

Psalm 50

19th Sunday Year A

Office of Readings Monday Week 3 and Saturday Week 4

This is a psalm composed for the penitential liturgy. God is accusing his people of their failure to keep the covenant. There are many allusions to the Sinai Covenant. Psalm 51 follows as the second part of the liturgy, in which the people acknowledge their sin and ask for pardon. There are many verbal connections between the two psalms. The title reads: ‘A Psalm* of Asaph*’. See the article ‘Asaph’ in the Introduction. Before ministering in the Jerusalem temple, this guild of singers and musicians may have come from the sanctuary of Bethel eighteen kilometres north of Jerusalem.

Part One. The setting

The psalm opens with words of extraordinary power. ‘The mighty God’ translates the Hebrew ’āl [אֵל], the high god of the Semites. This is followed by the special Israelite word for God ’ēlōhīm [אֱלֹהִים], a plural form, perhaps claiming that their God has all the qualities of the other gods put together. Finally comes YHWH, the word used in personal address of the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

All peoples are summoned – all upon whom the sun shines from east to west!

See the commentary on Psalm 48:2

Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?

– Lamentations 2:15

My sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and your heart’s desire.

– Ezekiel 24:21

Our holy place, our beauty and our glory.

– 1Maccabees 2:12

The language brings to mind the splendour of God on Mount Sinai:

They saw the God of Israel, beneath whose feet there was, it seemed, a sapphire pavement pure as the heavens themselves.

– Exodus 24:10

We think of the beauty of the church, the bride of Christ (Revelation 19:6-8; 21-22).

**¹The mighty God, God
YHWH*, speaks, summoning
the earth from the rising of the
sun to its setting.**

**²Out of Zion, the perfection of
beauty, God shines forth.**

Summoned to judgement

³Our God is coming and does not keep silence.

Before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest surrounds him.

YHWH answered Job out of the whirlwind.

– Job 38:1

The mountains will melt under him and the valleys will burst open, like wax near the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.

– Micah 4:1

Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; justice and right judgment are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before YHWH, the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory.

– Psalm 97:2-6

We recall the theophany on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16-20).

⁴From on high he summons the heavens and the earth to judge his people.

God is summoning the heavens and the earth to witness to the justice of his judgment. Compare the following:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today.

– Deuteronomy 4:26

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

– Deuteronomy 32:1

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for YHWH has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.

– Isaiah 1:2

⁵Gather to me those bound to me, those who made a covenant* with me by sacrifice.'

'Those bound to me' are those who owe fidelity to God, the *ḥāsîdî*, [חֲסִידִי], God's vassals who have entered into a covenant relationship with God, a commitment of love (*ḥesed*) to which God is faithful. As the psalm progresses we will see that *they* are anything but faithful. The covenant is renewed by each generation.

Not with our ancestors did YHWH make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.

– Deuteronomy 5:3

⁶The heavens declare his justice*, for God is coming in person as judge. [Selah*]

Compare the convocation on Sinai (Exodus 19:4-8), the covenant, and the sacrifices that sealed the Sinai covenant (Exodus 24:5-8).

Part Two. God accuses his people

God opens the case. On Sinai God declared:

I am YHWH your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

– Exodus 20:2

They are fulfilling all their cultic obligations. God has nothing of which to accuse them on that score. But cult and sacrifices cannot substitute for a genuine relationship with God. They are guilty of injustice. We cannot carry out our religious duties, and use that to bribe God into silence.

This is a message that is frequently found in the oracles of the prophets. See Isaiah 1:10-20; Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 7; Amos 5:18-26; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-9; Zechariah 7; Sirach 34:18 - 35:21.

To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to YHWH than sacrifice.

– Proverbs 21:3

Compare the words spoken by God on Mount Sinai:

Indeed, the whole earth is mine.

– Exodus 19:5

The ‘confession’ mentioned in verse fourteen is a humble confessing of sin. Compare:

If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors: if their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob. I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

– Leviticus 26:40-42 (see also Numbers 5:7)

After such a confession we can fulfil our vows (including sacrifice - see Psalm 51:17-19).

God who is accusing them is YHWH, our redeemer God.

⁷Listen, my people, for I will speak; O Israel, I testify against you. I am God, your God.

⁸Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me.

⁹Do not bring me a bullock from your house, or goats from your folds,

¹⁰for every wild animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle in their thousands on my mountains.

¹¹I know all the birds of the air; all that moves in the field is at my disposal.

¹²If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine.

¹³Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?

¹⁴Offer to God a sacrifice of confession and pay your vows to the Most High.

¹⁵Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify* me.

**¹⁶But to the wicked God says:
What right have you to recite
my commandments, or take my
covenant* on your lips,**

**¹⁷you who hate discipline, and
cast my words behind you?**

**¹⁸You make friends with a thief
when you see one, and you keep
company with adulterers.**

**¹⁹You give your mouth free rein
for evil, and your tongue plots
deceit.**

**²⁰You sit and speak against your
kin; you slander your own moth-
er's child.**

**²¹These things you have done
and should I be silent? Do you
think that I am just like you? I
will accuse you to your face.**

**²²Mark this, you who forget God:
I will not tear you to shreds
without offering a way out.**

**²³Those who bring confession as
their sacrifice honour me. I will
see that those who correct their
conduct will enjoy the salvation*
of God.**

This is God's accusation. They assert their loyalty to the commandments that were etched in stone at Sinai and they speak of the covenant.

Moses came and told the people all the words of YHWH and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words that YHWH has spoken we will do.

– Exodus 24:3 (also 24:7 and 19:7-8)

Our relationship with God is tested by our relationship with others. In the decalogue we are commanded not to kill, not to destroy through adultery the marriage relationship which is at the basis of family life, not to deprive others of the material things which they need to live properly, and not to accuse others falsely (Exodus 20:13-16).

They recite the decalogue, but in practice they ignore it. The command not to kill is not mentioned in this psalm, but all the others are.

You have set our guilt before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

– Psalm 90:8

So I will become like a lion to them, like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them. I will destroy you, O Israel; who can help you?

– Hosea 13:7-9

Then Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to YHWH God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.'

– Joshua 7:19

Note that God is accusing them so that they may acknowledge the truth and be saved:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says YHWH God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?

– Ezekiel 18:23 (see Zechariah 12:10; and Hosea 11:9)