

30 March 2025 A Psalm of Encouragement (John Gay.)

'Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.' (Psalm 32:1-2)

Today's appointed psalm is Psalm 32 and it is surely one of the most excellent of psalms and I think possibly my personal favourite. That apart, our gospel reading reminds us of the time when Jesus was coming under closer scrutiny by the religious leaders.

When he finds himself criticised for not only spending time in the company of sinners, but worse, 'eating with them', well, as far as the scribes and Pharisees were concerned, this was the nadir for anyone who thinks himself righteous. How could Jesus think of himself as a godly man when indulging in such behaviour? Indeed the implication is that Jesus, by mixing with such people so readily, is himself at the point of condemnation. 'What', they may well have asked, 'was Jesus thinking'.

Jesus thought alright and replies with three parables. Two were somewhat similar in nature and format about finding and retrieving something that was lost and then found, citing sheep and a coin respectively. The third, and arguably the most important, was about, a lad who perhaps meant well, but made some bad choices in life and, like the sheep and the coin, was lost, before he found himself and set out to regain something of the life he had known before. Then, when his father found him, there was double rejoicing.

I do wonder if Jesus, when framing this story, had in mind Psalm 32? Let's work through it and see. Remember the start in vv.1 and 2:

'Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.'

Verse 2, if you like, is the standard to which we should be looking to aspire, where 'the Lord counts no iniquity', and where the spirit of the person contains 'no deceit.' Unfortunately for us, before we get to that standard, we have to pass through v.1:

'Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered'.

We must realise that in order for transgression to be forgiven, we will have had to transgressed in the first place, or there is nothing to forgive! This applies to all of us; there is only one person who has not had to do this: the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

For the rest of us, alas, the forgiveness of sin is a necessity if we are to go on and live anything that looks like a godly life. More than that, we must realise where our conduct does not attain the standard the Lord sets.

This question of being blessed and yet needing to take stock of our wrong-doing is nowhere better illustrated than in Jesus' parable of the 'Prodigal Son'. What follows in the story neither confirms nor denies the accusations laid against Jesus by the religious leaders, but rather relays a scenario that those familiar with the message of Psalm 32 would understand. The layout of the story is this:

At the beginning there was a happy family, probably wealthy as the head of it owned both home and land, and, as we learn later, there were hired hands employed there. It looks like happy days, at least until the youngest son, who, as the youngest son, was not going to inherit the property, decided that he wanted to make his own way in life.

Now there is nothing wrong with that, and the father would understand, as would Jesus' hearers, that in order to go into business and succeed, he would need some funds to establish himself properly. The father was, if you like giving this younger son, who was not the main inheritor, the best start in this new adult world that he could. He gave the lad his portion of the inheritance in cash, as an adjustment against what the older son would inherit: the farm and the property.

So, the young man goes off, presumably to make his fortune. We don't know why or how, but suddenly, being free to do what he wants with money in his pocket, the lad began to make a number of bad choices and take wrong options. He probably made the wrong sort of friends and picked poor choices of business associates. 'Reckless living' can mean all sorts, so he probably had more fun than he should have and possibly the wrong sort of fun.

It didn't seem to bother the boy until the money ran out, coupled with a famine, meaning resources were practically zero. His friends wouldn't or couldn't help him, so in order to simply survive he hired himself out to do

the most menial of work on a farm, slopping out pigs. As he would have known, it doesn't get lower than that for the farm-hand. Might the lad have reflected later in life verses 3-4 of the psalm:

'For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.'

At his lowest ebb, suddenly he has an idea. He will go to his father's house, where there is plenty, admit his faults and ask forgiveness, so that he may be taken on there as a hired hand like any of the other servants. At least he would eat something better than pig slops.

He does as he plans, but even before he arrives at the farm, his father has spotted him and rushed out to meet him in advance and embraced him and kissed him. Despite the son's protestations that he was not worthy of his father's name and all that went with it, the best robe and shoes are brought and a ring to signify his restoration to the family. Might the son have uttered a prayer similar to that of the psalmist, that of Psalm 32:5?

'I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord", and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.' (v.5)

The psalmist then makes the point to the reader:

'Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they (that is the waters) shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.' (v.6-7).

Meanwhile, in the parable, the father's love for a son that was lost to him, but now is found cannot be restrained. He calls out in vv.23-34:

'And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.'

Similarly, the rest of Psalm 32 suddenly changes direction from the encouragement of God's protection to a call toward living wisely, leading to celebration; v.8-11:

'I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you. Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!'

Psalm 32 reminds us of our need to place our reliance in the strength of the Lord, rather than our own. When we walk in his way, despite anything that might befall us, we can be confident in him that he will be keeping his eye on us, and will, at the end preserve us for all eternity as he himself is ever present, eternal and almighty.

When the world and one's own sense of unworthiness, becomes too much, allow Psalm 32 to be the word of God to remind you that the Lord loves the repentant sinner as much as any who aspire to be righteous but fail. For:

'Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.' (Psalm 32:1-2) and 'Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!' (v.11)