

Psalm 22

Palm Sunday; 5th Easter Year B
Prayer during the Day Friday Week 3

People are mocking the psalmist, who is calling on God but seemingly in vain. He remembers what God did in reply to the cry of his ancestors. He remembers, too, his own earlier experiences of intimacy with God. Desperate, he describes his situation, and pleads with God, promising to acknowledge God's response in the public assembly. The psalm takes a sudden turn in verse twenty-three which begins a prolonged hymn of thankful praise. Has his prayer been answered? Or is this a profound act of faith that God who hears the cry of the poor has heard his cry and so God's response is certain?

Psalm 22 has special significance for disciples of Jesus. Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46 place the opening words on the lips of the dying Jesus, and the Gospel writers borrowed a number of expressions from this psalm in their accounts of Jesus' passion. Its title reads: 'To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm* of David'. 'The Deer of the Dawn' provided the tune.

Part One: The tightening of the circle of oppression (22:1-21)

**¹My God, my God,
why have you abandoned me?**

We do not expect to be abandoned by God.

They put their trust in you, all who acknowledge your name for you, YHWH, have not forsaken those who seek you.

– Psalm 9:10

My heart is glad. I experience a profound joy
in the depths of my being.
Even my flesh rests secure, for I rest my trust in you.
You do not give me up to Sheol,
You do not let your faithful one see the Pit.

– Psalm 16:9-10

Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
for you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God my Saviour!
Even if my father and mother forsake me,
YHWH will welcome me.

– Psalm 27:9-10

YHWH will not forsake his faithful ones.

– Psalm 37:28

YHWH will not forsake his people;
he will not abandon his heritage.

– Psalm 94:14

Danger is close, yet God seems far away:

Do not stand far off. Trouble is near
and I have no one to assist me.

– Psalm 22:11

But you, YHWH, do not stand aside!
O my strength, come quickly to my aid!

– Psalm 22:19

We find this same awareness in other places:

YHWH, you have seen; do not be silent!
O Lord, do not be far from me!

– Psalm 35:22

Do not forsake me, YHWH; O my God, do not be far from
me; make haste to help me, O Lord, my deliverance.

– Psalm 38:21-22

They say, ‘God has forsaken him, pursue him, seize him,
for there is no one to defend him. ‘O God, do not stay far
from me; O my God, come quickly to help me!

– Psalm 71:11-12

Am I a God near by, says YHWH, and not a God far off?

– Jeremiah 23:23

Seek YHWH while he may be found, call upon him while he
is near.

– Isaiah 55:6

The cry is answered only by God’s silence!

**²I call all day, my God,
but you do not an-
swer, all night long I
call and cannot rest.**

The ‘you’ is emphatic (as also in 22:9,10,19). With regard
to ‘the praise of Israel’ see later 22:22-26.

**³Yet *you* dwell in the
sanctuary, *you*, the
praise of Israel.**

Danger and affliction press in upon the psalmist. He has
gone to the sanctuary. Where is God? It is as though he is
saying: ‘You claim to hear the cry of the poor. Why do you
not respond to me?’

Foremost in the psalmist’s thinking is the escape from
Egypt, but God rescued his people many times since:

Consider the generations of old and see: has anyone trusted
in YHWH and been disappointed? Has anyone persevered
in the fear of YHWH and been forsaken? Has anyone called
upon him and been neglected?

– Sirach 2:10

**⁴In you our ancestors
trusted*; *they* trusted*,
and you rescued *them*.
⁵To you *they* cried, and
they escaped;
they trusted* in you,
and *they* did not trust
you in vain.**

⁶But here am I, more a worm than human; scorned and despised.

⁷All who see me jeer at me, they toss their heads and sneer:

⁸ 'He relied on YHWH*; let YHWH save him! Let him come to his aid if he loves him so much.'

The psalmist is a social outcast. Compare:

Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you insect Israel!
I will help you, says YHWH;
your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.

– Isaiah 41:14

The Gospel writers continue to allude to this psalm:

Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads ...
'He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to'
... The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

– Matthew 27:39,43-44

Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads...
'save yourself, and come down from the cross!' ...
Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

– Mark 15:32

The leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!'

– Luke 23:35

Compare the Suffering Servant:

He was deeply despised, abhorred by the nations.

– Isaiah 49:7

So marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortal human beings.

– Isaiah 52:14

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

– Isaiah 53:3

Unwittingly, those who scoff acknowledge a marvellous truth: God, though felt to be absent by the one suffering, is seen to be delighting in him. Compare the following:

He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of YHWH. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father.

Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.

– Wisdom 2:13-18

God has been close since childhood. Compare the following:

You, O Lord, are my hope. I have placed my trust in you, YHWH, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

– Psalm 71:5-6

By placing the new-born on his lap and naming the child, the father accepted the child as his.

When you cry out for help, YHWH hears, and rescues you from every danger. YHWH is near to those whose hearts are broken, and comes to the help of those whose spirits are crushed.

– Psalm 34:17-18

The comparison with Jesus continues:

My betrayer is at hand.

