

## Psalm 17

32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C  
Prayer during the Day Wednesday Week 1  
Office of Readings Common of a Martyr

This is an appeal to YHWH from a person who is suffering injustice. He asserts his innocence throughout and asks God to protect him by wiping out his enemies. He is praying at night (verse 3) and concludes with a confident assertion that in the morning (verse 15), YHWH will intervene in his favour. Note the close links with Psalm 16. The title reads: 'A prayer of David'. This is the first of only five psalms (Psalms 86, 90, 102, 142) that identify themselves in the title as a 'prayer' [Hebrew *təpillâ*, תְּפִלָּה].

**<sup>1</sup>Hear, YHWH\*, my appeal for justice\*; attend to my cry; listen to my plea. My lips are free of deception.**

**<sup>2</sup>Let my verdict\* come from you, for you can see that I am upright\*.**

The Psalmist wants God to intervene and pronounce a just verdict. See the article 'Judgment' in the Introduction. Others cannot be trusted.

The law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted ... Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.

– Habakkuk 1:4,7

The temple singers responsible for Isaiah 40-55 know that the one chosen to lead the people on their return to Jerusalem must be one committed to justice:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth a just verdict to the nations ... A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth a just verdict.

– Isaiah 42:1,3

**<sup>3</sup>Scutinise my heart\*; probe it by night; test me by fire; you will find no wickedness in me.**

**There is no error in what I have said <sup>4</sup>in regard to how people are behaving.**

**Following the instructions from your lips I have remained vigilant. Even on steep paths**

**<sup>5</sup>I have kept my footing. In your tracks my feet have not been unsteady.**

This text from the scroll of Isaiah is used to describe Jesus and his mission at the scene of his baptism in the Jordan (see Mark 1:11).

The psalmist knows that YHWH is not deceived by appearances, and so he confidently pleads his innocence. He is not exaggerating. Things are as bad as he is claiming. In spite of that he has remained steadfast.

Protection was sought in the temple. Joab sought asylum ('salvation') in YHWH's tent (see 1Kings 2:28-34). Asylum could also be sought in one of the special cities set aside for this purpose (see Numbers 35:9-29; Deuteronomy 19:1-13). In the final analysis only God is 'Saviour' [Hebrew *môšîa'*, מוֹשִׁיעַ]. See the article 'Saving Help' in the Introduction. The psalmist knows that the one he addresses as 'my God' is present and active in his life and will respond to his cry for help.

To entrust oneself to God's 'right hand' is to seek God's active and powerful intervention:

Your right hand, YHWH, glorious in power—  
your right hand, YHWH, shattered the enemy.

– Exodus 15:6

The psalmist moves from the language of a courtroom to a more personal appeal. The need to protect the eye is axiomatic:

YHWH sustained him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the pupil of his eye.

– Deuteronomy 32:10

'My life' at the end of verse nine translates the Hebrew *nepeî*. They do more than physically surround him; they give him no room to move, no space to live. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction. God was thought of as invisibly present on the throne of the ark of the covenant in the inner sanctuary of the temple. The throne (the 'cover' or 'mercy-seat') was protected by cherubim whose wings arched over it. To be hidden in the shade of YHWH's wings is to find refuge in intimate communion with God in the sanctuary.

The image of God protecting his people with outstretched wings, as of an eagle, may also be present here:

As an eagle stirs up its nest,  
and hovers over its young;  
as it spreads its wings, takes them up,  
and bears them aloft on its pinions,  
YHWH alone guided him.

