



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Wednesday, February 6, 2008
Ash Wednesday

The Solemn Liturgy of Ash Wednesday
at 5:30pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Psalm 51
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CONTRITION: THE WAY FORWARD IN LIFE

Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise. Psalm 51: 10, 17

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The original, first meaning of the adjective, contrite, is “injured or bruised by rubbing or striking,” which sheds light on the more usual, second and figurative meaning we use, which is the conscience stricken by the consciousness of sin. “My conscience smote me,” are the words of a contrite person.

The great Miserere, from the first word of the Latin translation of Psalm 51, begins, “Have mercy upon me, O God, after thy great goodness: according to the multitude of thy mercies do away mine offences.” The biblical introductory footnote to this Psalm reads, “To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came unto him after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” This Psalm has been understood, since ancient Israel, to express King David’s contrition after being convicted by the Lord through his prophet of grievous sin.

David had taken in adultery the beautiful Bathsheba, the wife of his faithful soldier Uriah the Hittite, whom David arranged to have killed “accidentally” in battle. It was a crafty plot to cover his tracks, but the Lord exposed David’s sin. David’s friend and prophet Nathan spoke truth to power when he said to the king, “Thou art the man!” David collapsed before Nathan’s indictment and repented, expecting to die. He did not die, but, in the grave words of the prophecy that followed, the sword never departed from David’s house, and the resulting, self-inflicted dysfunction produced family feud and civil war for decades, to the end of David’s life and beyond.

But the Bible calls David the man after the Lord’s own heart, and today, when the choir chants David’s great penitential lament, the Miserere, as we receive the ashes of mortality on our foreheads, let us ask why this is. David was beloved by God not only because David believed and trusted and loved the Lord but more especially because he truly

repented and accepted the punishments and consequences of his sin in a right heart, for the rest of his extraordinary life.

What David did sets him apart from all the other, many extraordinary and good, kings of ancient Israel. And ancient Israel's most beloved king is set apart from any other king or leader known to man. Holy Scripture honors David not for his political wisdom, his courage and loyalty, his valor in battle and heroism, his courtesy, his good looks, his poetic and aesthetic nature, his charm and intelligence, all of which he had in abundance. David is set apart by his lifelong response to his conviction by a prophet for a particularly sordid and disgusting sin: true contrition and authentic repentance. David spent the rest of his life sincerely climbing that "Seven-Storey Mountain," the mountain of purification.

What sets David apart is the best any sinner can do, and in the Church of Jesus Christ, David's example is the true way to live in response and in relation to that great fountain of mercy which flows from the cross of the crucified Son of David.

As the choir sings the Latin verses of David's lament, we will for the most part be focusing on our own participation in receiving ashes hearing the words God said to Adam after his original sin, "Remember, O Man, that dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." I suggest that you make it your homework at this beginning of Lent to read Psalm 51 on your own, alone, in prayer. I also suggest you keep today's liturgy leaflet to review the Church's invitation to observe Lent.

As a priest and Christian, indeed simply as a human being, I have become more and more convinced that the way forward in life is through true contrition, to exercise the capacity to repent, to say "I am sorry," to take our medicine with a right mind and heart, to ask and to receive and to convey forgiveness from and to one's fellow human beings. It is certainly the way through the door into the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus began his preaching in Galilee saying, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." This is the first premise of life for sinners who desire something better.

Today we hear that we are dead. Remember that you are dust. Dust we are, but redeemed dust, dust bound for glory through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the power of his Resurrection from the dead. On Easter morning, we will hear from the Apostle Paul, again, "You are dead." But he continues straight on. "You are dead, and *your life lies hid with Christ in God.*" Let us go forward, from ashes to Easter through Jesus Christ. The door is open; let us walk through it. If we want to live, in fact live forever, we most certainly shall.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.