– Matthew 26:46

The psalmist likens his enemies to wild animals. Bashan is the fertile territory east of the upper Jordan and north of the river Yarmuk. He is encircled, trapped and his attackers lack humanity. They are ferocious, irrational, and he is terrified. Compare Saint Peter:

Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

– 1Peter 5:8

Nothing is as it should be. What should be dry, secure and stable (the bones) are like water. What should be humid (the mouth and the throat) is dry. The sensation is of being undone, broken and falling apart. We think of Jesus:

Jesus said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.

– John 19:28

In his pain he seems to see God, now close, but in the circle of his enemies, pounding him into the dust of death – the God who brought him forth from the womb (22:9). This is his most excruciating pain. However, see later where those in the dust praise God (22:29)!

⁹Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you entrusted* me to my mother's breasts. ¹⁰Placed on your lap from my birth, since my mother bore me you have been my God.

¹¹Do not stand far off. Trouble is near and I have no one to assist me!

¹²A pack of bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan close in on me; ¹³they open wide their jaws for me, like ravenous, roaring lions.

¹⁴I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart* is like wax, melting within my breast; ¹⁵my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaw;

You lay me in the dust of death.

Prayer for deliverance

¹⁶Dogs hunt me; a gang of villains closes me in. They tear at my hands and feet.

The last sentence in verse sixteen is unclear in the Hebrew. The image may be of wild dogs tearing at his flesh. We think of Jesus crucified. Thomas speaks of the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands (John 20:25), and the risen Jesus asks his disciples to look at the hands and his feet (Luke 24:39). However, it is possible that the hands and feet may be doing the tearing, in which case the image may be of a person who is buried in a pit and is desperately and vainly trying to claw his way out.

¹⁷I can count all my bones. There they are glaring at me, gloating over me;

Stripped naked, the psalmist is ready to be dumped in the pit and buried. The Gospel writers use the language of this psalm to describe Jesus:

¹⁸they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my robe they cast lots.

The soldiers took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier, leaving aside his tunic ... This was to fulfil what the scripture says, 'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my robe they cast lots.'

– John 19:23-24

¹⁹But you, YHWH, do not stand aside! O my strength, come quickly to my aid!

²⁰Rescue me* from the sword, my life from the clutches of the dog!

In asking God to rescue 'me', the psalmist is referring to his life, but also to his energy, his zest for life, Hebrew *nepeï*. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction.

²¹Save* me from the lion's jaw, from the horns of the wild bull.

Part Two. The expanding of the circle of praise (22:22-31).

The expanding circle of praise contrasts with the tightening circle of Part One.

²²Then I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

The psalmist is bargaining with God. He promises to tell others if God comes to his rescue. This verse is quoted in Hebrews 2:12. We recall Jesus' words:

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me.

– John 17:6

1. The first wave of praise comes from the psalmist surrounded by his community

His prayer answered, the psalmist bursts into a hymn of praise. Jesus, too, cries out in ecstasy, for his cry, too, has been heard:

Jesus cried again with a loud voice.

– Matthew 27:50

²³You who fear* YHWH, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴For he did not despise or scorn the condition of this wretch; he did not hide his face from me, but heard me when I cried to him.

²⁵You are the theme of my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear* him.

²⁶The poor* shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek YHWH will praise him. May you never lose heart*.

We recall Jesus eating with sinners (Mark 2:16), and the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves (Mark 6:42).

2. The second wave of praise from all the nations

All the nations that you have formed will come and bow down before you, O Lord, and glorify your name.

– Psalm 86:9

To him shall bow down, each in its place, all the coasts and islands of the nations.

– Zephaniah 2:11

Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For that is your due; among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is no one like you.

– Jeremiah 10:7

Those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau; and the kingdom shall be YHWH's.

– Obadiah 21

YHWH will become king over all the earth; on that day YHWH will be one and his name one.

– Zechariah 14:9

God is king over the nations;
God takes his seat on his holy throne.

– Psalm 47:8

²⁷All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to YHWH; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

²⁸For dominion belongs to YHWH, and he rules over the nations.

This is what YHWH has done

3. The third wave of praise is from the dead and from future generations

²⁹**To him, indeed, shall the ashes in the tomb bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust. And I, too, with all my being*, if he preserves me.**

³⁰**My descendants will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,**
³¹**and proclaim his justice* to a people yet unborn, saying: 'This is what he has done!**

The idea of the dead praising God is quite extraordinary in the Old Testament. See the Introduction under 'Resurrection' for the Old Testament ideas on the after-life. 'All my being' translates the Hebrew *nepeï*. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction.

As regards Jesus, God is praised not for saving him from dying, but for inspiring him in the way he died and in taking him through death into the glory of the resurrection. Under this aspect the Suffering Servant is closer to Jesus than Psalm 22 (see Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12).

Peter offers us the following reflections on suffering:

It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth' [Isaiah 53:9]. When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

– 1Peter 2:19-23

Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name.

– 1Peter 4:13-16