

Ash Wednesday

Day of Prayer and Fasting

10.00 am

Introduction – Bishop Michael

From the earliest times Christians have used the weeks leading up to Easter as a time of deepened prayer, fasting and service of others to prepare for the great celebration of our Lord's passion and resurrection. To focus such preparation with self-searching, repentance and the seeking of God's grace and mercy, it has been customary to pray what Christians and Jews know as the seven penitential psalms. For nearly 3,000 years these psalms have helped us as God's people to recognize our sinfulness, express our sorrow and ask for God's forgiveness. Together they give us the structure for our time of prayer together today.

Reader 1 Caroline Sewell

We begin with Psalm 6

- 1 O Lord, rebuke me not in your wrath;
neither chasten me in your fierce anger.
- 2 Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am weak;
Lord, heal me, for my bones are racked.
- 3 My soul also shakes with terror;
how long, O Lord, how long?
- 4 Turn again, O Lord, and deliver my soul;
save me for your loving mercy's sake.
- 5 For in death no one remembers you;
and who can give you thanks in the grave?
- 6 I am weary with my groaning;
every night I drench my pillow
and flood my bed with my tears.
- 7 My eyes are wasted with grief
and worn away because of all my enemies.
- 8 Depart from me, all you that do evil,
for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping.
- 9 The Lord has heard my supplication;
the Lord will receive my prayer.
- 10 All my enemies shall be put to shame and confusion;
they shall suddenly turn back in their shame.

Reflection – Bishop Michael

This psalm expresses the prayer of someone who is sick. Their suffering and pain make them cry out to God “How long, O Lord, how long?” Here is someone afflicted by a grave illness that causes pain all over their body: their bones are dislocated, their breathing is restricted, their eyes are swollen from weeping, at night they are unable to sleep, constantly feeling faint. And that is not all. What ails them is intensified through fear – because this illness also brings them closer to death: they suffer not only in body, but also in spirit. They are restless and frightened. Only too aware of their faults and failings; they know themselves to be a sinner, and fear God’s judgement. As if this were not enough, they feel under attack, surrounded by people who slander and belittle them, seemingly taking pleasure in their suffering. So, the Psalmist prays “My eyes are weary with grief and raw because of all those who are against me”. It’s not difficult to empathise here. Haven’t we all, at some time, echoed the cry: “Oh, how long must this go on?” Yet here, this is a cry that is born from faith. The very act of crying out is an acknowledgment that the Lord is there, and will not abandon him. Even in the depths he can affirm: “The Lord **has** heard my supplication; the Lord **will** receive my prayer.”

Prayer 1 read by Caroline Sewell

Let us pray

Lord Jesus Christ, by the loneliness of your suffering on the cross, be near to all who are desolate and in pain and in sorrow; hear the anguish of all who cry out ‘how long, O Lord, how long?’ and let your presence transform their sorrow into comfort and their loneliness into fellowship with you for your mercy’s sake.

Suggested Music

Taize – "O Lord, hear my prayer" St Thomas Music Group. 7 min. 42sec. Fade after 4 mins

Image



11.00 am

Reader 2 Julie Allday

The second Penitential psalm is Psalm 32

- 1 Happy the one whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sin is covered.
- 2 Happy the one to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile.
- 3 For I held my tongue; my bones wasted away through my groaning all the day long.
- 4 Your hand was heavy upon me day and night; my moisture was dried up like the drought in summer.
- 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and my iniquity I did not hide.
- 6 I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.
- 7 Therefore let all the faithful make their prayers to you in time of trouble; in the great water flood, it shall not reach them.
- 8 You are a place for me to hide in; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with songs of deliverance.
- 9 ‘I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; I will guide you with my eye.
- 10 ‘Be not like horse and mule which have no understanding; whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you.’
- 11 Great tribulations remain for the wicked, but mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord.
- 12 Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

Reflection – Bishop Michael

This psalm is the prayer of someone who was burdened with a sense of sin and had not been able to find forgiveness. The psalmist says “while I kept silence, my body 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”. Stressing his inability to speak truthfully about the turmoil inside (“I held my tongue” he says) he reminds us of our instinct to try to hide our sin from God, from others, and even from ourselves, thinking that we can soften it, if not push it

away. But sin cannot be pushed away; It must be faced, forgiven, and dealt with. Pretending not to see it or, still worse, wanting to justify it means remaining in a lie, living out a dishonesty about ourselves, who and what we are. And lies lead to not living well: they imprison; harden hearts and minds and will, and weigh heavy upon the soul. As the Psalmist puts it “the life blood within me was dried up as by the heat of summer”.

