

Psalm 40

2nd Sunday Year A; 2nd Sunday Year B;
20th Sunday Year C

Prayer during the Day Monday Week 2
Office of Readings for the Dead

The psalmist sings in praise of YHWH who has ‘drawn me from the desolate pit’. His need for help continues and he admits that it is his own sins that are largely responsible for his suffering. He has come to see that what God wants from him, more than anything else, is that he embrace God’s will in his heart. The title reads: ‘To the leader. Of David. A Psalm*’

¹I anxiously waited for YHWH*; he stooped down to me and heard my cry.

²He drew me up from the desolate pit, from the miry bog. He set my feet upon a rock and made my steps secure.

^{3a}He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.

^{3b}Many will see and fear*, and put their trust* in YHWH.

⁴Happy* are those who have placed their trust* in YHWH, who do not turn to idolatry, caught up in illusion.

⁵How many wonderful things you have done, YHWH my God, how many things you have thought up to favour us. There is no one like you. I am tempted to recount them, but they surpass anything I could say.

This recalls a scene from Jeremiah:

They took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king’s son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.

– Jeremiah 38:6; see 38:11-13

The psalmist is speaking of the mire of sin. Paul gives voice to the cry of sinful humanity:

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

– Romans 7:24

God’s liberating action was such as to inspire in him a song of praise.

The Psalmist passes from personal experience to a general reflection. There is an echo of these verses also in Jeremiah:

Blessed are those who trust in YHWH.

– Jeremiah 17:7

The Psalmist passes from speaking about YHWH to speaking to God. This forms a bridge with the rest of the psalm. From what God has done he wants to discern God’s design for him.

On YHWH’s thoughts towards us see Psalm 33. That no one can compare to YHWH see Baruch:

This is our God, no one can be compared to him.

– Baruch 3:35 (also Psalm 35:10)

Part Two

The psalmist declares his commitment to carry out God's call to witness to his personal experience of God's justice and uprightness, truth and saving action, covenant love and fidelity, and God's compassion. He speaks first of what God delights in and what the psalmist delights in, of what God has done and what the psalmist longs to do.

God has dug through the blocked ear to open up a path for his word into the very centre of the psalmist's being.

YHWH God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. YHWH God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.

– Isaiah 50:4-5

In quoting this verse the Letter to the Hebrews 10:5 follows the Greek Septuagint, which instead of 'ear' has 'body' (sōma), the part ('ear') being taken for the whole ('body'). The image in the Greek is of the creator digging the body out of clay.

He knows that the cult is not enough for him. God is calling him to a special vocation.

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

– Hosea 6:6 (quoted Matthew 9:13 and 12:5)

Samuel said, 'Has YHWH as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of YHWH? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.'

– 1 Samuel 15:22

The psalmist is expressing a radical willingness to make God's will his own. See Hebrews 10:7 where this passage is quoted. God's word has penetrated into his stomach, there to be digested!

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, YHWH, God of hosts.

– Jeremiah 15:16

He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.

– Ezekiel 3:1-3

^{6a}Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have dug out my ear.

^{6b}You have not asked for burnt offerings or sin offerings.

⁷And so I say: 'Here I am.'

In the scroll of the book it is written of me

⁸that I am to carry out your will.

O my God, I long to do it. Your law is within, in the depths of my being.

⁹I proclaim good news of justice* to the great congregation.

See, I have not restrained my lips. You know this, YHWH.

¹⁰I have not kept your justice* hidden within my heart*.

I have spoken of your faithfulness and your saving help*;

I have not concealed your kindness* and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

The ‘congregation’[Hebrew qāhāl, קָהָל] is the people assembled in response to God’s call. In verse nine the Greek Septuagint translates ekklēsia (translated ‘church’ in the New Testament), and in verse ten the Greek Septuagint translates synagogē (‘synagogue’). ‘Proclaim good news’ is translated in the Greek Septuagint by the verb euangelizō (‘proclaim good news/gospel’).

God’s will is for the psalmist to give public witness to his religious experience and herald the good news of who YHWH is and of YHWH’s saving action. Compare the following:

Sing to YHWH, bless his name;
day after day proclaim his salvation.

– Psalm 96:2

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’

– Isaiah 40:9

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’

– Isaiah 52:7

The spirit of YHWH God is upon me, because YHWH has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.

– Isaiah 61:1

He is determined to carry out God’s will whatever the difficulties involved. Once again we are reminded of Jeremiah:

Whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’ For the word of YHWH has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

– Jeremiah 20:8-9

Part Three. A prayer

The psalmist, knowing that the mission given to him by God involves risk, prays for God's protection and help (compare Jeremiah's concerns in Jeremiah 1). The risk in heralding good news reminds us of the prophet of the exile, portrayed as YHWH's Suffering Servant (Isaiah 50:4-9). We think also of Moses.

¹¹**YHWH, do not withhold your tender compassion* from me; let your kindness* and your faithfulness keep me safe always.**

¹²**For evils have encompassed me without number; my guilty* deeds have overtaken me, until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart* fails me.**

Psalm 40:13-17 is found also in Psalm 70. The slight variations are noted.

Psalm 70:1 reads:

*'O God, please free me.
YHWH, make haste to help me!'*

The psalmist prays that those who are opposing him will fail. Psalm 70:2 is identical with Psalm 40:14.

¹³**YHWH, please free me;
YHWH, make haste to help me.**

¹⁴**Let all those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion. Let those who desire to harm me be repulsed and brought to dishonour .**

Psalm 70:3 reads:

*'Let those who say to me 'Aha! Aha!
be turned back in shame.'*

Note the contrast. He speaks here of those who seek God (not those who seek his life); those who desire the psalmist's salvation (not his harm); those who proclaim: 'YHWH is great'(not 'Aha'). Psalm 70:4 has 'Great is *God!*'

¹⁵**Let those who say to me
'Aha! Aha!' remain aghast because of their shame.**

¹⁶**May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your saving* presence say continually, 'Great is YHWH!'**

Psalm 70:5 reads:

*'I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God!
You are my help and my deliverer;
YHWH, do not delay!'*

¹⁷**As for me, I am poor* and needy*, but the Lord thinks of me. You are my help and my deliverer. O my God, do not delay.**