

Psalm 8

Feast of the Holy Trinity Year C
Office of Readings for the Feast of the Blessed Trinity,
the Exaltation of the Cross, and All Saints
Morning Prayer Saturday Week 2 and Week 4
Evening Prayer on the Feast of Saint Michael

The beauty of the night sky moves the psalmist to a profound sense of awe at the majesty and power of the Creator. This in turn leads him to reflect on his own insignificance and utter dependence on God. Why has this mighty God given such dignity to us human beings, and why has God entrusted creation to us? Psalm 8 is quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews 2:6-8. The title reads: 'To the leader: according to The Gittith. A Psalm* of David'. Some suggest that 'The Gittith', a word found also in Psalm 81 and Psalm 84, means 'in the fashion of Gath'. Others suggest it is derived from the word for 'wine press' and is a reference to the tune to be used.

¹YHWH*,
**our Sovereign Lord,
how wonderful is your
name over all the earth!**

As is clear from verse nine, the opening sentence of verse one functions as a refrain. 'Our Sovereign Lord' translates the Hebrew ^adōnay [דֹנָי], the word which was to replace YHWH when the sacred name was read aloud (see the article 'YHWH' in the Introduction). The sentiment expressed here is echoed in Isaiah:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.

– Isaiah 6:3

**I want to worship your
heavenly majesty
²with the mouths of
infants and babes at the
breast.**

This verse is picked up by Jesus when the children are crying out in the temple in praise of the Messiah:

Have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and babes at the breast you have prepared praise for yourself'?

– Matthew 21:16

**To silence the enemy
and the rebel, you have
asserted power [or 'es-
tablished a bulwark']
against your foes.**

The Hebrew ^ōz [זֹ] may have its literal meaning, 'power'. If it means a 'powerful bulwark', the reference is to the star-studded firmament, admired by little children. Their exclamations of wonder proclaim that human pride cannot pierce the heavens! As will become clear in verse three, the psalmist is gazing at the night sky. He is overwhelmed by its beauty and intricacy and is moved to praise the Creator. Chapter thirteen of the Book of Wisdom is worth reading:

If through delight in the beauty of creation people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is the Lord, for the author of beauty created them.

– Wisdom 13:3

Saint Augustine expresses well these sentiments:

But what is my God? I put my question to the earth.
It answered, 'I am not God', and all things on earth declared the same.
I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep and the living things that creep in them,
but they answered, 'We are not your God. Seek what is above us'.
I spoke to the winds that blow, and the air and all that lives in it replied, 'I am not God',
I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars, and they told me,
'Neither are we the God whom you seek'.
I spoke to all the things that are about me, all that come through the door of the senses,
and I said, 'Since you are not my God tell me about Him. Tell me something of my God'.
Loud and clear they answered, 'God is He who made us!'
I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things.
Their only answer was their beauty.

– Augustine, Confessions, X.6

The psalmist reflects on the fact that in stark contrast to the little children who are open to the wonder of what God is doing, there are those who rebel against God. They try to devastate the earth and would want to rise above the firmament and challenge God. We are reminded of Jesus' words:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

– Matthew 11:25

Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

– Matthew 18:13

We are reminded also of Saint Paul:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

– 1Corinthians 1:27

The psalmist shares the wonder, simplicity and innocence of the children as he praises God for what he calls 'the work of God's fingers'. We think of God's finger in Michelangelo's painting of creation on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. The intricacy and delicacy of the created world causes the psalmist to be caught up in admiration of the artist who is responsible for its creation.

**³When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that
you have established**

⁴what are we that you are mindful of us, mortal human beings that you care for us?

The psalmist is troubled and asks himself: Who am I? What does it mean to be a human being [using both 'enôš, אֱנוֹשׁ and ben 'ādām, בֶּן אָדָם]? The following verses will reveal that he does not attempt to answer this fundamental question by looking at us and at what we do. Rather he looks at what God has done and is doing for us. We are all too aware of what we do and fail to do. The only way to find out who we really are is to look at our relationships, and primarily at our relationship with God. How God treats us will give us the cue as to who we are. The psalmist is amazed at the way God keeps us in mind and cares for us.

We might reflect on the ways in which we have experienced God keeping us in mind and caring for us. Each of us has special experiences that we treasure because, perhaps into the centre of pain we knew that God was looking after us. It is by reflecting on these moments that we come to a deep awareness of who we really are as persons treasured by and precious to God.

What are human beings, that you make so much of them,
that you set your mind on them,
visit them every morning, test them every moment?

– Job 7:17-18

⁵You have made us a little lower than gods, and crowned us with glory* and honour.

We reflect on our place in creation. We have been given the whole of creation to continue the task of bringing order out of chaos and forming the world into a paradise where human beings can live with dignity and where all living things, indeed the whole of the created universe, can be intelligently governed. This is not a right, but a privilege given to us for which we are responsible. Who then are we to have been so honoured and trusted by God?

Thinking of Jesus, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes:

We see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death.

– Hebrews 2:9

The Genesis account goes further than the psalm, claiming that we are made in God's 'image and likeness' (1:26). This idea is picked up by Saint James:

Human beings are the image and reflection of God.

– James 3:9 (see 1Corinthians 11:7)

This is quoted by Paul:

God has put all things under the feet of Christ
and has made him the head over all things for the church,
which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

– Ephesians 1:22-23 (see 1Corinthians 15:27)

The Book of Wisdom echoes the psalmist:

By your wisdom you have formed human beings
to have dominion over the creatures you have made,
and rule the world in holiness and righteousness.

– Wisdom 9:2

The psalmist is reflecting on the Genesis story:

Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image,
according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over
the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the
cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over
every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

– Genesis 1:26

If we abuse our power (see verse two) we are failing to live
within the limitations of the human condition. We might
also reflect on the following:

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways
higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

– Isaiah 55:9

The psalm ends where it began by acknowledging the sovereignty of God. The psalmist reflects on the wonderful dignity that is ours as human beings. It is obvious that we are not God and should not act as though we are, but we are made in God’s image and likeness in that we, of all creation, can commune with God. Moreover God has placed his creation in our hands to care for it. The psalmist sees this not as a right but as a gift. It is God who has crowned us with glory and honour. It is God who has given us our parents and family and community and personal gifts. It is God who has formed our body, our soul, and our heart, and who continues to do so, giving each of us that special beauty that is our unique selves. We are to live, as Saint Paul invites us, ‘for the praise of God’s glory’ (Ephesians 1:14).

**⁶You have given us
dominion over the
works of your hands;
you have put all
things under our feet:**

**⁷all of them: sheep
and oxen, wild beasts
of the plain,
⁸birds of the air, and
fish of the sea that
make their way along
the sea routes.**

**⁹YHWH,
our Sovereign Lord,
how wonderful is
your name over all the
earth!**