**#66 Ash Wednesday 2023 SG HC**

**Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17**

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
    for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—
**2**a day of darkness and gloom,
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
    a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
    nor will be again after them
    in ages to come.

**12**Yet even now, says the Lord,
    return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
**13**    rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the Lord, your God,
    for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
    and relents from punishing.
**14**Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
    and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain-offering and a drink-offering
    for the Lord, your God?

**15**Blow the trumpet in Zion;
    sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
**16**    gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
    assemble the aged;

gather the children,
    even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
    and the bride her canopy.

**17**Between the vestibule and the altar
    let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.
Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord,
    and do not make your heritage a mockery,
    a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
    “Where is their God?”’

**Psalm 51: 1-10**

Have mercy on me, O God,
    according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
    blot out my transgressions.
**2**Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
    and cleanse me from my sin.

**3**For I know my transgressions,
    and my sin is ever before me.
**4**Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
    and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
    and blameless when you pass judgement.
**5**Indeed, I was born guilty,
    a sinner when my mother conceived me.

**6**You desire truth in the inward being;[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+51%3A+1-10&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-14698a)]
    therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
**7**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
    wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness;
    let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
**9**Hide your face from my sins,
    and blot out all my iniquities.

**10**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
    and put a new and right[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+51%3A+1-10&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-14702b)] spirit within me.

**Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21**

**6**‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

**2**‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. **3**But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4**so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A+1-6%2C+16-21&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-23287a)]

**Concerning Prayer**

**5**‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. **6**But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A+1-6%2C+16-21&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-23289b)]

**16**‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. **17**But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, **18**so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A+1-6%2C+16-21&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-23301a)]

### Concerning Treasures

**19**‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A+1-6%2C+16-21&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-23302b)] consume and where thieves break in and steal; **20**but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A+1-6%2C+16-21&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-23303c)] consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What is it to be penitent?

Such a very unfashionable word these days, heard often in American crime dramas, particularly the grittier ones, where we hear of people being punished, being sent to the ‘penitentiary.’ If you are penitent, there’s a sense of the need for forgiveness; saddled with original sin, and adding in our own particular sins, we spend our time on earth looking for salvation, trying to be forgiven. And despite the BCP saying that on the cross, Jesus ‘made there a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world,’ we are obliged, still, to be penitent. Was that full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice somehow not enough? There’s whole strand of academic and pastoral theology to explore there – but not today!

Which other word might we use, rather than ‘penitent’? If we exchange the word for another, how does our penitence look then?

We could instead say repentant – same word root, I guess; remorseful, ashamed; contrite; sorry; apologetic; rueful; sheepish, perhaps; plaintive, sorrowful, mournful. Many of any of these might be said instead of ‘penitent’.

But I’m uneasy. What sort of God would we be worshipping if this was all that we are in his eyes? If these words were His idea of us being who he meant us to be? If he was happy that we live permanently in this state, what sort of a God does that show us? In what way are we made in his image, if we are this wretched? I wonder if this is the God who he great atheist Richard Dawkins noisily doesn’t believe in; a Victorian Sunday-School God, almost.

Well, I’ve got news; like Dawkins, I don’t believe in that God either.

I believe in a God of hope; of community; of opportunity. A God of endless and freely given kindness. A God of grace; a God of compassion; a God of love.

So, how have we, then, got to where we have got to, in the whole *penitent* thing?

And who says what it is to be penitent?

I remember reading Umberto Eco’s novel, *The Name of the Rose.* It has some deeply theological themes but is essentially a medieval crime novel, with some juicy murders, impenetrable labyrinths, flickering candles and flawed humans. Sean Connery starred in the film adaptation, so you can see one direction that it’s coming from.

In it, a monk, Salvatore of Montferrat, is condemned to death by the Inquisition as he is overheard saying the word ‘penitenziagite.’

This is a shortening of the phrase "Poenitentiam agite, appropinquavit enim regnum caelorum", meaning "Repent: the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."(Matthew 4:17). Simply, it means ‘be penitential’. But in shortening it to ‘penitenziagite,’ Salvatore is marked out; that phrase, said in that way, points out his past membership of the Dulcinians, who were branded as heretics. Salvatore is fiction, but the Dulcinians were real, and their way of penitence was defined as heresy.

Their heresy was this - they stood for the fall of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and return of the Church to its original ideals of humility and poverty; now there’s a thought…they stood for the fall of the social feudal system; they stood for human liberation from entrenched power; and for the creation of a society based on mutual aid and respect, respecting gender equality. This is the heresy, the *disallowed penitence*, for which Salvatore, and real Dulcinians died. They feel like very modern concerns. But someone branded this way of being penitent as heresy.

So, after all of this, I return to my question - *what is it* to be penitent - and who says? Our service will soon ask us all to receive the Ashes as ‘a sign of the spirit of penitence.’ What might that mean?

As Christ’s people, self-examination and confession is what we do. We look at ourselves, and we often see faults; and we offer them to God. God, for his part, as we will soon hear, through our penitence, *enriches* us with his grace; he *defends* us in trouble and *keeps* us from evil; he *nourishes* with his blessing; our prayers are *accepted* and we are *absolved.*

If these words from our Service are to have any life in them, we have to show, by our living, that we believe them.

So through Lent, absolutely use this as a time to reflect, consider and to pray deeply, but also use penitence as a three dimensional word; I don’t think penitence is something that we proclaim and then have to start again. Penitence is an ongoing conversation with God, through prayer, about how we offer everything we are to Him, but also how we accept and are alive by all that He gives us.

What is it to be penitent? It’s all sorts of things!

But what counts isn’t what a faith proclaims penitence to be; what counts is the hope that a penitent faith offers to us all.

Amen.