

Psalm 58

Not in the Sunday Liturgy or the Prayer of the Church

Surrounded by violence and injustice, the psalmist can see little good in the human race. He blames the gods and calls on YHWH* to act by sweeping the evil away and ensuring a reward for the just*. The final verse sums up his sentiments. As we pray the psalm we would do well to reflect on the fact that the evil that the psalmist is complaining about is not all 'out there'. It can be found also 'within'. The same applies when we pray in the 'Our Father': 'rescue us from evil' (Matthew 6:13). As the wise man writes:

When an ungodly person curses Satan, he curses himself.

– Sirach 21:27

The title reads: 'To the leader: Do Not Destroy. Of David. A Miktam*'.
Part One. The psalmist cries out against Evil

**¹Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?
Do you judge people fairly?
²No! In your hearts* you devise crimes;
your hands deal out violence on earth.
³The wicked go astray from the womb;
they err from their birth, uttering lies.
⁴They have venom like the venom of a serpent,
like the deaf adder that stops its ear
⁵lest it hear the sound of the snake charmer
expert in casting spells.**

The Psalmist is crying out against the way evil is expressed in his world. He is doing so after the fashion of the prophet Micah:

Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice?
– you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron.

– Micah 3:1-3

He is crying out against those who abuse executive and judicial power by acting unjustly.

An evil tribunal which decrees injustice in the name of the statutes.

– Psalm 94:20

They devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds.
When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power.

– Micah 2:1

The ungodly say: 'Let us oppress the righteous poor man;
let us not spare the widow or regard the grey hairs of the aged.
But let our might be our law of right.
What is weak is clearly useless.'

– Wisdom 2:10-11

He is crying out against those whose hearts are corrupt and who act accordingly. They are dead inside. They have no problem in sacrificing the innocent for an ideology, a cause or a party. When they act in an evil way, it is premeditated, deliberate and cold-blooded. Their evil is second nature to them. It does not occur to them that they are doing wrong, though this takes away neither responsibility nor guilt.

You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened.
For I knew that you would deal very treacherously, and that from birth you were called a rebel.

– Isaiah 48:8

They are hardened against compassion, so puffed up are they with their own power and importance.

He pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity; he maintained his anger perpetually, and kept his wrath forever.

– Amos 1:11

They are snakes – the epiphany of Evil. Their bite is poisonous (verses 4-5).

I am letting snakes loose among you, adders that cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 8:17

Flee from sin as from a snake; for if you approach sin it will bite you.
Its teeth are lion's teeth, and can destroy human lives.

– Sirach 21:2

They rely on falsehood, they speak lies, conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity.
They hatch adders' eggs, and weave the spider's web;
whoever eats their eggs dies, and the crushed egg hatches out a viper.

– Isaiah 59:4-5

They make their tongue as sharp as a snake's, and under their lips is the venom of vipers.

– Psalm 140:3

The sentiments of this psalm find an echo in Deuteronomy:

Their vine comes from the vine stock of Sodom, from the vineyards of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of poison, their clusters are bitter; their wine is the poison of serpents, the cruel venom of asps. Is not this laid up in store with me, sealed up in my treasuries? Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly ... When I whet my flashing sword, and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries, and will repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh – with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired enemy. Praise, O heavens, his people, worship him, all you gods! For he will avenge the blood of his children, and take vengeance on his adversaries; he will repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people.

– Deuteronomy 32:32-35, 41-43

Part Two. A plea for punishment and a curse

**⁶O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
YHWH*, tear out the fangs of the young lions!**

**⁷Let them vanish like water that runs away;
like grass let them be trodden down and wither.**

**⁸Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime;
like the aborted foetus that never sees the sun.**

**⁹Sweep them away like thorn bushes in an unexpected whirlwind,
like wild beasts, like a funeral pyre!**

Having expressed his shock and horror, the psalmist gives vent to his anger and to an impassioned plea. He implores God to intervene against the satanic power of injustice and violence. Sirach offers a timely reminder here:

Fight to the death for truth, and YHWH God will fight for you.

– Sirach 4:28

Part Three. God will re-establish justice

**¹⁰The just* will rejoice when they see vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.**

**¹¹People will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the just*;
surely there is a God who judges* on earth.'**

YHWH, avenging God, avenging God, shine forth!

– Psalm 94:1

I know that YHWH maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor.
Surely the righteous will give thanks to your name;
surely the upright will live in your presence.

– Psalm 140:12-13

Listen, O kings, and understand; learn, O judges of the ends of the earth ...
YHWH will search out your works and inquire into your plans.
Because as servants of His kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law,
or walk according to the purpose of God, who will come upon you terribly and swiftly,
because severe judgment falls on those in high places.

– Wisdom 6:1-6