

Psalm 16

Easter Vigil; 3rd Sunday of Easter A
33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
13th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
Evening Prayer I, Sunday Week 2
Night Prayer Thursday
Office of Readings 1st November

This is an exquisitely beautiful psalm, a lyrical expression of an intense religious experience, and a declaration of exclusive loyalty to YHWH (compare Psalms 115 and 135). Sadly verses one to three have not been well preserved. It is possibly a prayer by a priest on the day of his consecration, or of a Levite on the day when he made the offerings (see verses 5-6). Other people enjoy the benefits of their inheritance. The psalmist delights in the fact that his inheritance is YHWH. His intimate communion with God more than satisfies his heart, and nothing can distract him from this.

The title reads: 'A Miktam of David'. As suggested in the article in the Introduction, 'miktam' may mean 'arranged for playing with a musical instrument'. The five psalms from 56 to 60 are also described as a 'miktam'.

The psalmist has experienced YHWH's protection in his life. When trouble comes it is to YHWH that he turns, as he does in this present psalm. We might meditate on the following:

**Protect me, O God, for
in you I take refuge.**

Happy are all who take refuge in YHWH.

– Psalm 2:12

Let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
forever let them sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
so that those who love your name may exult in you.
For you bless the just, YHWH;
you cover them from above
and surround them with the shield of your goodness.

– Psalm 5:11-12

YHWH my God, in you I take refuge.

– Psalm 7:1

Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me,
for in you my entire being takes refuge;
in the shade of your wings I will take refuge,
until the destructive storms pass by.

– Psalm 57:1

You are my refuge, my bastion against the enemy.
I want to abide in your tent forever,
find refuge under the shelter of your wings.

– Psalm 61:3-4

Delight in the community

**²To YHWH I declare
'You are my Lord;
I have no other good
but you.'**

Compare the challenge given by Joshua:

Now if you are unwilling to serve YHWH, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve YHWH.

– Joshua 24:15

We find our good in YHWH, not in what YHWH has given us or done for us.

I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'YHWH'.

– Exodus 33:19

Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek YHWH their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to YHWH and to his goodness in the latter days.

– Hosea 3:5

According to your kindness remember me.

– Psalm 25:7

They will celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness.

– Psalm 145:7

I believe that I shall see the goodness of YHWH in the land of the living.

– Psalm 27:13

This verse echoes the sentiments of Jesus as he resists temptation in the desert (Luke 4:1-13).

**³And of those of
the land who are
consecrated to you,
I declare: 'they are
the ones on whom I
model my life. All my
attention is on them'.**

The text is uncertain. It is probably a declaration of adhesion to those consecrated ones (the people, or specifically the priests) whom God has set aside for his worship and who form the psalmist's community. Fidelity to God involves fidelity to the community. The psalmist shares God's delight:

You shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for YHWH delights in you,
and your land shall be married.

– Isaiah 62:4

YHWH, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.

– Zephaniah 3:17

Jeremiah uses similar language when criticising those who made offerings to Astarte (see Jeremiah 44:17-18). The Israelites insisted on worshipping no one but YHWH. Compare the commandment:

You shall have no other gods before me.
– Exodus 20:3

Do not invoke the names of other gods;
do not let them be heard on your lips.
– Exodus 23:13

Put away the foreign gods that are among you,
and incline your hearts to YHWH, the God of Israel.
– Joshua 24:23

I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth,
and they shall be mentioned by name no more.
– Hosea 2:17

Strict monotheism was a late development. Even then, as in all so-called monotheistic religions, we must distinguish between those who consider *their* God to be the only true God, and real monotheists who recognise that everything comes from the one source, and so everything, every person, is radically sacred, and that we all belong to each other and to the whole of the universe. A true monotheist is known by the respect shown to every creature.

These libations are objectionable because they are poured out to idols.

Among the smooth stones of the valley is your portion;
they, they, are your lot;
to them you have poured out a drink offering.
– Isaiah 57:6

Will you make offerings to Baal,
and go after other gods that you have not known.
– Jeremiah 7:9

In praying this psalm we are challenged to look at the ‘idols’ that we build in our personal and social lives. What idols are there in the culture to which we belong? Listen to the prophet Ezekiel:

They have taken their idols into their hearts.
– Ezekiel 14:2

4They multiply their sorrows, those who run after strange gods.

