

Psalm 15

22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B;
16th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C
Evening Prayer Monday Week I & Common of Pastors
Office of Readings for All Saints

The psalmist is seeking to be close to God and is reflecting on the way we must live if we want to enjoy this closeness. Psalm 15 is modelled on the decalogue in that it recognises the primary place of our relationship with God as the context within which we should relate to our neighbour, while also recognising that our relationship with our neighbour is the test of the truth of our relationship with God. For other statements of the necessary link between religion and justice see especially Isaiah 1:10-20; Jeremiah 7; Micah 6:6-8. The same point is made in the New Testament

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

– 1Corinthians 11:27-28

Christ has reconciled you in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before God.

– Colossians 1:22

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

– Romans 12:1-2

The ethical demands put forward by the psalmist are still relevant today, when public discourse is often used to shore up political power or economic interest with little regard for the truth, and when economic power serves the self-interest of the rich with little regard for the common good.

**¹YHWH*, who may
be a guest in your
tent? Who may live
on your holy moun-
tain?**

YHWH dwelt in a tent as he journeyed through the desert with his people (2Samuel 7:6). It was in this tent that Moses experienced intimate communion with YHWH (see Exodus 33:11). Solomon replaced it with a more permanent dwelling, the temple.

One thing I asked of YHWH, this is what I seek:
to live in the house of YHWH all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of YHWH, to admire his temple.

– Psalm 27:4

The story of Anna comes to mind as one who lived her days in God's temple (Luke 2:37).

For Christians, dwelling in God's tent is being part of the Church, the Body of Christ:

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any human being, has set up.

– Hebrews 8:1-2

When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

– Hebrews 9:11-12

Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

– Hebrews 10:19-22

The psalmist asks the question because worship has ethical demands:

‘With what shall I come before YHWH, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
Will YHWH be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’
He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does YHWH require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

– Micah 6:6-8

Those who walk righteously and speak uprightly, who despise the gain of oppression,
who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it,
who stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed
and shut their eyes from looking on evil, will live on the heights;
their refuge will be the fortresses of rocks;
their food will be supplied, their water assured.

– Isaiah 33:15-16

The psalmist begins to answer his own question in a very general way. Compare the following:

^{2a}The person who walks blamelessly,

One who walks in integrity will be safe,
but whoever follows crooked ways
will fall into the Pit.

– Proverbs 28:18

Nothing that is good does YHWH withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

– Psalm 84:11

Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

– Matthew 5:48

^{2b}and does what is right*

Though in English this, too, may sound rather general, the Hebrew is speaking of justice (Hebrew *sedeq*, טָדֵף). See the article ‘Just’ in the Introduction. The same teaching is found on the lips of Jesus:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.

– Matthew 5:6

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

^{2c}and speaks the truth from the heart*;

We might reflect on the following from the New Testament:

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.

– 1Peter 2:21-22

The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

– Luke 6:45

What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

– Matthew 15:18-19

The aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.

– 1Timothy 1:5

They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

– Revelation 14:4-5

³who does not slander with the tongue, and does no evil to a friend, and casts no slur on a neighbour;

The psalmist has just listed three things that we must do. Here he lists three things that we must *not* do.

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people.

– Leviticus 19:16

Who will set a guard over my mouth, and an effective seal upon my lips, so that I may not fall because of them, and my tongue may not destroy me?

– Sirach 22:27

He speaks again of what we must do. This first part of verse four represents two aspects of the one attitude – one that is considered a sign of being loyal to YHWH. We cannot be neutral but must choose to be with those who are in communion with God.

Do I not hate those who hate you, YHWH?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

– Psalm 139:21-22

Jesus, too, taught us to hate sin, but not the sinner. He taught us, rather, to love them out of their sin. See his response to the woman taken in adultery:

I do not condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.

– John 8:11

Listen, also, to his teaching:

Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

– Luke 6:35

For a reflection on how Jesus went beyond the teaching of Psalm 15 see the articles ‘Anger of God’ and ‘Fear of YHWH’ in the Introduction.

This is another positive thing we must do if we want to live in communion with God. Concerning oaths, listen to Jesus:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all ... Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

– Matthew 5:33-37

It would appear that some of Jesus’ contemporaries thought that one had to be truthful only when one backed up one’s statement with an oath. Jesus agrees with verse two: we should always ‘speak the truth from the heart’.

**‘who despises those
not approved by
God, and honours
those who fear*
YHWH;**

**who stands by an
oath, whatever the
cost.**

usury and bribes

**⁵who does not lend
money at interest**

Once again, having listed two things we must do, the psalmist lists two things that we must not do. His ten demands (five negative and five positive) mirror the Decalogue. The prohibition on exacting interest is found in the Torah:

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.

– Exodus 22:25

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit.

– Leviticus 25:35-37

On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest.

– Deuteronomy 23:20 (see Ezekiel 18:17)

**and does not accept a
bribe against the innocent.**

This teaching, too, is traditional:

You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

– Exodus 23:8

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

– Deuteronomy 16:19

Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them.

– Isaiah 1:23 (see Ezekiel 18:7-9)

**The one who does these
things shall never fail.**

We recall Jesus' words to the lawyer at the conclusion of his parable on the Good Samaritan:

Do this and you will live.

– Luke 10:28

Psalm 15 is echoed in the following from the Isaiah scroll.

Who among us can live with the devouring fire? Who among us can live with everlasting flames? Those will live on the heights who walk righteously and speak uprightly, who despise the gain of oppression, who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it, who stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed and shut their eyes from looking on evil. Their refuge will be the fortresses of rocks their food will be supplied, their water assured.

– Isaiah 33:14-16