

## Psalm 54

25th Sunday Year B

Prayer during the Day Tuesday Week 2

This is a psalm of supplication (verse 2), composed in a traditional style and with little poetic inspiration. The psalmist appeals to the divine tribunal for the justice that his enemies are denying him. He appeals to God's reputation as a just judge, to God's ultimate authority and faithfulness. The Fathers associate this prayer with Jesus facing his death but trusting in God to vindicate him. The title reads: 'To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Maskil\* of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, 'David is in hiding among us.' The scene is found in 1Samuel 23:19.

**<sup>1</sup>O God, by your honour save\*  
me, by your might be my  
judge.**

**<sup>2</sup>Hear my prayer, O God; be  
attentive to my words.**

**<sup>3</sup>For the insolent rise up  
against me, the ruthless seek  
my life; they have no regard  
for God.**

[Selah\*]

'Being' translates the Hebrew *nepeš*. More than his physical life is at stake. See the article 'Being' in the Introduction.

Verse five is not included in the psalm as prayed in the Christian liturgy. It is an example of a sentiment that is recognised as having been transcended in the teaching of Jesus who commands us to love our enemies, not seek vengeance against them. At the conclusion of the commentary on this psalm there are some statements from the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the need to reinterpret the Old Testament in the light of the revelation of Jesus. We think of Jesus' words:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

— Matthew 5:43-45

**<sup>4</sup>But surely, God is my helper;  
the Lord is the upholder of my  
being\*.**

**<sup>5</sup>The evil that my enemies  
carry out will turn back upon  
them.**

**In your faithfulness, put an  
end to them.**

**‘With a freewill offering I will  
sacrifice to you;**

**I will give thanks to you,  
YHWH\*, for you are good,**

**7when you have delivered me  
from every trouble, and my  
eye has looked in triumph on  
my enemies.**

A ‘freewill offering’ [n<sup>e</sup>dāb, נֶדָבָה] is one freely offered by someone outside the regular sacrificial system required by law. The psalmist is pleading for justice, not based on any qualities of his own (the prayer is simple and sincere), but based on God’s honour as judge, God’s authority and power to vindicate, God’s faithfulness to justice.

O God, the insolent rise up against me;  
a band of ruffians seeks my life,  
with no thought of you.

But you, O Lord, are a God  
tenderly compassionate and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding  
in kindness and faithfulness.

Turn to me and be gracious to me;  
give your strength to your servant;  
save the child of your serving girl.

Show me a sign of your favour,  
so that those who hate me  
may see it and be put to shame,  
because you, YHWH, help me  
and comfort me.

– Psalm 86:14-17

In inspiring the psalmist to compose his prayers, and in inspiring the community to welcome them, treasure them and hand them on, God is inspiring real people with all their limitations of insight and language. We should pray the psalms with Jesus who guides us to distinguish what comes from prayer from what comes from the limited views of the writers. The Pontifical Biblical Commission in a declaration entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) states:

‘There is mutual illumination and a progress that is dialectic: what becomes clear is that Scripture reveals the meaning of events and that events reveal the meaning of Scripture, that is, they require that certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted’(pages 91-92).

‘The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding’(page 94).

‘The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute’( page 113).

‘Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language. Proper respect for inspired Scripture requires undertaking all the labours necessary to gain a thorough grasp of its meaning’(page 133).