

Psalm 102

Office of Readings Tuesday Week 4

This psalm offers us waves of lyrical poetry of excellent quality. Jerusalem is in ruins, but the enemies of whom the psalmist speaks are more personal rather than national. The personal suffering is experienced as part of the national suffering for Zion and as a moment in a continuing history of suffering. The threat of premature death in mid-life is seen against the eternity of God. Compare the lament of Hezekiah:

I said: In the noontide of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. I said, I shall not see YHWH in the land of the living; I shall look upon mortal human beings no more among the inhabitants of the world. My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end.

– Isaiah 38:10-12

The psalm moves between the individual and the community. As Christians when we read 'rebuild Zion' we think of the call to rebuild the Church – a call that was experienced by Saint Francis of Assisi and to which he responded with generosity. We are all called to play our part in this. The title reads: 'A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before YHWH*.'

The psalmist speaks first of his physical pain. His words recall Job:

Their flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen; and their bones, once invisible, now stick out.

– Job 33:21

The owl was considered unclean and its presence and sound an ill-omen. The wilderness suggests exile; a place of devastation suggests Jerusalem in ruins. The texts on the following page may assist a meditation on these verses.

¹Hear my prayer, YHWH, let my cry for help* come to you.

²Do not hide your face from me in my distress. Listen to me; answer me speedily when I call.

³For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.

⁴My heart* is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread.

⁵Because of my loud groaning I am all skin and bone.

⁶I am like an owl in the wilderness, like a young owl in a place of devastation.

⁷I lie awake; I am like a solitary bird on the roof top.

Solitude and hostility

It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations; Arabs will not pitch their tents there, shepherds will not make their flocks lie down there. But wild animals will lie down there, and its houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will live, and there goat-demons will dance. Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged.

– Isaiah 13:20-22

Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith [mythological female demon who haunted ruins] shall repose, and find a place to rest. There shall the owl nest and lay and hatch and brood in its shadow; there too the buzzards shall gather, each one with its mate.

– Isaiah 34:13-15

For a further reflection on solitude read Job 19.

⁸All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me curse me by name.

⁹I eat ashes for bread, and mingle tears with my drink,

¹⁰because of your indignation and anger*; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.

We are consumed by your anger; overwhelmed by your wrath. You have set our guilt before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. Even if we live seventy years, or even eighty, if we are strong; life is only toil and trouble; the years soon pass and off we fly. Who understands the power of your anger? Who appreciates the force of your wrath?

– Psalm 90:7-11

You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm.

– Job 30:22

¹¹My days are like a lengthening shadow; I wither away like grass.

¹²But you, YHWH, reign forever; your name endures from one generation to the next.

We are mortal, but YHWH is immortal and it is in YHWH that we place our hope.

I am gone like a shadow at evening.

– Psalm 109:23

We are like a breath; our days are like a passing shadow.

– Psalm 144:4

We are but of yesterday, and we know nothing, for our days on earth are but a shadow.

– Job 8:9

A human being, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last.

– Job 14:1-2

They have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown.

– Isaiah 37:27

The Hebrew verb translated here as ‘have compassion’ is from the root *ṣḥm*. See the article ‘Compassion’ in the Introduction. ‘Favour with grace’ translates the Hebrew *ḥānān*. These two ideas are often found together in the Bible: see Exodus 34:6; Job 4:2; Psalm 86:14; Psalm 111:4; Psalm 112:4 and Psalm 145:8.

As to the connection between personal suffering and the suffering of the city, note the following verses from the Third Lamentation

⁴He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones ...

⁸though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer ...

²²The steadfast love of YHWH never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end ...

⁴³You have wrapped yourself with anger
and pursued us, killing without pity ...

⁴⁸My eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of my people ...

⁵⁰until YHWH from heaven looks down and sees ...

⁶¹You have heard their taunts, YHWH,
all their plots against me.

The Septuagint renders the second half of verse 13 ‘*οτι καιρος του οικτιρησαι αυτην, οτι ηκει καιρος*’ (‘for the time to have compassion, that time has come’).

Ah! You who say, ‘Let him make haste,
let him speed his work that we may see it;
let the plan of the Holy One of Israel hasten
to fulfilment, that we may know it!’

– Isaiah 5:19

At the time that I determine,
I will judge with equity.

– Psalm 75:2

There is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come,
it will not delay.

– Habakkuk 2:3

Thus says YHWH: In a time of favour
I have answered you,
on a day of salvation I have helped you.

– Isaiah 49:8

¹³You will rise up and have compassion* on Zion, for it is time to favour it with your grace*; the appointed time has come.

YHWH hears the cry of the poor

¹⁴Your servants hold its stones dear, and have pity even for its dust.

¹⁵The nations will fear* the name of YHWH, and all the kings of the earth your glory*.

¹⁶When YHWH builds up Zion, and appears in his glory*,

¹⁷he will turn to the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their plea.

¹⁸Let this be recorded for a future generation, so that a people yet unborn may praise YHWH:

My sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and your heart's desire.

– Ezekiel 24:21

Those in the west shall fear the name of YHWH, and those in the east, his glory; for he will come like a pent-up stream that the wind of YHWH drives on.

– Isaiah 59:19

The psalmist is confident that God will have compassion on the city and rebuild it.

On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt ... Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, YHWH, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, YHWH, have spoken, and I will do it.

– Ezekiel 36:33,36

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, I am about to set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of jewels, and all your wall of precious stones.

– Isaiah 54:11-12

On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old.

– Amos 9:11

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.

– Psalm 22:24

Traditions were handed on orally before they were recorded in writing:

Things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us, we will not hide from their children; we will tell the coming generation the glorious deeds of YHWH, and his might, and the wonderful things that he has done.

– Psalm 78:3-4

Go now, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

– Isaiah 30:8

Thus says YHWH to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, 'Kings shall see and stand up, princes shall prostrate themselves, because of YHWH, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'

– Isaiah 49:7

God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity.

– Psalm 68:6

YHWH hears the needy. He does not despise his own that are in bonds.

– Psalm 69:33 (see Psalm 79:11)

YHWH says to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'

– Isaiah 49:9

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.

– Isaiah 61:1

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.

– Zechariah 9:11-12

In days to come the mountain of YHWH's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of YHWH, to the house of the God of Jacob'.

– Isaiah 2:2-3 (= Micah 4:1-2)

All the peoples may call on the name of YHWH and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, my scattered ones, shall bring my offering.

– Zephaniah 3:9-10

I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory.

– Isaiah 66:18

Once again the psalmist reflects on the contrast between the divine which knows no end and the human which is mortal.

¹⁹that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven YHWH observed the earth,

²⁰to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were condemned to die.

²¹Thus the reputation of YHWH will spread throughout Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem, ²²when peoples and kingdoms gather together to worship YHWH.

²³He has broken my strength in mid course and shortened my days.

²⁴'O my God,' I say, 'do not take me away at the mid-point of my life, you whose years endure throughout all generations.'

God is eternal

²⁵Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

²⁶They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away;

²⁷but you are the same, and your years have no end.

²⁸The children of your servants and their offspring will live in security in your presence.

These verses are quoted in the New Testament in the Letter to the Hebrews 1:10-12. There the 'you' of verses 26-27 is applied to the risen Christ.

As the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says YHWH; so shall your descendants and your name remain.

– Isaiah 66:22