– Deuteronomy 32:11

**<sup>6</sup>I call upon you, my God;  
answer me; attend to me,  
hear my voice.**

**<sup>7</sup>Show forth the wonders of  
your kindness\*, You who  
save\* from their enemies  
those who entrust them-  
selves to your right hand.**

**<sup>8</sup>Guard me as the pupil of  
your eye; hide me in the  
shade of your wings  
<sup>9</sup>from the wicked who at-  
tack me, from my deadly  
enemies who hunt me  
down to take my life\*.**

Protect the oppressed

**<sup>10</sup>They lack all feeling.  
Their speech is arrogant.**

**<sup>11</sup>They track me down  
and hem me in. They fix  
their eyes on me, deter-  
mined to cast me to the  
ground.**

**<sup>12</sup>They are like a lion ea-  
ger for prey, like a young  
lion lurking in ambush.**

**<sup>13</sup>Rise up, YHWH, con-  
front them, overthrow  
them! With your sword  
snatch me\* away from  
the wicked.**

**<sup>14</sup>Kill them, YHWH. Kill  
them with your own  
hand. Let them not share  
the heritage of the living.**

**Fill the stomachs of  
those you protect. May  
their children be satis-  
fied. May they have more  
than enough for their  
little ones.**

The image employed by the psalmist in the first part of verse ten in the Hebrew text includes the word 'fat'. He seems to be making the point that his accusers are so well fed with the fat of the land that they have no room inside for finer feelings. Compare the following:

Their hearts are fat and gross, but I delight in your law.

– Psalm 119:70

They have covered their faces with their fat, and gath-  
ered fat upon their loins.

– Job 15:27

He prays to be rescued as from a ravenous lion. The 'me' in verse thirteen translates the Hebrew *nepeï*. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction. He wants to be physically safe, but he also wants to experience energy, hope and vitality again. The text of verse fourteen is obscure. The translation offered is that suggested by Luis Alonso Schökel SJ. He changes the substantive 'mortals' to the verb 'make them mortal' ('kill them'). Jesus taught us a better response to our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

The psalmist thinks now of those who are supporting him. He pleads with YHWH to protect and care for them and for their children. Compare the following:

They thank YHWH for his kindness,  
for the wonderful things he has done for humankind.  
For he satisfies the thirsty,  
and the hungry he fills with good things.

– Psalm 107:8-9

I would feed you with the finest of the wheat,  
and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.

– Psalm 81:16

He gave them food from heaven in abundance.

– Psalm 105:40

I will abundantly bless its provisions;  
I will satisfy its poor with bread.

– Psalm 132:15

The Psalmist will be satisfied only by intimate communion with God and he knows that only the just can ‘behold’ (Hebrew *hāzâ*, הָזָה) God’s face.

YHWH is just, and he loves justice.  
The upright shall *behold* his face.

– Psalm 11:7

‘Seeing you’ is an attempt to translate the Hebrew *t’mûnâ* (‘visible form’). This is the only time it occurs in the psalms.

See especially the extraordinary statement ending the scene where Moses and the elders dare to approach YHWH on the sacred mountain:

God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel. They *beheld* God. They ate and drank.

– Exodus 24:11

The classical text upon which he is drawing is in the Book of Exodus where Moses is described as seeing beyond the other prophets in experiencing a special intimacy with YHWH:

When there are prophets among you,  
I YHWH make myself known to them in visions;  
I speak to them in dreams.  
Not so with my servant Moses;  
he is entrusted with all my house.  
With him I speak face to face —  
clearly, not in riddles;  
and he beholds the form of YHWH.

– Numbers 12:6-8

See the commentary on Psalm 11:7, ‘the upright shall behold his face’.

The psalmist is confident that he can sleep in peace and when he wakens to face trial, God will reveal himself and make sure that justice is done. In this way God will reveal his presence and the psalmist will behold the ‘likeness’ of YHWH. See the article ‘Resurrection and After-life’ in the Introduction for a study of the development of these ideas in ancient Israel.

Verse fifteen has an even deeper meaning for us who hope to share in the risen glory of Jesus when we awake from the sleep of death.

**<sup>15</sup>As for me, because I have  
been righteous\* I shall be-  
hold your face;  
when I awake, seeing you, I  
will be satisfied.**