

Psalm 116 [= LXX Psalm 114-115]

verse 1-9 (LXX 114), 24th Sunday Year B

Evening Prayer Friday Week 2

verses 10-19 (LXX 115), Holy Thursday, Corpus Christ Year B

Evening Prayer 1 Sunday Week 3

Evening Prayer 2 for Exaltation of the Cross, All Saints, Corpus Christi, Apostles, Martyrs

In the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and so the Christian liturgical books, Hebrew Psalm 9-10 = Psalm 9, and Hebrew Psalm 114-115 = Psalm 113. In the present psalm the process is reversed. Here it is the Greek, Latin and liturgical texts which divide Hebrew Psalm 116 into Psalm 114-115.

On the personal level, the Psalmist is thanking God because he has escaped death (compare Psalm 30). He speaks of his being abandoned and powerless to help himself. He speaks also of his interior affliction. He is taking part in a liturgy in which he is fulfilling a vow taken when ill. Verse 19 suggests a communal dimension. God has liberated his people from the slavery and death of exile, and restored them to life in bringing them back to the temple. It is a song of love (verse 1), of faith (verse 10), and of thanksgiving (verse 17).

Psalm 116 is listed among the so-called Hallel Psalms, sung on the pilgrimage feasts (Tabernacles, Passover, Pentecost), and also at Hanukkah and each month at the new moon. Psalm 116 was the first psalm sung after the meal, and so possibly the psalm sung by Jesus before leaving the supper (see Matthew 26:30).

Part One. Psalm 116:1-9 (= LXX and Vulgate Psalm 114)

‘Love’ in verse 1 is the Hebrew *’āhab* [אָהַב], rendered in Greek by *agapaō* [ἀγαπᾶω]. The focus is not on feeling, but on fidelity.

You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

– Deuteronomy 6:5

You shall love YHWH your God.

– Deuteronomy 11:1

Contrast the following which is the only text in the Hebrew Bible to use the affectionate word *rāḥam* [רָחַם], of our ‘love’ for God.

I love you, YHWH, my strength.

– Psalm 18:1

The psalmist knows that YHWH has drawn near so as to hear him. He is encouraged to keep calling out in supplication.

¹I love YHWH*, because he has heard my voice and my plea.

²He listens to me whenever I call on him.

YHWH has answered prayer

³The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I was overcome with distress and anguish.

⁴I called on YHWH's name: 'YHWH, I pray, save my life*!'

⁵Gracious* is YHWH, and righteous*; our God is tenderly compassionate*.

⁶YHWH protects the naive and immature; when I was brought low, he saved* me.

⁷Return, O my soul*, to your rest, for YHWH has dealt bountifully with you.

⁸He delivered my soul* from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling

⁹I will walk in the sight of YHWH in the land of the living.

The psalmist has been restored to health, having faced a mortal illness. 'My life' in verse 4 translates the Hebrew *nepeï*. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction. Verse 5 draws on the credal formula of the Book of Exodus:

YHWH passed before him, and proclaimed, 'YHWH, YHWH, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.'

– Exodus 34:6

'My soul' in verses 7 and 8 translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction. God so loved us that he gave us his Son, who gave his life to redeem us from slavery to death, sin and the law.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

– Romans 8:18-23

Part Two. Psalm 116:10-19 (= LXX and Vulgate Psalm 115:1-10)

The first words of this verse are quoted by Paul:

Just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with Scripture-- 'I believed, and so I spoke' -- we also believe, and so we speak.

– 2Corinthians 4:13

¹⁰I believed, even when I said, 'I am sorely afflicted.'

This is also quoted by Paul:

Although everyone is false, let God be proved true.

– Romans 3:4

¹¹I said in my consternation, 'Everyone is false.'

We cannot rely on human help. Only God is absolutely trustworthy:

O grant us help against the foe, for human help is worthless.

– Psalm 60:11 (also Psalm 62)

Turn away from mortal human beings, who have only breath in their nostrils, for of what account are they?

– Isaiah 2:22

Thus says YHWH: 'Cursed are those who trust in mere mortal human beings and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from YHWH.'

– Jeremiah 17:5

Verses 13-14 function as a refrain (See verses 17-18).

Simon the priest held out his hand for the cup and poured a drink offering of the blood of the grape; he poured it out at the foot of the altar, a pleasing odour to the Most High, the king of all. Then the sons of Aaron shouted; they blew their trumpets of hammered metal; they sounded a mighty fanfare as a reminder before the Most High. Then all the people together quickly fell to the ground on their faces to worship their Lord, the Almighty, God Most High. Then the singers praised him with their voices in sweet and full-toned melody.

– Sirach 50:15-18

I will come into your house with burnt offerings to carry out my vows to you, vows pronounced by my lips, promises made when I was in trouble.

– Psalm 66:13-14

¹²What shall I return to YHWH for all his goodness to me?

¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation* and call on the name of YHWH.

¹⁴I will pay my vows to YHWH in the presence of all his people.

¹⁵Precious in the sight of YHWH is the death of his faithful ones.

¹⁶YHWH, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds.

¹⁷*I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of YHWH.*

¹⁸*I will pay my vows to YHWH in the presence of all his people*

¹⁹*in the courts of the house of YHWH, in your midst, O Jerusalem.*

Praise YH! [Halâlû Yâ]

His ‘faithful’ are those who have welcomed God’s covenant love [ḥesed] and are faithful in keeping the covenant.

Love YHWH, all you his faithful ones.

YHWH preserves those who believe in him.

– Psalm 31:23

We are to link verse 13 to verse 17: ‘I will lift up the cup of salvation ... I will offer you a thanksgiving sacrifice.’ Verses 17-18 repeat and develop the refrain of verses 13-14.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?

– 1Corinthians 10:16

Jesus took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’.

– 1Corinthians 11:25

Jesus did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’.

– Luke 22:20

The final cry is also the final cry of Psalm 113 and Psalm 115.