**13th March 2011**

**Focus Scripture: Psalm 32**

This year during Lent, the focus readings we will explore are from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. They tell of God’s saving acts throughout Hebrew history. This week the readings call us to explore the themes of creation and separation, and to celebrate the gift of God’s abundant grace.

Frederick Beuchner the American Presbyterian minster said the Bible has a central plot:

‘Despite its extraordinary variety, the Bible is held together by having a single plot. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which \god created it’.

The world gets lost. We get lost. So during this Lent we are on a journey – to get found again and get back on the right road.

In Psalm 32, the psalmist expresses thanksgiving after a personal experience of forgiveness of sin and of healing. This is a penitential psalm, used in temple worship to express the sorrow and repentance

of individuals and the community.

The word sin in the bible has several nuances of meaning. It can mean disobedience – in the sense of breaking the rules. It can be thought of in root ways. For Augustine the root sin is pride ‘hubris;’ – self centeredness. We are aware of our finitude and vulnerability. We become anxious and therefore self centred.

Sin can mean separation. Or estrangement. We are centred in ourselves and not in God.

Sometimes the root sin is unfaithfulness to god – idolatry, adultery in the sense of basing your life on something other than God’s ways.

The problem is disobedience, or estrangement, or pride, or infidelity, or lack of trust. Sin in the bible is not just social personal sins, but also the sins of society, corruption greed, injustice, and oppression – structural sin as well as social sins.

How Are We Tempted Today?

William Willimon, in his book What's Right with the Church (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), tells about leading a Sunday School class that was studying the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. After careful study and explanation of each of the three temptations, Dr. Willimon asked, "How are we tempted today?" A young salesman was the first to speak. "Temptation is when your boss calls you in, as mine did yesterday, and says, `I'm going to give you a real opportunity. I'm going to give you a bigger sales territory. We believe that you are going places, young man.'  
  
"But I don't want a bigger sales territory," the young salesman told his boss. "I'm already away from home four nights a week. It wouldn't be fair to my wife and daughter."   
  
"Look," his boss replied, "we're asking you to do this for your wife and daughter. Don't you want to be a good father? It takes money to support a family these days. Sure, your little girl doesn't take much money now, but think of the future. Think of her future. I'm only asking you to do this for them," the boss said.   
  
The young man told the class, "Now, that's temptation."

But the Tempter turns our strengths against us

One night a well-known and highly respected preacher was working on his sermon for the following Sunday. His little son came in and asked his daddy to come tuck him in. The father told him to get into bed and he would come in a few minutes to give him a goodnight kiss and tuck him in. But then, he became engrossed in his preparation, and much later, he remembered the promise. He went into his son's bed room only to discover that the little fellow was already asleep. That story is heart-breaking because it has a familiar ring to it. His passion to be a good preacher - a good thing - had tempted him that night to be a bad father. Do you see what happened? The tempter even turns our strengths against us if we are not careful.  
  
Jesus overcame his first temptation by putting his complete trust in God. 1. The First Temptation: Jesus was tempted by the wrong use of power.

2. The Second Temptation: Jesus was also tempted by the wrong way to popularity.

3. The Third Temptation: Jesus was tempted by the wrong kind of partnership.

That's a good example for us. We're so concerned about "having it all." The wise person trusts that God will provide all that he or she needs.

The Churches Together Lent course that starts in various places this week is called ‘Let the Scriptures Speak’ and in this 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible there is renewed emphasis on the Bible and its message. So today I want to take you through this important psalm and hopefully let the scriptures speak to you.

This psalm meant much to St Augustine and Augustine’s words ‘the beginning of wisdom is to know yourself a sinner’ might form its caption. He had the words inscribed on the wall over against his bed, so that, when too ill to read, he might still be aware of their comfort.

After our series looking at the Sermon on the Mount the psalm starts with tow beatitudes. In these two beatitudes there are three words used for those thoughts and deeds that separate people from God and from one another – “transgression,” “sin,” “iniquity” – and three words to express restoration and a renewed relationship with God – “wrongdoing is forgiven,” “covered,” “no more.” For the psalmist,

Admitting one’s shortcomings or guilt to God is essential; without this, one becomes ill and wastes away. Doing it leads to happiness, blessedness. There is a contrast in the kind of covering: when god covers sin, he graciously blots it out; when men and women cover their sin, in verse 5, they sinfully hide it.

The psalm starts by declaring that great promise of scripture that whatever the form and fashion of our wrongdoing, call it what you will, it can and will be forgiven.

The folly as seen in verse tow is not to claim such grace by complete confession. There must be no deceit or guile as the King James Version puts it, no words on the lips which do not gush from a repentant heart. But, given that, God cleanses. Many commentators suggest this psalm is a meditation on the silent months after King David’s adultery and consequential murder of his mistresses husband, in which David appeared insensitive and beyond the realization of the enormity of his sin. The people in his land knew of it and hostile people murmured their resentment and their discontent. The court and its king had become too aloof and self justifying. The leader no longer led. He had usurped his authority and violated his rights and the rights of others. The prophet Nathan confronted King David and gave a courageous word that brought a realisation of what he had done and a consequent conviction of sin. Nathan’s challenge shattered the hard exterior and finally David was able to emerge free and a new man.

