

WEEK 1: SUNDAY

A long time ago, when I had just learnt to drive, I ran out of petrol on a lonely country road. I gratefully accepted some fuel from a nearby farmer. What he didn't tell me was that it was a mixture designed not for a car, but for a lawn mower. I got back home all right, but the next day the car behaved like a sick animal, coughing and spluttering. I made it down to the local garage, where the mechanic explained what the wrong fuel does to the engine. There was thick, messy stuff in the carburettor where there should have been clear petrol. He cleaned it out, and I felt — and it was as though the car felt — a huge sigh of relief. Even to hear the engine running smoothly was a delight. Now I was free again, free not to have to worry about the car but to think, more positively, where I might want to go.

That is the mood of this Psalm. It would be wrong to think of it, as some do when the question of sin and confession comes up, as a gloomy poem. Some Christian traditions these days seem to do as little 'confessing' as they can, in case it spoils the happy mood they want to maintain. But that's like trying to carry on driving while the engine is complaining it's running on the wrong stuff. Confession is facing up to what's wrong. The first two verses of the Psalm list four different types of problem: 'offence' or 'transgression' (breaking of a known command), 'sin' (missing the mark of genuine humanness), 'guilt' or 'iniquity' (the murky stuff inside me where there should be clarity and openness) and 'deceit' (the vain attempt to pretend all is well — a very common problem today). And the reason we do this is the same reason I went to the mechanic. As the Psalmist says in verses 3 and 4, it was hard to live like that.

It's only then that we discover why the Psalm declares that people who confess what's wrong inside are 'blessed' or 'happy'. The Psalm is actually a great celebration: it's over! It's gone! It's been dealt with! And instead of the heavy, dark feeling inside, there is a sudden sense of God's presence, protecting and rescuing us (verses 6 and 7).

Only then do we discover that forgiveness isn't just a matter of bringing the bank balance, as it were, back from a huge debt to a balance of zero. Once the car has been cleaned out, we are free to hear a fresh call from God, to hear when he whispers and feel when he nudges, rather than having to be treated like an unbroken horse or mule (verses 8 and 9). A well-trained horse is one that has learnt to sense the rider's hopes and intentions and even to anticipate them. It is as though the mechanic not only fixed the car but showed me on the map some wonderful places to visit that I'd never imagined before.

That's why the poem closes, once again, with celebration. Put off the task of confession and the mess will only get worse, leading to all kinds of trouble. But trust in the Lord — and that trust will often begin by trusting him with our saddest and darkest secrets — and we will find his love surrounding us. It's like going outside on the first spring morning where suddenly you realize it's not cold any more. Lent is a time for discipline, for confession, for honesty, not because God is mean or fault-finding or finger-pointing but because he wants us to know the joy of being cleaned out, ready for all the good things he now has in store.

TODAY

Father, help me, this Lent, to confess my sin honestly and to celebrate the new life which you give to those who trust you.