

## Psalm 2

Office of Readings for Christ the King and Sunday Week 1  
also for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross  
and the Common of Martyrs

Psalm 2 is to be read with Psalm 1. The success which God is guaranteeing to the king in Psalm 2 assumes that the king behaves as instructed in Psalm 1. He is to be righteous. The basis for Psalm 2 is God's promise given to David:

I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom ... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

– 2Samuel 7:12-14

He has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?

– 2Samuel 23:5

If, as seems likely, Psalm 2 is a late psalm, composed at a time when the nation was humiliated, it is to be understood as messianic, in that it is not referring to a particular historical situation, but to the way things will be when God vindicates his chosen people against those who are keeping them in subjection. The prophet Zechariah who lived in Jerusalem when the city was under the rule of Persia, also looks forward to the messianic time:

On that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.

– Zechariah 12:9

YHWH will become king over all the earth.

– Zechariah 14:9

### Part One. Spoken by the one presiding at the liturgy

**<sup>1</sup>Why do the nations cry out in mutiny, and the peoples plot in vain?**

**<sup>2</sup>The kings of the earth put themselves on a war footing, and the rulers take counsel together against YHWH\* and his anointed one\*, saying,**

**<sup>3</sup>Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast off their yoke'.**

On 'the anointed one' [Hebrew *māšîaḥ*, מָשִׁיחַ] see the article 'Anointed' in the Introduction. How dare the kings of the Gentiles conspire against the king whom God has anointed!

Luke applies these words to the conspiracy of Pilate and Herod against Jesus (see Acts 4:25-26). He goes on to show the Christian community praying for the courage, not to conquer and destroy, but to preach the good news and to heal.

God, called here ‘the Lord’ (Hebrew <sup>a</sup>dōnāi, אֲדֹנָי), is Lord of all the earth. He is not disturbed by their folly. We find the same imagery in Psalm 37:13 (which also uses <sup>a</sup>dōnāi) and Psalm 59:8 (which uses YHWH). See also the following:

YHWH brings the designs of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

It is the counsel of YHWH that stands forever, the plans of his heart from generation to generation.

– Psalm 33:10-11

YHWH of hosts has sworn: As I have designed, so shall it be; and as I have planned, so shall it come to pass. I will break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains trample him under foot; his yoke shall be removed from them, and his burden from their shoulders. This is the plan that is planned concerning the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. For YHWH of hosts has planned, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?

– Isaiah 14:24-27

Our understanding of the ‘wrath’ or ‘fury’ of YHWH depends on our image of God, as does our understanding of our human response of ‘terror’. We refer the reader to the articles ‘Anger of God’ and ‘Fear of YHWH’ in the Introduction.

**<sup>5</sup>Then he confronts them in his anger\*, and strikes them with terror\* in his fury\*.**

### **Part Two. The reign of the Messiah is guaranteed by YHWH**

Verse six abruptly interrupts the flow of the psalm. YHWH speaks in support of his anointed king.

Zion, sometimes written ‘Sion’ (Hebrew śîyôn, יְרוּשָׁלַיִם) originally referred to the fortified hill of Jebusite Jerusalem. David conquered Jerusalem and made it the capital of a united Israel. When the ark was taken by David into the conquered city and when the temple and palace were constructed by Solomon, Zion referred to Jerusalem as a religious centre and as the place of the throne of God’s anointed king.

**<sup>6</sup>I myself have set my king on Zion, my holy mountain.’**

### Part Three. God's commitment to the Davidic dynasty

**I will repeat  
YHWH's decree.**

**He said to me:**

**'You are my son;  
today I have begot-  
ten you.**

The king quotes the protocol by which YHWH appointed him. God's appointed leader is to act towards God as a son. Compare the following:

I will make him the first born, the highest of the kings of the earth. Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm.

– Psalm 89:27-28

The language is modelled on the court language of Egypt:

You are my beloved daughter. I am your beloved father. I will establish your sovereignty over the two kingdoms and I will write the protocol.

– Amon-Ra to queen Hatseput

I am your father. As God I have begotten you. Therefore you sit on my throne as king of upper and lower Egypt.

– Amon-Ra to Tutmoses III, son of Hatseput

The New Testament quotes this verse in reference to Jesus, the anointed one who is bringing about God's reign. At his Baptism Jesus experiences this special intimacy:

You are my Son.