I will not pour out their drink offerings of blood, my lips will not utter their names.

A special union with YHWH

⁵YHWH is my chosen portion and my cup; my destiny is in your hands.

Each family was given land chosen by lot from a cup (and so judged to be decided by Providence).

In the Messianic Psalm 2 YHWH promised the king:

I will give you the nations as your inheritance,
and the ends of the earth for your possession.

– Psalm 2:8

Something far more intimate is offered the Levites. Materially, they are supported by temple taxes and certain sacrifices (Exodus 29:26; Leviticus 7:35; Leviticus 8:29; Numbers 18:8-19). Their real sustenance, however, is their communion with God. The psalmist may well be a Levite.

Then YHWH said to Aaron: You shall have no allotment in their land, nor shall you have any share among them; I am your share and your possession among the Israelites.

– Numbers 18:20

The levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no allotment or inheritance within Israel. They may eat the sacrifices that are YHWH's portion but they shall have no inheritance among the other members of the community; YHWH is their inheritance, as he promised them.

– Deuteronomy 18:1-2

Whom have I in heaven but you?

What does the earth mean to me when I have you?.

– Psalm 73:25

Origen writes:

The portion (heritage) of Christ is the Father, and also the people whom the Father gives to him ... The person who has renounced everything of this world can say: 'YHWH is my portion of the inheritance for ever'. YHWH makes himself bread, giving us his teaching and strengthening the heart of whoever eats of it. He makes himself a chalice in the measure in which we contemplate the truth, and he gives the joy of knowledge to whoever drinks from it with love. The true vine offers us the cup and whoever drinks says with gratitude: 'He has filled my heart with joy'.

⁶The lot for me has fallen on a most pleasant place, my inheritance is magnificent.

The inheritance to which the psalmist is referring is God himself.

Urgently I cry to you, YHWH; I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.'

– Psalm 142:5

‘Feelings’ translates the Hebrew *kēlāyôt*, [כְּלַיִת, *kēlāyôt*], meaning ‘kidneys’. Irrational feelings, feelings over which we have little control, were thought of as being located in the kidneys. More rational feelings were associated with the heart. For the distinction see the article ‘Heart-Kidneys’ in the Introduction. The psalmist feels himself more vulnerable at night to irrational feelings that well up inside him. He has learned to place his trust in YHWH, confident that these feelings reveal the mysterious influence and inspiration of God in his life.

The ‘right hand’ is the hand that wields the sword. It is a symbol for powerful protection. Verse nine speaks of the joy which the psalmist experiences in his ‘heart’ (Hebrew *lēb*, [לֵב, *lēb*]). The expression ‘the depths of my being’ is an attempt to translate the Hebrew *kābôd*, [כְּבוֹד, *kābôd*] (normally translated ‘glory’*). Perhaps it should read *kābēd* [כְּבֵד, *kābēd*], referring to the liver as an organ of feeling? Trust in God flows over into his ‘flesh’ (Hebrew *bāśār*, [בָּשָׂר, *bāśār*]), a word that speaks of our human condition insofar as it is fragile and corruptible. ‘Flesh’ and ‘secure’ are usually contraries. Here in this psalm every dimension of the psalmist’s being rests secure in YHWH, and he feels a profound interior joy.

As regards security of the ‘flesh’, read Saint Paul:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

– Romans 8:11

‘Me’ translates the Hebrew *nepeš* (see the article ‘Being’ in the Introduction). ‘Your faithful one’ (Hebrew *hāsîd*, [חָסִיד, *hāsîd*]) is the one who is faithful to the covenant. See the article ‘Kindness’ in the Introduction. The Greek Septuagint replaces ‘Pit’ (the hole where the body was buried) with ‘corruption’. Hence the application of this verse to Jesus in the New Testament (see Acts 2:24-32 and 13:34-39). Jesus was buried (he saw the Pit), but he was raised to life and hence did not experience ‘corruption’.

7I bless* YHWH who gives me counsel; even in the night he directs my feelings.

8I keep YHWH always before me; with him at my right hand, I shall not waver.

9Therefore my heart* is glad. I experience a profound joy in the depths of my being. Even my flesh* rests secure, for I place my trust* in you.

10You do not give me* up to Sheol. You do not let your faithful one see the Pit.

11You show me a path to life. In your presence is fullness of joy; in your right hand pleasures without end.