Sin, failing to live life as God intends us, is not some abstract idea. On the contrary it affects every aspect of life, it conditions our behaviour, affects our attitude, imprisons our heart. For this to be dealt with requires seeing my life in a new light, leading to a complete change of heart. The Psalmist comes to see this: I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ ‘and you (the Lord) forgave the guilt of my sin.’ If lies dry us up, then sincerity and truth bring us back to life. No longer needing to pretend with yourself, with God, with others, brings a new freedom. Recognising and confessing sin is not humiliation, but an act of truth and release. Not least is there a release of concern, compassion and love for others. Freed from self we are free to serve, and in that we may find new hope and new joy. “Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; all who are true of heart, shout for joy.”

Prayer 2 Julie Allday

Let us pray:

Give us honest hearts, O God,
and send your kindly Spirit
to help us confess our sins
and bring us the peace of your forgiveness;
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Suggested Music

"Blessed are the men who fear Him" Elijah – Mendelssohn.
Edinburgh Festival Chorus. Orchestra of the Age of
Enlightenment. 3 min 1 sec.

Image



12 noon

Reader 3 Ray Brinkley

We turn now to the third Penitential psalm – Psalm 38

1 Rebuke me not, O Lord, in your anger,
neither chasten me in your heavy displeasure.

2 For your arrows have stuck fast in me
and your hand presses hard upon me.

3 There is no health in my flesh
because of your indignation;
there is no peace in my bones because of my sin.

4 For my iniquities have gone over my head;
their weight is a burden too heavy to bear.

5 My wounds stink and fester
because of my foolishness.

6 I am utterly bowed down and brought very low;
I go about mourning all the day long.

7 My loins are filled with searing pain;
there is no health in my flesh.

8 I am feeble and utterly crushed;
I roar aloud because of the disquiet of my heart.

9 O Lord, you know all my desires
and my sighing is not hidden from you.

10 My heart is pounding, my strength has failed me;
the light of my eyes is gone from me.

11 My friends and companions stand apart from my affliction;
my neighbours stand afar off.

12 Those who seek after my life lay snares for me;
and those who would harm me whisper evil
and mutter slander all the day long.

13 But I am like one who is deaf and hears not,
like one that is dumb, who does not open his mouth.

14 I have become like one who does not hear
and from whose mouth comes no retort.

15 For in you, Lord, have I put my trust;
you will answer me, O Lord my God.

16 For I said, ‘Let them not triumph over me,
those who exult over me when my foot slips.’

17 Truly, I am on the verge of falling
and my pain is ever with me.

18 I will confess my iniquity
and be sorry for my sin.

19 Those that are my enemies without any cause are mighty,
and those who hate me wrongfully are many in number.

20 Those who repay evil for good are against me,
because the good is what I seek.

21 Forsake me not, O Lord;
be not far from me, O my God.

22 Make haste to help me,
O Lord of my salvation.

Reflection – Bishop Michael

In this psalm we hear the cry of someone who has faced their sin and suffering, and is still in great pain. We have a sense here of a person who is burdened, not only by their own grief and heartache but the suffering and pain of the world – the real suffering and pain that touches so many who are sorely tested by things that are beyond their own control: entire peoples crushed by war, hunger, sickness, violence and injustice – pandemic. In this Psalm, as in much of scripture, we hear the echo of the great suffering of the poor and weak, the lonely and the abandoned. It seems that the person who composed this psalm was afflicted with a terrible disease, perhaps leprosy. Whatever it was, it was clearly socially and emotionally isolating “My friends and companions stand apart from my affliction; my neighbours keep their distance.” In such circumstances how easy it is to give in to bitterness, recrimination and self justification. Here the psalmist does none of these things. He feels deeply the wounds of the world against him in false accusation (vv.13–14) but has decided to remain silent and NOT to retaliate. How often we retaliate first and wish we had kept silence only later!

Having a deep trust in God's mercy, his abiding presence with him, the psalmist knows that sometimes suffering has to be faced first head on, in a silent accepting of the reality facing us. It is only when we are able to look the ills of the world in the face, and acknowledge them for what they are, that we can also begin to be truly open to what God is doing in response, where he is already at work, and what he then requires from us: “in you, Lord, have I put my trust; you **will** answer me, O Lord my God.”

