

Psalm 12

Office of Readings Tuesday Week 1

This psalm is about the importance of commitment to the truth. God's word is pure. The word of the arrogant, on the contrary, cannot be trusted. The psalmist describes it as corrupt. This is also a plea to God to stop the powerful using words to oppress the poor and to corrupt society.

Its title reads: 'To the leader: according to the Sheminith (see Psalm 6). A Psalm* of David'.

¹Give us your saving help*, YHWH*, for there is no longer anyone who respects the covenant; sincerity has disappeared from the human race.

For a reflection on 'saving help', see the article in the Introduction. The phrase 'anyone who respects the covenant' translates the single Hebrew word ḥāsīd [חָסִיד]. It refers to those who welcome God's ḥesed. The Greek Septuagint uses hosios [ὁσιος], picking up the idea of respecting the sacred. 'The human race' translates the Hebrew 'ādām [אָדָם]. See also verse eight.

There is a climate of suspicion and lack of trust. Compare the following:

Many proclaim themselves loyal, but who can find one worthy of trust?

– Proverbs 20:6

I said in my consternation, 'Everyone is false.'

– Psalm 116:11

This is the nation that did not obey the voice of YHWH their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

– Jeremiah 7:28

They bend their tongues like bows; they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, says YHWH. Beware of your neighbours, and put no trust in any of your kin; for all your kin are supplanters, and every neighbour goes around like a slanderer.

– Jeremiah 9:3-4

The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood, and they hunt each other with nets.

– Micah 7:2

The psalmist speak of 'lies'. He includes in his criticism those who use the judicial process to achieve their wicked purpose of despoiling the poor. Compare:

A worthless witness mocks at justice, and the mouth of the wicked devours iniquity.

– Proverbs 19:28

How is it possible that you are accomplices in an evil tribunal which decrees injustice in the name of the statutes? (Or, as another translation puts it: 'Do injustice under cover of law'!)

– Psalm 94:

He speaks against flattery and duplicity. The divided tongue reveals a divided heart. The Book of Proverbs picks up this theme:

There are six things that YHWH hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.

– Proverbs 6:16-19

Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are smooth lips with an evil heart. An enemy dissembles in speaking while harbouring deceit within; when an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it, for there are seven abominations concealed within; though hatred is covered with guile, the enemy's wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.

Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling.

A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

– Proverbs 26:23-28

These people are accountable to no one, for they have control over the means of communication.

They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.

– Psalm 73:9

²They utter lies to each other; they speak with flattering lips and a false heart*.

³May YHWH destroy all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts, ⁴those who say, 'With our tongues we will prevail; our lips are our own. Who is our master?'

The violence of untruth

In the New Testament James has much to say against sins of the tongue:

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

– James 1:26-27

The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell ... With the same tongue we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

– James 3:5-9

**⁵YHWH responds:
'Because of violence
against the poor*,
because the needy*
groan, I will now rise
up. I will keep them
safe as they give their
testimony.'**

God rises up as a judge to protect those witnesses who dare to tell the truth.

'Now I will arise,' says YHWH.

– Isaiah 33:10

Rise up, YHWH!

Do not allow the insolence of mortal human beings.

In your presence let the nations be judged..

– Psalm 9:19

From the heavens you uttered judgment;
the earth feared and was still when God rose up
to establish judgment, to save all the oppressed of the earth.

– Psalm 76:8-9

Everyone is afraid to stand up to the lies of the powerful.
But YHWH will resist them, and the truth spoken by the
oppressed will be vindicated by him.

Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground!
The one who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning,
and darkens the day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out on the surface of the earth,
YHWH is his name,
who makes destruction flash out against the strong,
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.
They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

– Amos 5:7-10

'Safe' in verse five shares the same root [yš'] with the word 'saving help' in verse one.

We can rely on God's word:

Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

– Proverbs 30:5

God whose way is perfect;
YHWH whose word is pure.

– Psalm 18:30

Your promise is well tested, and your servant loves it.

– Psalm 119:140

The text is obscure. It is conjectured that the Hebrew *zullût* [זָלִיזָה] means 'vileness'. The word preceding it is *k^orum* [כְּרֹם]. If this derives from the verb 'to be lifted up' [Hebrew *rum*, רָם], the image seems to be that of slag heaped up once the silver has been removed. Those abusing their power are exalted, and people (Hebrew *'ādām*) look up to them. But they are no better than a slag heap. Anything of value has been removed.

If, however, *k^orum* means 'like maggots' (Hebrew *rīm*, כְּרִמָּה), the image seems to be that of maggots in a tomb. Compare the following:

Maggots are the bed beneath you, and worms are your covering.

– Isaiah 14:11

They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them.

– Job 21:26

Anyone who bewails the corruption of language in the private and public arenas will know what the psalmist is saying. Words are meant for communication of truth in the collaborative task and privilege of building a better world. When people for their own economic, political, or personal advantage use words to deceive, the 'poor and needy' are the first victims, but the whole social fabric suffers decay.

⁶The words of YHWH are words that are pure, like silver refined in a furnace, fired seven times.

⁷It is you, YHWH, who will take us into your care; you will free us forever from these people.

⁸On every side the wicked prowl. People look up to what is vile.

or

[continuing on from verse 7 above]

you will free us forever from those who do evil, who crawl like maggots among the human race.