

## Pentecost X: The Prophet Nathan

2 Sam 11: 26-12: 13a	Psalms 51: 1-12	Eph 4: 1-16	John 6: 24- 35
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Today's OT reading continues the story of David's relations with Bathsheba and the consequences of either adultery or rape, depending on how you understood the events in last Sunday's reading. Today's text places us in the territory of sin in its themes and language.

The concepts and language of "sin" were the stock in trade of preaching when I was young: It was drummed into us how sinful we were, how sinful all humanity is. That kind of rhetoric is less common today.

The OT text contains a dramatic story that will never date because it's about emotions and behaviour that still rings true.

The fact that David knew he had made a bad choice in having relations with another man's wife seems clear as he did what we have probably all attempted at some stage: He tries to hide what he has done.

David tried three times to hide his actions and Bathsheba's resulting pregnancy by trying to get Uriah to go home to his wife so the child could be passed off as Uriah's. When his plan failed twice, he resorted to murder.

It's thought-provoking to note here how we often expect others to behave as we do and are surprised when they do not. David expected Uriah to be like him and choose the soft option of enjoying home comforts. However, Uriah is an honourable man, firm in his loyalty to his king and his fellow soldiers, so he will not go home as long as his comrades endure the hardships of the battlefield. Instead, he sleeps at the palace with David's servants. Despite being a Hittite, not a Jew, this foreigner holds to higher ethical standard than the king.

Today's story picks up with the prophet Nathan sent by God to confront David who has subsequently made Bathsheba his wife after he "killed him [Uriah] with the sword of the Ammonites".



Instead of confronting David directly, Nathan tells a powerful story of two men and their lambs that completely disarms David. The king's guilty conscience makes him unknowingly convict himself.

Full of righteous anger against the greedy man in the story he yells: "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die;..." without realising that he is talking about himself: "You are the man!" Nathan yells back, and delivers that heart-stopping, divine indictment and judgement, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel..." It concludes with David's heartfelt confession: "I have sinned against the Lord."

I imagine we can all identify to differing degrees with David's sense of self-disgust; when we have done or said something that we know is wrong, we feel absolutely dreadful.

Another element of this story which I imagine resonates with us is the consequences of the choice David made, of his sin, if you like. The poor choices we make often have both individual and corporate consequences.

As a consequence of his liaison with Bathsheba, who was from a noble family, David not only murdered her husband, but also betrayed Eliam, her father, one of his three greatest warriors, called the Mighty Men (2 Samuel 23:34) and her grandfather, Ahithophel, one of his chief counsellors (2 Samuel 23:34, 2 Samuel 15:12). That action comes back to haunt him as Ahithophel transfers his allegiance to David's son Absalom.

The results of David's wrongdoing included not only an unwanted pregnancy and the murder of a trusted friend, but also the death of that baby, the eventual rape of David's daughter Tamar by his son, Amnon, which leads another son, Absalom to murder Amnon and eventually start a civil war against his father.

I was struck by two things about this litany of misery caused by one man's sin, or poor choices, if you like.

First, it reminded me of a concept that I did not encounter until coming to Australia, although it has worldwide relevance, not least in Africa: The inter-generational or trans-generational consequences of people's choices, of sin.

It is commonly mentioned in connection with the mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples, but also, Nathan Nettleton, the Baptist minister I have quoted before writes: "We do know that evildoing has generational consequences. Coming generations are going to pay the price for our generation's failures to do enough to halt greenhouse emissions. Serious domestic violence and abuse often has horrific consequences for several generations." (Laughingbird.net)

Secondly, I suggest that it speaks directly into our current context: Poor choices sometimes have tragic consequences not just for us, but for others too. Because some people choose not to take the virus seriously, perhaps not to wear a mask or not to isolate when they should, they get sick, other people get sick, perhaps even die.

And so to the Psalm set for today, **Psalm 51**.

In the NIV Bible the introduction to this psalm says: "For the Director of Music. A Psalm of David when the Prophet Nathan came to him, after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba."

That is a painful and public statement of wrongdoing if ever there was one and it points to the traditional interpretation of this Psalm. It is understood to be David's confession written sometime after the Bathsheba affair because the weight of his offence is always before him. He is miserable, so weighed down by guilt and regret that it feels as though his bones are broken. All the joy in David's life seems to have evaporated.

However, in the view of many scholars, this Psalm was written later, when Israel is returning to their land after having been exiled due to their sin. Scholars believe that priests and synagogue leaders wrote the psalm to reflect Israel's corporate heart of repentance, and their attempts to "pick up the pieces" literally of life in the promised land after bearing God's judgment.

They also say that the introduction I quoted, the Hebrew phrase "A Psalm of David" can also mean "A Psalm *in the Spirit of David*" rather than "A Psalm *written by David*" and they question the choice of the word "of" because there is a Hebrew word used for "by" that expresses authorship.

Whoever wrote this Psalm, and whenever it was written, these seem like the despairing words of someone who feels desperately cut off from the presence of God. The psalmist sounds broken by sin and guilt, pleading with God for restoration. The voice sounds like someone engulfed by a sense of worthlessness, the stain of sin felt so deeply as to be indelible.

*"This great song, pulsating with the agony of a sin-stricken soul, helps us to understand the stupendous wonder of the everlasting mercy of our God." (G. Campbell Morgan)*

*"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy" : The cry that goes up in this psalm is at the heart of our faith story: It is not asking the Lord for forgiveness because the writer/s deserve it, or because it has been earned by good works. It is an appeal to God for forgiveness on the basis of who God is, God's nature, God's character – because God is a God of love and mercy.*

In that lies one of the many challenges that face the church today, this community included, something that often concentrates my heart and mind. Post-Christian, post Post-Modern society is no longer as open to the concepts and language of sin with which we grew up, those at the core of those texts

from the OT and Psalm. People no longer take kindly to being asked “Are you saved, Sister?” or being told “You need to repent of your sins”, “Turn or burn”.



The challenge for us is how to share the merciful forgiveness and love at the heart of God that the Psalmist says, is the antidote to the kind of hopeless despair and self-disgust expressed in Psalm 51.

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