And if verse 3 is read aright, it appears that through the months of apparent disdain and unconcern there was misery of mind and heart which made his very body sick.

It was the common opinion throughout the ancient world and in the Old Testament writings that sickness was related to sin. This verse again supports the connection between pathology of body and mind and how they are intricately and damagingly linked.

The pressure of God’s hand lay upon him, a weight like the burning of the summer sun. There is no peace wrote Francis Thompson in the hound of Heaven, for those whom God pursues, only partial flight. There is no rest when the almighty hand bears down upon the head, only aridity and exhaustion. There is one escape, ever open, ever ready – surrender and confession.

Humans are always declaring their freedom, wishing for more "space," announcing that they belong only to "themselves." We want to be free from the enslavement of the kitchen, or from confinement of a job we don't like.

Airplane companies claim to set us free, and medical companies says the same. There are deodorant companies which promise to set us free from the worry of underarm wetness and odour; we want freedom to sleep at night with a clear conscience, freedom from fear of death, and above all, freedom from the terrors of the judgment day.

A teen-age boy told his parents he was going to run away from home.  "Listen," he said, "I'm leaving home. There is nothing you can do to stop me. I want excitement, adventure, beautiful women, money, and fun. I'll never find it here, so I'm leaving. Just don't try to stop me!" As he headed for the door, his father leaped up and ran toward him. "Dad," the boy said firmly, "you heard what I said. Don't try to stop me. I'm going!" "Who's trying to stop you?" answered the father, "I'm going with you!"

Verse 5 contains the blessedness of this moment. It is a simple act, an immediate in its effectiveness. Hence the interweaving in these words of confession and relief. ‘At a bound’ says McLaren, ‘the soul passes from dreary remorse. The break with the former self is complete, and effected at one wrench. Some things are best done by degrees; some, of which the forsaking of sin is one, are best done quickly.

Long before Freud, the psalmist understood the power of speech, the need for spoken release and admission, the liberation that comes with actual articulation to the One who listens and can respond. God is the one with whom we have to deal. Sin blocks life with God. That blockage can go unnoticed, for we have a deep capacity for self deception. The body can often pay for it.

Guilt can be destructive. It is in this psalm for a reason. But real guilt, as opposed to false guilt, real guilt fully embraced and acknowledged permits movement, a new reception of life and a new communion with God. Only then can guilt be resolved and genuinely relinquished. The psalm asserts that there are no alternatives, no substitutes. The body will not be deceived, even as god will not be mocked. Freedom from guilt requires embracing it and having it dealt with by the mercy of God.

In verses 6 and 7 confession changes here to reflection. In these verses the author draws perhaps on personal imagery of wilderness, its sudden flash floods, and its rocky strongholds. Imagine David the shepherd boy – taking emergency cover from flash floods (pertinent imagery with he devastation of the Japanese tsunami). The hiding place is needed in the rocky stronghold. Find our security in god in the storms and floods of life.

Verse 8, 9

The eye of God was a common thought. There is a word which implies ‘in front of’ which contains the notion. In Judges 18 v6 ‘Go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of (in front of0 the lord. The supreme illustration is the breaking of Peter (Luke 22.61 – the Lord looked at Peter as he denied him. The concept is that God sees, watches, and although we appear to be alone, we are never out of sight. And being thus in view, love follows, and the impulse which knows no space or separation, directs us. Only let the mind be sensitive and attuned to catch the hint, the message. This blessed awareness is what sets us apart from the beast, the horse which needs a bridle and the mule, proverbial symbol of obstinacy and stupidity.

The final two verses has the psalm come to a conclusion. In Psalm 51 David hopes that restoration is so complete that he will teach others who sin the ways of God and bring sinners like himself to the blessedness of his own experience. Here he visibly seeks to do so. The biblical meaning of repentance is not primarily contrition but resolve. In the minds of many Christian’s repentance is associated with introspective guilt. It means feeling really sorry for what you have done or left undone, feeling really bad about the horrible person that you are.

In the Hebrew Bible to repent means primarily to return to God – to return from exile, to no longer being lost. In the new testament it means to go beyond the mind that you have – go beyond the mind shaped by the world and the culture you are a part of and to the mind you have in Christ. Be transformed, change direction – find a new path to real freedom in Christ.

The bold splendour of the imagery is sustained to the end, with the fine picture of god’s mercy, round the forgiven and repentant person like a fortress wall.

A group of mountain hikers came across an old woodsman with an axe on his shoulder. "Where are you going?" they asked him.  
  
"I'm headed up the mountain to get some wood to repair my cabin," replied the woodsman.  
  
"But why are you going up the mountain?" they asked incredulously. "There are plenty of trees all around us here."  
  
"I know," he said, "but I need strong timber and it grows only on the highest elevations, where the trees are tested and toughened by the weather around them. The higher up you go, the stronger the timber grows."  
  
And that is what God desires for us - that through the winds of trial and the storms of temptation we would grow strong and live on a higher level - strong to resist the devil's urging, strong to serve God, and strong as we stand together in faith and service to one another.

The steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.