

Psalm 26

Office during the Day Friday Week 1

This is a personal appeal of an innocent person to God's judgment (compare Psalm 17). For some of the background, see the article 'Legal System' in the Introduction. It is a personal prayer which recognizes that cult and ethical behaviour must go hand in hand. While the psalmist claims to be free of serious sin, he recognises his dependence on God, whose faithfulness is the basis of his confidence. He contrasts his behaviour with that of evildoers and pleads not to be judged along with them. At the same time he recognises the need to open his heart to God's testing (verse 2), and prays that YHWH will help him remain innocent (verse 11). Compare the following from the New Testament:

With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

– 1Corinthians 4:3-4.

This is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God – and all the more toward you.

– 2Corinthians 1:12

Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honourably in all things.

– Hebrews 13:18

The Missal of Pius V used this psalm as an introductory penitential rite for the celebration of the Mass. Its title reads: 'Of David'.

Introduction

**¹Pass judgment* on me,
YHWH*, for I have lived
an honest life, trusting* in
YHWH without wavering.**

Others can judge us wrongly, and we are not above deceiving ourselves. The judgment that ultimately matters is that of God. Here the psalmist invites God to pass judgment on him. As we shall soon see, the basis of his confidence is not his own innocence but God's redemptive and gracious action in his life (see verse 11). It is his trust in YHWH that enables him to act morally and not waver.

Part One. Living under the grace of God's love and fidelity

Insofar as the psalmist is aware of the movements of his heart he does not detect sin. He hopes that even the more mysterious feelings that well up inside him, feelings associated with the kidneys, are also free from sin. He asks God to test him and, where necessary, purify him. See the article 'Heart-Kidneys' in the Introduction. In the Book of Proverbs we read:

The human spirit is the lamp of YHWH, searching every innermost part.

– Proverbs 20:27

At the same time:

All one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes, but YHWH weighs the spirit.

– Proverbs 16:2 (see 21:2)

It is God's judgment that ultimately matters:

Remember the long way that YHWH your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.

– Deuteronomy 8:2

The basis of the psalmist's trust is the kindness and faithfulness of YHWH, not the fact that he judges himself to be without guilt.

Verses 4-5 echo Psalm 1.

³For your kindness* is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness.

⁴I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;

⁵I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.

Part Two. Joining in the cult

Verses six to twelve were prayed by the priest in the Tridentine Mass during the washing of hands at the Offertory. As Christians we think of baptism which cleanses us from sin and through which we are welcomed to join the assembly at the table of the Lord:

Baptism now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God from a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.,

– 1Peter 3:21

⁶I wash, purifying my hands, and go around your altar, YHWH,

⁷singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and recounting your wondrous deeds.

Praising God in the assembly

⁸YHWH, I love the house in which you dwell, the place where your glory* abides.

⁹Do not sweep me* away with sinners, nor my life with the bloodthirsty, ¹⁰those in whose left hand are evil plots, and whose right hand is full of bribes.

¹¹I, on the other hand, live an honest life; rescue me, and be gracious* to me.

¹²I continue to walk in an upright* way; in the great congregation I will bless* YHWH.

Compare the following:

Turn away from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, or you will be swept away for all their sins.

– Numbers 16:26

Abraham came near and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ... Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’

– Genesis 18:23,25

Other texts speak of the corruption polluting the cult and society:

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

– Deuteronomy 16:19

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them.

– Isaiah 1:23

They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.

– Amos 2:6

‘Me’ in verse 9 translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. See the article ‘Being’ in the Introduction. Much more than his physical life is at stake.

Conclusion

Note the repetition here of the sentiments of the opening verse. The psalmist claims to be living an honest life thanks to the liberating and gracious action of YHWH. He wants to continue to walk in integrity, and so pleads with YHWH to continue to rescue him and be gracious to him..

The word ‘congregation’ translates the Hebrew *maqḥāl* [מִקְרָאֵל] from *qāhāl* [קָהָל]. This generally refers to the congregation of Israel gathered in worship. The Greek Septuagint version translates it by *eκκλῆσία* [εκκλησία], though in other texts it is translated by *sunagōgē* [συναγωγή]. *eκκλῆσία* is translated into English as ‘church’, and *synagōgē* as ‘synagogue’.