

**ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR
LENT 1 2023**

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. A psalm specially appointed to be said or sung on Ash Wednesday is Psalm 51 which begins with the words: "Have mercy upon me, O God, after thy great goodness: according to the multitude of thy mercies do away mine offences." Psalm 51 is a psalm that, as it were, opens the door onto Lent and reminds us that this is a season during which we are challenged to face up to the truth about ourselves, and to acknowledge (to use an unfashionable word) our 'sin'.

In the course of his prayer, his spiritual poem, the Psalmist prays: "Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me." In the familiar Prayer Book version of the psalm, these simple words have a proper rhythmic beauty. "Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me". It is therefore sometimes too easy for us to fail to recognise the full significance of what is said. One commentator on the Psalms has written: "Many of the prayers for help say, 'Change my situation so I may praise you.' This one says, 'Change me; I am the problem'." "Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me."

The fact that 'I am the problem' is suggested by the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; part of which we heard read as our First Lesson today. A kind of selfishness, disobedience, rebellion and pride seem to grow in each and every one of us almost from the start. Our habit soon develops of blaming 'circumstances' or 'other people' for the troubles and unhappiness that assail our lives, but the Psalmist sees to the 'heart' of things, and understands that it is the human heart that must be changed, and that that 'changing' must begin with whomever the 'me' might be.

Later in Psalm 51, we come across the words: "The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise." Both these words, and those cited earlier, must have been in the mind of its author when the Prayer Book Collect for Ash Wednesday was composed for inclusion in the first English Prayer Book of 1549. Many of you will know that it is the Collect traditionally appointed to be read after the Collect for the Day each day in Lent. At its 'heart' are the words: "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts". "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts."

The new heart must be a 'contrite' heart. As with the words from the psalm, the words of the Collect can charm us with their melody. We can fail to 'take to heart' the full significance of what is being said.

Recently, it has been drawn to my attention that the English word 'contrite' whose meaning for us is 'penitent' or 'sorry', derives from the Latin verb 'conterere'. It means to 'rub away', 'reduce to small portions by rubbing' 'to grind' or 'to pound'. The making of the 'new and contrite' hearts is not achieved too easily. Perhaps we resist what we might think of as the necessary 'scouring' of the heart. It is just too painful to recognise and bear the truth about ourselves. We can only turn to God, as did the Psalmist, understanding that God (to use the words of Lent's Second Sunday Collect in the Prayer Book) "seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves."

This is what the Psalmist did. This is what Christians down through the ages have done. Among them was the seventeenth century Dean of St Pauls, John Donne. One of his Holy Sonnets begins with the lines:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
as yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee

"Batter my heart" pleads the poet. This business of penitence, sorrow, contrition, is no easy matter. This is not the giving up of sweets or cheese or booze for a few weeks. This is a matter of prayer and pleading and submission.

At the end of his sonnet, Donne speaks to God:

Take me to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you 'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

The images are violent. The cleansing and renewal of the selfish, disobedient, rebellious and proud heart is a spiritual struggle.

John Donne's younger contemporary George Herbert knew as much. In his poem 'The Sinner', Herbert, like the Psalmist, saw that it was he who needed to be changed. Of his own soul, he writes:

I find there quarries of pil'd vanities,
But shreds of holiness, that dare not venture
To show their face, since cross to thy decrees:

And, likening his own heart to the slabs that Moses carried down the mountain, he pleads:

And though my hard heart scarce to thee can groan,
Remember that thou once didst write in stone.

Today, we live in an all too troubled world. As we pass the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine, as we hear reports of shootings and stabbings, many forms of human exploitation and fraud on a grand scale, we try to change the outward 'circumstances' through political astuteness and stricter legislation. Yet we know that this is always but an, albeit necessary, 'holding operation'. The root of the problem is in every single human heart. The solution to the problem is the transformation of every single human heart. Such transformation is the business of religion. That is why it is so important that we should not regard religious observation as any kind of recreation (as that word is commonly understood) or entertainment but rather something deeply serious embraced for the benefit of the world in which we live.

The possibility of the transformation of every single human heart is of course what some would dismiss as mere phantasy. Others would understand it as a dream; possibly a dream that might come true. Believing that the dream might yet come true is an ingredient in what you and I call 'faith'. But you and I are sure that faith is not an idle standing by and waiting. Faith demands a kind of participation. That participation begins with our own Lenten prayer.

Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me.