Prayer 3 Ray Brinkley

Let us pray:

O Lord of my salvation.
Almighty Lord and Saviour,
behold with pity the wounds of your people;
do not forsake us, sinful as we are,

but for the sake of the passion of your
Beloved One, Jesus,
come quickly to our aid,
for his mercy's sake.

Suggested Music

"The Lord's Prayer" a Russian Orthodox Liturgical work by Nikolay Kedrov Sr. by Bulgarian National Choir "Svetoslav Obrerenov" 3 min 56 sec.

Image



1.00 pm

Reader 4 Roger Page

The fourth Penitential psalm is Psalm 51

1 Have mercy on me, O God, in your great goodness;
according to the abundance of your compassion
blot out my offences.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I acknowledge my faults
and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you only have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,

5 So that you are justified in your sentence
and righteous in your judgement.

6 I have been wicked even from my birth,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

7 Behold, you desire truth deep within me
and shall make me understand wisdom
in the depths of my heart.

8 Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean;

wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

9 Make me hear of joy and gladness,
that the bones you have broken may rejoice.

10 Turn your face from my sins
and blot out all my misdeeds.

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

12 Cast me not away from your presence
and take not your holy spirit from me.

13 Give me again the joy of your salvation
and sustain me with your gracious spirit;

14 Then shall I teach your ways to the wicked
and sinners shall return to you.

15 Deliver me from my guilt, O God,
the God of my salvation,
and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.

16 O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

17 For you desire no sacrifice, else I would give it;
you take no delight in burnt offerings.

18 The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

19 O be favourable and gracious to Zion;
build up the walls of Jerusalem.

20 Then you will accept sacrifices offered in righteousness,
the burnt offerings and oblations;
then shall they offer up bulls on your altar.

Reflection – Bishop Michael

Of all the penitential psalms this is probably the best known. We know it by the first word of its Latin version ‘miserere – Have mercy’. It is a prayer of a believer who is confident that God’s mercy is greater than any human sin. Tradition says that the psalm was written by David after he had been confronted by the prophet, Nathan. If that is correct, then the psalm was written at one of the darkest moments of David’s life. David’s lust had driven him into adultery with Bathsheba, and he ultimately had her husband, Uriah, killed so that he could marry her. It was a sin with many consequences, impacting on many lives and relationships at the time and in the future. David’s conscience was awakened only when Nathan openly rebuked him, bringing him face to face with a word from the Lord. At this point comes a realisation not just of the nature of one particular sin and its consequence, but of the flawed human nature behind it, and other sins and failing in any person’s life: ‘I have been wicked

even from my birth’, so what is needed is not just a quick act of saying sorry and being pardoned, but a deep renewal of character: ‘you desire truth deep within me and shall make me understand wisdom in the depths of my heart. Purge me . . . and I shall be clean.’ It is precisely this that God longs to bring to us. The true focus of this psalm is not our sin, but God’s mercy and forgiveness. Mercy and steadfast love describe the richness of God’s relationship with all that he has made. In the Bible mercy is not just a passing feeling. It’s the passionate, strong, and tender faithfulness of a mother for her child. Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Says the Lord. Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (Isaiah 49.15) If we are sometimes stubborn in our sinning, we could say that God’s mercy for us is even more stubborn. And God has the last word.

Prayer 4 Roger Page

Let us pray

Take away, good Lord, the sin that corrupts us;
give us the sorrow that heals
and the joy that praises
and restore by grace your own image within us,
that we may take our place among your people;
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Suggested Music Allegri "Miserere" Kings College Cambridge.
5min 43 sec possibly fade at 4 mins

