

Psalm 103

Feast of the Sacred Heart Year A
7th Sunday Year A; 24th Sunday Year A
7th Sunday of Easter Year B; 8th Sunday Year B
3rd Sunday of Lent Year C; 7th Sunday Year C
Office of Readings Wednesday Week 4

This has been called the Old Testament's 'Te Deum' (Latin hymn of praise and thanksgiving prayed in the liturgy on major feasts). As it stands it is post-exilic, but it builds on earlier material. It is a hymn of thanksgiving (verses 1-2 and 20-22) beginning in a personal way and then inviting all of Israel (verse 10), all mankind (verse 14), and finally the whole of the cosmos to join in praising God. It may arise out of a personal experience of healing (verses 3-4), or as a result of the return from exile (verse 6), or simply as a meditation on God's mercy (verse 8). The focus is on God's mercy which is moved by human weakness (verse 14), and experienced by those who are faithful to the covenant (verses 17-18). The title reads simply: 'Of David'.

Saint Augustine offers us this reflection:

God has ears, the heart has a voice ... Your voice cries out if someone is listening, your voice remains silent if no one hears you. In your heart there is always someone who is listening to you. At times we sing, at times we are silent. But can your heart remain silent and not praise God? The voice may sometimes cry out and sometimes not, but the voice of the heart need never be silent.

Here and through to verse 6, the psalmist gives six reasons for praising YHWH.

For your name's sake, YHWH, pardon my guilt, for it is great.

– Psalm 25:11

We see this in Jesus' ministry (see Mark 2:10).

YHWH heals those whose hearts are broken, and binds up their wounds.

– Psalm 147:3

I am YHWH who heals you.

– Exodus 15:26

Thus says YHWH: Your hurt is incurable, your wound is grievous. There is no one to uphold your cause, no medicine for your wound, no healing for you. ... I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 30:12-13,17

We see this in Jesus' ministry (Mark 2:17; 5:25).

¹Bless* YHWH*, O my soul*, all that is within me, bless his holy name.

²Bless* YHWH, O my soul*, and do not forget what he has done for you.

1. ³YHWH forgives all your guilt*,

2. and heals all your diseases.

Reasons for praising YHWH

**3. ⁴He redeems* your life
from the Pit,**

YHWH, my rock and my redeemer.

– Psalm 19:14

They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer.

– Psalm 78:35

See Jesus' ministry (Mark 10:45).

**4. and surrounds you with
kindness* and tender
compassion*.**

See the articles 'Compassion' and 'Kindness' in the Introduction. These two terms recur throughout the psalm:

YHWH is compassionate and ... abounding in kindness.

– verse 8

As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his kindness toward those who fear him.

– verse 11

YHWH has compassion for those who fear him.

– verse 13

The kindness of YHWH always was and always will be.

– verse 17

**5. ⁵He fills you with good
things as long as you live,**

We are filled with the goodness of your house,
with the holy gifts of your temple.

– Psalm 65:4

With honey from the rock I would satisfy you.

– Psalm 81:16

With long life I will satisfy them.

– Psalm 91:16

He satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry
he fills with good things.

– Psalm 107:9

I will satisfy the poor of Zion with bread.

– Psalm 132:15

You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every
living thing.

– Psalm 145:16

See Jesus' ministry (Mark 6:30-43, 7:28, 8:1-8).

**so that your youth is re-
newed like the eagle's.**

Those who wait for YHWH shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

– Isaiah 40:31

This is the sixth and final reason offered for why we should praise YHWH. The rest of the psalm offers further details that support these reasons.

The psalmist recalls the Exodus from Egypt. Later (verses 17-18) he will speak of the covenant (see Exodus 20:6).

This repeats the credal formula found throughout the Bible. See the article 'Grace' in the Introduction.

The end of the exile is a dramatic proof of this.

Why have you forgotten us completely?

– Lamentations 5:20

How long, YHWH? Will you be angry forever?

– Psalm 79:5

Perhaps his kindness is exhausted, and his promises have come to an end?

– Psalm 77:8

'No', says this psalm. Compare Jeremiah:

Return, faithless Israel, says YHWH. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says YHWH; I will not be angry forever.

– Jeremiah 3:12

Your justice is like the high mountains, your judgments are like the great deep.

– Psalm 36:6

Riise up, O God, above the heavens.
Let your glory fill the earth.

– Psalm 57:11

Happy the person who is absolved from transgression, whose sin is buried and forgotten.
Happy the person to whom YHWH imputes no guilt, whose spirit is not darkened.

– Psalm 32:1-2

He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

– Micah 7:19

6. YHWH sees to justice* and right judgments* for all the oppressed.

7He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel.

8YHWH is tenderly compassionate* and gracious*, slow to anger* and abounding in kindness*.

9He will accuse, but not always. He will be angry*, but not forever.

10He will not deal with us as our sins deserve, nor repay us according to our guilt*.

11For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his kindness* toward those who fear* him.

12As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions* from us.

God our Father

¹³As a father has compassion* for his children, so YHWH has compassion* for those who fear* him. ¹⁴For he knows how we are; he remembers that we are dust.

Like a father YHWH exercises authority:

Let my son go that he may worship me.

– Exodus 4:23

Like a father YHWH educates:

Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so YHWH your God disciplines you.

– Deuteronomy 8:5

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for YHWH has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.

– Isaiah 1:2

Like a father YHWH accepts the king as his adopted son:

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

– 2Samuel 7:14

You are my son; today I have begotten you.

– Psalm 2:7

Like a father YHWH cares for orphans as his own:

Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.

– Psalm 68:5

YHWH's 'feelings' are those of a father:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

– Hosea 11:8

I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness.

– Jeremiah 3:19, 22

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 31:20

¹⁵As for us mortal human beings, our days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; ¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of YHWH blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

– Isaiah 40:7

As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up; they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.

– Job 7:9-10

Sirach, too, speaks of God's tender compassion for human beings:

What are human beings, and of what use are they?
 What is good in them and what is evil?
 The number of years in their life is great if they reach one hundred years.
 Like a drop of water from the sea and a grain of sand,
 so are a few years among the days of eternity.
 That is why the Lord is patient with them
 and pours out his mercy upon them.
 He sees and recognises that their end is miserable;
 therefore he grants them forgiveness all the more.
 The compassion of human beings is for their neighbours,
 but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing.
 He rebukes and trains and teaches them,
 and turns them back, as a shepherd his flock.
 He has compassion on those who accept his discipline
 and who are eager for his precepts.

– Sirach 18:8-14

I will see that those who correct their conduct
 will enjoy the salvation of God.

– Psalm 50:23

His mercy is for those who fear him from genera-
 tion to generation.

– Luke 1:50

The heavenly hosts are invited to join in the cho-
 rus of praise, and then, finally, all of creation.

**¹⁷But the kindness* of YHWH
 always was and always will be
 for those who fear* him, and
 his righteousness* passes on
 from children to grandchil-
 dren,
¹⁸to whoever keeps his cov-
 enant* and remembers to carry
 out his commandments.**

**¹⁹YHWH established his throne
 in the heavens, and his rule
 governs the universe.**

**²⁰Bless* YHWH, O you his
 angels, you mighty ones who
 do his bidding, obedient to his
 spoken word.**

**²¹Bless* YHWH, all his hosts*,
 his ministers that do his will.**

**²²Bless* YHWH, all his works,
 in all places of his dominion.
 Bless* YHWH, O my soul*.**