

Psalm 45

The Assumption (August 15)
Evening Prayer Monday Week 2
Prayer during the Day Saturday Week 4
Office of Readings for Common of Virgins

This psalm was composed for the wedding of a king – perhaps for the wedding of Ahab and Jezebel (1Kings 16:31). In Christian reflection it is applied to Christ the king and the Church, his spouse. The title reads: ‘To the leader: according to Lilies. Of the Korahites*. A Maskil*. A love song’.

The opening verses are in praise of the king, beginning with his prowess in battle. We are reminded that such prowess was the main reason for wanting a king in the first place:

that we also may be like other nations,
and that our king may govern us
and go out before us and fight our battles.

– 1Samuel 8:20

The psalmist then praises the king’s power and authority, recognising that he has these in order to bring about truth and justice. The king is no autocrat like the neighbouring kings, but has his authority in order to bring about the reign of God in the holy land and beyond.

The throne of the king is God’s throne, for the king is to execute God’s will and God’s justice, thus bringing about the reign of God in the land.

¹My heart* overflows with a noble theme; I dedicate my verses to a king; my tongue is an agile pen of a scribe.

²You are the most handsome of men; grace is poured upon your lips, for God blesses* you forever.

³Gird your sword upon your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendour and majesty.

⁴Ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend justice*; let your right hand show your dread deeds.

⁵Your arrows are keen, armies surrender to you, the king’s enemies lose heart*.

^{6a}Your throne is God’s throne; it endures forever.

The wedding of the king

^{6b}Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity;

⁷you love justice* and hate wickedness.

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

⁸Your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments celebrate you.

⁹Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honour; at your right hand stands the queen mother adorned in gold of Ophir.

¹⁰Hear, O daughter, consider and listen: forget your people and your father's house.

¹¹The king is infatuated with your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him.

¹²The city of Tyre will seek your favour with gifts, the richest of the people with all kinds of wealth.

He lauds the king for the justice of his administration. If this hymn was composed for the wedding of king Ahab, there is a skilful use of his name in verse seven. The Hebrew for 'love' is 'āhab [אהב].

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament quotes verses six and seven in relation to Jesus:

Of the Son he says, 'Your throne is God's throne; it endures forever and ever. Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity; you love justice and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

– Hebrews 1:8-9

He now sings of the wedding night, praising the king and the queen mother, both of whom are sumptuously dressed as they await the arrival of the king's bride. Music is playing in the great hall.

The three perfumes mentioned were brought by ship through the Red Sea. Myrrh is a bitter aromatic resin brought to Israel from Arabia and Somalia. Aloes is from the resin and heartwood of a tree in India. Cassia is from the bark of a tree in Sri Lanka. The location of Ophir is disputed. Some suggest Arabia, others East Africa, and yet others India.

This advice is for the bride as she is preparing to be escorted into the wedding hall.

The mention of Tyre is one reason for suggesting that this psalm may have been composed for the wedding of Ahab and Jezebel, who was a princess of Tyre.

He sings of the bridal procession.

¹³The princess is decked in her chamber with robes woven from gold;

¹⁴in many-coloured robes she is led to the king, followed by her maiden companions.

¹⁵With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.

The psalmist exults in the marriage for it will ensure the endurance of the dynasty.

¹⁶In the place of ancestors you, O king, shall have sons; you will make them princes over the whole land.

This song will ensure that the day is remembered for ever.

¹⁷I will cause your name to be celebrated forever, from one generation to the next; and the peoples will praise and thank you forever and ever.

We conclude our reflection by quoting from Augustine's commentary in which he applies the psalm to Jesus the Messiah-king.

This Loved One is seen by his persecutors, but without their understanding him. Had they known him, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory [1Corinthians 2:8]. He himself required different eyes for this knowledge, saying: 'Who sees me sees also the Father' (John 14:9). Sing to him, therefore, this psalm. Let us rejoice together at the wedding feast, and we will be together with those who are celebrating the wedding, who are invited to the wedding. Those invited are the bride, for the bride is the Church, the bridegroom is Christ ...

Is it possible that at this wedding to which we are invited there is no marriage bed? How is it then that in another psalm it is said: 'He has placed his tent in the sun, and he himself is like a bridegroom coming forth from his wedding chamber' [Psalm 19:4-5]. It is a nuptial union that exists between the Word and the flesh. The wedding bed for this union is the womb of the Virgin. In truth flesh itself is united to the Word; through whom it is also said: 'No longer two but one flesh' (Matthew 19:5). The Church is taken from the human race, so that the head of the Church is the same flesh united to the Word, and the other believers are members of this Head.

Would you really like to see who comes to the wedding? 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was towards God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). Rejoice O spouse loved by God. When did he love her? When she was still deformed. 'Because all have sinned', says the apostle, 'and have need of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). And again, 'Christ died for sinners' (Romans 5:8). She was deformed and was loved so that she would not remain deformed. She was not loved because deformed, in that it was not the deformity that was loved. Whatever is loved is conserved; deformity has been eliminated and beauty created.

Jesus the king-bridegroom

To whom does she come but to the one who formed her. He himself comes in the words of prophecy. Behold, the same bridegroom is coming towards us. Let us love him. Rather, if we have found in him any deformity, let us not love him. He, on the contrary, has found many deformities and has loved us. We, on the other hand, do not love him if we find any deformity in him. This precisely because he is clothed in flesh; wherefore it is said of him: 'We saw him and he had no beauty or attraction' (Isaiah 53:2). If we were to consider the mercy that caused him to be made man, we would find him beautiful. The prophet spoke in the name of the Jews, when he said: 'We saw him and he had no beauty or attraction'. Why? Because they saw him without understanding [non in intellectum]. But for those who understand - 'The Word became flesh' (John 1:13), and of a sublime beauty. One of the friends of the bridegroom says: 'Far be it from me to glory in anything other than the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Galatians 6:14).

It is a little thing not to be ashamed of the cross, we must glory in it. Why then does he not have beauty or attraction? Because 'Christ crucified was a scandal for the Jews and foolishness for the Gentiles' (1Corinthians 1:23). But how on the cross does he have beauty? 'For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1Corinthians 1:25). To us therefore who believe the Bridegroom always appears beautiful.

Beautiful is God, the Word towards God. Beautiful in the womb of the Virgin where he did not lose divinity and assumed humanity. Beautiful is the Word born a baby, because while he was a baby, while he sucked milk, while he was cradled in the arm, the heavens spoke, the angels sang his praise, the star directed the way of the Magi, he was adored in the manger, the place where humble animals were fed. He is beautiful then in heaven, beautiful on the earth, beautiful in the womb, beautiful in the arms of his parents; beautiful in his miracles, beautiful under torture; beautiful in his being invited into life and beautiful in his taking it up again; beautiful on the cross, beautiful in the tomb, beautiful in heaven.

Hear the canticle intelligently, and the weakness of the flesh will not draw your eyes away from the splendour of his beauty. The supreme and true beauty is justice, You will not see him as beautiful if you consider him unjust. If in every way he is just, in every way he is beautiful.