– Luke 3:22

At the Transfiguration, God says to the apostles:

This is my Son, the Chosen One.

– Luke 9:35

Luke gives us a typical homily preached by Paul in the synagogue. It includes the words:

We bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you'.

– Acts 13:33

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read:

To which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you?'

– Hebrews 1:5 (also 5:5)

Jesus' disciples in sharing his life share in his intimacy with the God. Paul reminds us that we:

have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'

– Romans 8:15

For a second time YHWH speaks, inviting the king to request dominion over the whole world. Compare:

May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

– Psalm 72:8

This is a promise for the future Messianic times:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

– Zechariah 9:10

‘Possession’ (Hebrew <sup>a</sup>ḥuzzâ) refers to property acquired in any way. ‘Inheritance’ (Hebrew naḥ<sup>a</sup>lâ) stands for the allotted portion to which one has a claim by right of inheritance. YHWH is pictured as a patriarch allotting property to his firstborn son.

The promise embracing the whole world is fulfilled in Jesus who opens his mission with the words:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.

– Mark 1:15

Jesus invites his disciples to pray that the world will open itself to the reign of God’s love:

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

– Matthew 6:10

That it is God’s will for the whole world to embrace the reign of divine love is clear from the final words of Jesus to his disciples:

Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

– Matthew 28:18-20

Paul writes:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

– 1Corinthians 15:28

**<sup>8</sup>Ask of me, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession.**

**‘You will break them with a sceptre of iron, and dash them to pieces like a clay pot.’**

The Old Testament authors saw YHWH as their God. They thought of their enemies as God’s enemies and, in ways typical of the thinking of the time (a way of thinking that has a habit of persisting!), they imagined God as fighting on the side of Israel’s armies.

You are my war club, my weapon of battle: with you I smash nations; with you I destroy kingdoms; with you I smash the horse and its rider; with you I smash the chariot and the charioteer; with you I smash man and woman; with you I smash the old man and the boy; with you I smash the young man and the girl; with you I smash shepherds and their flocks; with you I smash farmers and their teams; with you I smash governors and deputies. I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea before your very eyes for all the wrong that they have done in Zion, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 51:20-24

The Hebrew is translated here as ‘You will *break* them’ on the assumption that the verb comes from the root r“ [רעע]. The Book of Revelation borrows this imagery to speak of the power of the kingdom brought about by Jesus:

To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered.

– Revelation 2:26-27

She gave birth to a son who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.

– Revelation 12:5

From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.

– Revelation 19:15

The Greek Septuagint version translates: ‘You will shepherd them’ on the assumption that the verb comes from the root r’h [רעה]. Since David was a shepherd, the verb ‘shepherd’ functions as a metaphor for ‘rule’. Compare:

He shall feed his flock in the strength of YHWH.

– Micah 5:4

The power of the Messiah is the power not to break but to embrace. It is the power of love inviting us all to open ourselves to love and to come to the Messianic Banquet, the love-feast of the marriage of the Lamb and his Spouse, the Church.

**Part Four. Spoken by the one presiding at the liturgy** (see Part One)

The theme of God's anger and the corresponding theme of 'Fear of YHWH' are repeated from verse five. See the articles in the Introduction. The Book of Wisdom also has advice for the gentile kings:

'Listen, therefore, O kings, and understand;  
learn, O judges of the ends of the earth ...  
Your dominion was given you from YHWH,  
and your sovereignty from the Most High;  
he will scrutinise what you are doing  
and look into your plans ...  
To you then, O monarchs, my words are directed,  
so that you may learn wisdom and not transgress.

– Wisdom 6:1,3,9

**<sup>10</sup>Now therefore, O kings,  
be wise; be warned,  
O rulers of the earth**

**<sup>11</sup>Serve YHWH with fear\*;  
trembling pay him your  
homage,**

**<sup>12</sup>lest his anger\* flare up,  
and you perish on the way.**

This final verse, beginning with 'Happy' recalls the opening verse of Psalm 1, binding the two psalms closely together.

**Happy\* are all who take  
refuge in him.**

Paul offers an eschatological projection of the sentiments of this psalm

Then comes the end, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father,  
after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.  
For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.  
The last enemy to be destroyed is death.  
For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet' ...  
When all things are subjected to him,  
then the Son himself will also be subjected  
to the one who put all things in subjection under him,  
so that God may be all in all.

– 1Corinthians 15:24-28