Image



2.00 pm

Reader 5 Peter and Liz Brown

We come now to the fifth of the Penitential psalms – Psalm 102

1 O Lord, hear my prayer
and let my crying come before you.
2 Hide not your face from me
in the day of my distress.
3 Incline your ear to me;
when I call, make haste to answer me,
4 For my days are consumed in smoke
and my bones burn away as in a furnace.
5 My heart is smitten down and withered like grass,
so that I forget to eat my bread.
6 From the sound of my groaning
my bones cleave fast to my skin.
7 I am become like a vulture in the wilderness,
like an owl that haunts the ruins.
8 I keep watch and am become like a sparrow
solitary upon the housetop.
9 My enemies revile me all the day long,
and those who rage at me have sworn together against me.
10 I have eaten ashes for bread
and mingled my drink with weeping,
11 Because of your indignation and wrath,
for you have taken me up and cast me down.
12 My days fade away like a shadow,
and I am withered like grass.
13 But you, O Lord, shall endure for ever
and your name through all generations.
14 You will arise and have pity on Zion;
it is time to have mercy upon her;
surely the time has come.
15 For your servants love her very stones
and feel compassion for her dust.
16 Then shall the nations fear your name, O Lord,
and all the kings of the earth your glory,
17 When the Lord has built up Zion
and shown himself in glory;
18 When he has turned to the prayer of the destitute
and has not despised their plea.
19 This shall be written for those that come after,
and a people yet unborn shall praise the Lord.
20 For he has looked down from his holy height;

from the heavens he beheld the earth,
21 That he might hear the sighings of the prisoner
and set free those condemned to die;
22 That the name of the Lord may be proclaimed in Zion
and his praises in Jerusalem,
23 When peoples are gathered together
and kingdoms also, to serve the Lord.
24 He has brought down my strength in my journey
and has shortened my days.
25 I pray, 'O my God, do not take me in the midst of my days;
your years endure throughout all generations.
26 'In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
27 'They shall perish, but you will endure;
they all shall wear out like a garment.
28 'You change them like clothing, and they shall be changed;
but you are the same, and your years will not fail.
29 'The children of your servants shall continue,
and their descendants shall be established in your sight.'

Reflection – Bishop Michael

In this Psalm we have a poor person lamenting their sad condition. They say nothing about sin, and do not even ask for forgiveness. Nonetheless they feel as if their suffering is due to God's judgement. They cry: 'Because of your indignation and wrath, for you have taken me up and cast me down' (v.11) The Psalm is a meditation on the frailty and the weakness of life. Here is a person of faith who feels as if his or her life is drifting like smoke (v.3) or is as insubstantial as an evening shadow (v.11). And it's not just their own life: the very world around, they feel: 'will wear out like a garment and pass away' (v.27). Everything feels weak and fragile, and there is the fear that even this brief and tragic life span risks a premature end. Yet still the psalmist has no doubt about prayer, and the turning of the heart to God: "O my God, do not take me in the midst of my days" v.25. The prayer is honest, as there is a pouring out of feelings of bitterness and of loneliness, knowing that God will hear and receive them: "I eat ashes like bread and mingle tears with my drink" (v.10). How many people are feeling like this today – deprived of support and comfort, feeling the fragility of life, frightened to even talk about death? We don't need to look far to see loneliness, suffering, heartache, a sense of being of little worth, or with low self-esteem. Yet not a drop of this suffering is lost on God who, in the broken hands of Christ, gathers the world's suffering to himself. Saint Augustine explained this

Psalm by saying: 'A poor person is praying? Which poor person? He became poor for you, that you might become rich through his poverty. Christ is the poor person.' Whoever gathers the suffering of the world into their own prayers through Christ, as we do now, thereby participates in the compassion that God has for all his suffering children.

Prayer 5 Liz Brown

Let us pray:

Have pity on our frailty, O God,
Draw us through prayer into your heart of compassion.
Bring healing to those who are enduring pain.
Bring value to those who are disregarded.
Bring joy to those in great sorrow.
Bring hope to those that have nothing to live for.
Bring provision to those who are hungry.
Bring shelter to those without a home.
Bring community to those who are lonely.
Please use and prompt me to be your hands of love across a hurting world
In Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

Suggested Music

"Here my prayer O Lord" Purcell. Collegium Vocale – Philippe Herreweghe. 2 min 30 secs

Image



3.00 pm

Reader 6 Andy Blumer

The sixth of the seven Penitential psalms is Psalm 130

1 Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice;
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.
2 If you, Lord, were to mark what is done amiss,
O Lord, who could stand?
3 But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you shall be feared.
4 I wait for the Lord; my soul waits for him;
in his word is my hope.
5 My soul waits for the Lord,
more than the night watchman for the morning,
more than the night watchman for the morning.
6 O Israel, wait for the Lord,
for with the Lord there is mercy;
7 With him is plenteous redemption
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

Reflection – Bishop Michael

Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord: out of the depths of despair, of loneliness, of grief; out of the depths of anxiety or depression, out of the depths of pain, bewilderment or loss. Out of the depths I cry to the Lord, for even in the depths, knows this psalmist, 'in his word is my hope'. Here, in the Old Testament, is a note of confidence and hope that finds its fulfilment in 'His word made flesh' – Jesus Christ. As St Paul was to write with such conviction: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Sometimes the depths in which we find ourselves seem to go on forever. Many of the great saints speak of having experienced what they called 'the dark night of the soul. By this they meant, not just a time of suffering or doubt, but one within which they also learned, like the psalmist, to wait for the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy; with him is plenteous redemption and he shall rescue his people from the depths.

