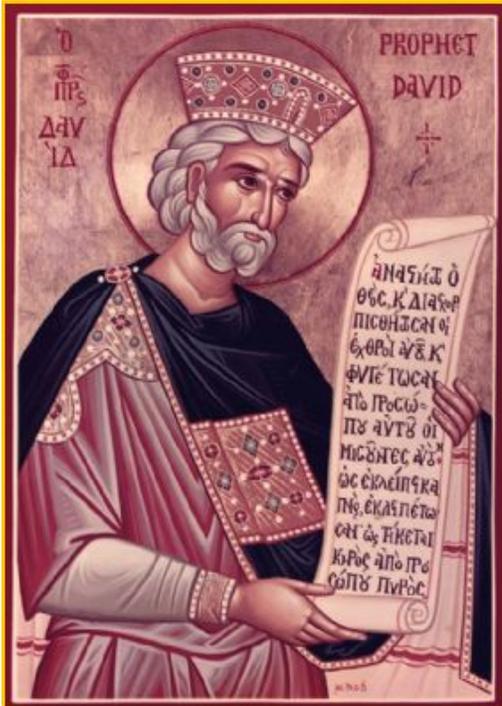


This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



Great Lent is a good time to consider Psalm 51 (50) with its emphasis on penitence and humility before God.

This psalm, used frequently in Orthodox worship services, refers to King David as a repentant sinner. The words "cleanse", "blot out", "wash" and "purge" appear in entreaties for God's mercy. The sinner feels his wrongs deeply and knows that only God can deliver him, saying, "For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me." He also knows that his sins are grave enough to deserve real punishment, and addresses God: "Thou art justified in Thy sentence and blameless in Thy judgment."

The word "broken" appears three times in the psalm. First we read the sinner's plea that God will let "the bones which Thou hast broken rejoice." These words remind us that even the bad things that happen to us—the things that break our bones—are under the authority of God; He is the one who has allowed them to be broken. But the very next word carries the certainty that God also can and will heal our bones and let them "rejoice."

God's power is infinite, and the sinner feels confident asking Him to "create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." The word translated here as "create" has the same meaning as in the Book of Genesis. God can make a person altogether new and clean, as He made the world in the first days of creation.

"Broken" appears again in verses that tell us what God wants from us. He is not looking for "burnt offerings" and animal sacrifices. Rather, "the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."

What does it mean to say that our spirits and hearts must be broken if they are to be acceptable gifts to God? In his book "Mere Christianity" the Anglican theologian C.S. Lewis addressed this in a way that has been helpful to many people who struggle to find meaning in the sufferings that "break" us in human life. Lewis wrote:

"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks on the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to?"

The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."

