verse 4 which seems rather surprising:

 "Against you, you only, have I sinned
 And done what is evil in your sight"

Now that's surprising because David had done enormous damage to several other people in the story but he recognised the primacy of God in the process of repentance.

David knew that God hates sin even though he is willing to love and forgive sinners. He understood that getting right with God came before everything else. It was David who recognised that his evil deeds stemmed from what theologians call original sin – the inherently weak and sinful nature which all human beings are born with - and which we had to fight against to conquer. So the words in verse 5 which seem rather puzzling at first:

“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me?” do not of course mean that there is anything sinful about the beautiful processes of conception and birth.

They are a reference to the universal tendency of humanity ever since the time of Adam's Fall, towards sinfulness or original sin from which we can only be rescued by the gift of God's amazing Grace.

Now King David's response was to ask in verses 7 and 8 to be cleansed, washed and to have his iniquity blotted out. So he prayed in verse 10 “Create in me a pure heart O God”. He wanted the fresh start that only his Creator could give him. But he needed the help of the Holy Spirit.

Fascinatingly our reading in verse 11 contains the first-ever reference in the Old Testament to the Holy Spirit, several centuries before this third person of God was fully revealed in the New Testament. Perhaps only the Lord's anointed could have had such foresight about the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now as we reach verse 7 notice how this whole Psalm changes gear:

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

As an aside here, on a recent trip to Abu Dhabi I was amazed to pick up a bar of soap in the hotel shower and noticed that it was called Hyssop Soap – the name derives from an ancient Syrian plant - which is said to have cleansing qualities. So this is an up-to-date Psalm even in its recommendation of bath gel!

Anyway, all the Hebrew poetry about washing, blotting out, crushing bones comes to a joyful climax in verses 10-12. Instead of all those gloomy words about sin, evil and iniquity, suddenly the psalm swings into positive words: Create, renew, Holy Spirit, restore, joy and salvation:

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

What King David is doing here is not only asking for God's forgiveness He is also asking for spiritual renewal and for the help of the Holy Spirit in getting started in a new life. In church language – starting the process of repentance

Repentance – the twinned theme of this talk- is a difficult and inadequate word in the English language. What does the word repentance or repent remind you of? Or tell you to do? To say sorry over and over again? To chant the Jesus Prayer from the Orthodox Church liturgy a hundred times before breakfast?

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God Have Mercy on me a Sinner".

Excellent if it works for you. Just as in the old days wearing sack cloth and ashes worked for some penitents. No, we should get our best understanding of the word Repentance from the words of Jesus himself. The first word he ever said as a Preacher was (Matthew 3:2) "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." If you are in a mood to confess your sins the Kingdom of Heaven is near for God is calling you.

But calling you in what way? There's a strong clue, not in the English word Repent or Repentance. But in the Greek word – the word in which the Gospels were written - for Repentance is: Meta-Noia – "a change of mind" or more easily translatable as "a change of heart or mind". In other words, "a turn to God" and to confess is to admit your sins to God in a sincere and penitent way. To repent is to change your heart or mind and turn to God with the help of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Back to the last verse of our reading:¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."

That prayer for joy is a good note on which to move to a conclusion of this talk. So I'm almost done! But I'd like to end on a personal note because this may help to bring home an important dimension – the joy of repentance. King David did not miss it.

In lugubrious Lent we perhaps make too much of the gloom and pain of penitence. I don't want to underestimate this. Repentance is not a quick fix. It can be and sometimes should be a testing, difficult, time consuming and heart-rending experience. But there is another side to this coin. So let me encourage you with a little story.

29 years ago, in 1997, I was almost as notorious and demonised a figure as Lord Mandelson and Andrew Mountbatten Windsor are today. I exaggerate of course, but I do know what it is like to be engulfed in a media firestorm, And to be under the cosh of negative tabloid headlines and attacks in Parliament, day after day. But at least, even though I was not much of a Christian in those days, I was repentant enough to admit – almost at once – that what I had done was wrong.

I admitted that I had told a lie while on oath in a libel case about who had paid my Ministerial hotel bill for two nights at the Ritz Hotel in Paris. The payment had been made by a Saudi businessman not by my then wife Lolitza, as I had testified. That admission was enough to bring down the wrath of media vilification on me and also the weight of the criminal law for I was prosecuted for perjury, pleaded guilty, and serve an 18-month prison sentence. No complaints.

As His Majesty the King said the other day in a different context:

“The law must take its course. Penalties and Punishment may be part of the experience of repentance.”

But there were silver linings to some of my clouds. At least a year before going to jail when I felt heavily burdened by guilt. Lolitza, said to me: “I think you should go to confession. Confess your sins to a priest.”

“But only Catholics do that” I demurred.

Amazingly, she found a Catholic priest willing to hear this Anglican sinner's confession. So off I went to see someone called Canon Norman Brown of Westminster Cathedral. At first, he hesitated and told me:

“You must go away and prepare carefully for this solemn sacrament.”

So I went away and filled at least six or seven notebooks with the record of all the sins I could remember, great and small, and about a week later I made a formal confession, kneeling before Father Norman in his attire of a cassock, a surplice, a biretta and a stole.

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I remember I ended this confession with words from the New Testament that perhaps come closest to the spirit of David in Psalm 51. They appear in the story of two men who go up into the Temple to pray. (Luke 18: 9-14) One of the men of the Pharisees was rather pleased with himself. But the other man, the Tax Collector, says over and over again: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." And that's how I ended my confession.

After that ending, Fr Norman said something like: "You have made a sincere and humble confession. God and his angels will be rejoicing in Heaven."

So I now pronounce Absolution and after making the sign of the Cross, he spoke words that are almost identical to the words we say at the end of some of our Communion Services here at St Peter's:

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and keep you in life eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And that was it. A wonderful absolution. I did immediately feel as though a huge weight had rolled off my shoulders and that I had indeed received God's forgiveness and that I could start a new life. What a joy! What a liberation!

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A slightly comic memory from that night is that when I came out of Westminster Cathedral, I was so happy that I started skipping along Victoria Street like a schoolboy until suddenly I came face to face with someone I knew. He was a rather stern unbending Government Chief Whip, who gave me a look that suggested that he thought I was a candidate for the funny farm. But I skipped cheerfully past him and despite life's ups and downs, frailties and failings, I've more or less been skipping ever since.

Because, through the joy of Salvation, and Repentance and the power of the Holy Spirit, I found my way to a new life in Christ.

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In my life, Confession and Repentance were the great turning points and that's why I said 'Hallelujah' in my hospital bed when Pat said will you preach on these subjects today.

Thank you for letting me share these thoughts with you. May your Confession and your Repentance become the turning points in your lives too.

AMEN