Prayer 6 Andy Blumer

Let us pray

Father, we commend to your faithful love
those who are crying from the depths;
help them to watch and pray
through their time of darkness,
in sure hope of the dawn of your
forgiveness and redemption;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Suggested Music

"De Profundis" Mozart – Choir and Orchestra of the Vienna
Volksoper 5 min 20 sec. It might have to be faded out after 4
mins.

OR Bach Double Violin Concerto in D Minor 2nd movement –
Largo ma non tanto. Yehudi Menuhin and David Oistrakh. 7
mins 47 sec. Fade after 4 mins.

Image



4.00 pm

Reader 7 Sarah Waights

We conclude our time of prayer together with the final
penitential Psalm – 143

1 Hear my prayer, O Lord,
and in your faithfulness give ear to my supplications;

answer me in your righteousness.

2 Enter not into judgement with your servant,
for in your sight shall no one living be justified.

3 For the enemy has pursued me,
crushing my life to the ground,
making me sit in darkness like those long dead.

4 My spirit faints within me;
my heart within me is desolate.

5 I remember the time past; I muse upon all your deeds;
I consider the works of your hands.

6 I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul gasps for you like a thirsty land.

7 O Lord, make haste to answer me; my spirit fails me;
hide not your face from me
lest I be like those who go down to the Pit.

8 Let me hear of your loving-kindness in the morning,
for in you I put my trust;
show me the way I should walk in,
for I lift up my soul to you.

9 Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies,
for I flee to you for refuge.

10 Teach me to do what pleases you, for you are my God;
let your kindly spirit lead me on a level path.

11 Revive me, O Lord, for your name's sake;
for your righteousness' sake, bring me out of trouble.

12 In your faithfulness, slay my enemies,
and destroy all the adversaries of my soul,
for truly I am your servant.

Reflection – Bishop Michael

This last of the penitential psalms is a plea which goes up to
God from a faithful believer who is probably in danger of dying.
The Psalm describes his breathing as he gets weaker, his heart
failing: My spirit faints within me; my heart within me is
desolate (v.4). He feels as if crushed to the ground. Gasping for
life, being dragged down into darkness. As I read this Psalm
how alike it feels to the descriptions of many who have grappled
with the worst forms of COVID-19. Reduced to this state, the
psalmist imagines himself passing from life to death, before
God's judgement. But although acknowledging God to be just, it
is to his grace and mercy that he looks, and it is in this that he
finds hope. He does not rely on his own qualities, but on the
character of God himself who is just and faithful and great in
love. "For **your names sake**, Lord, preserve my life" (v.11). And
even now, as life seems to be drawing to its close, he says to the

Lord “Teach me to do what pleases you, for you are my God; let your kindly spirit lead me on a level path . . . For truly I am your servant”. Even as the bonds that hold him to this life are being weakened so he becomes aware of the strength of the bonds that hold him, in faith and hope and love, to the Lord who has created him; who has kept faith with him throughout his life – “I remember the time past; I muse upon all your deeds; I consider the works of your hands”; and who prepares to receive him back to himself at the last.

Prayer 7 Sarah Waights

Let us pray:

Lord, for those who believe in you,
Death is the end of poverty and the beginning of riches;
The end of pain and the beginning of joy;
the end of weakness, and the beginning of strength.
Do not let the depths overwhelm us,
But out of darkness raise us to light
With joy for all that you have given us.
Cast out our fears and do not let our hearts be troubled
Revive me, O Lord, for your name’s sake;
For as in our beginning in you is our end,
With Jesus Christ our Lord.

Suggested Music

"There's a wideness in God's mercy" tune: "Cross of Jesus"
Stainer. sung by Christ church Cathedral Choir, Oxford from
"The Golden Age of Church Music".

Image



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