

Psalm 79

Prayer during the Day Thursday Week 3

The Holy Land has been devastated by an invading army. The psalmist pleads with God to defend God's honour by intervening to save his people and punish the invaders. A likely setting for this psalm is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar in 587BC. Comparisons can be made with Psalms 44, 74 and 102, but note here the explicit confession of sin (79:9). It is important to read the article 'Anger of YHWH' in the Introduction, which treats also of God's so-called 'punishment'. The title reads: 'A Psalm* of Asaph*.'

Part One. The destruction of the city and the temple

¹O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance.

The Israelites saw themselves as the special possession of God:

You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, YHWH, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.

– Exodus 15:17

Our inheritance is from God,
our pride given to Jacob out of love.

– Psalm 47:4

They have defiled your holy temple, they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.

Enemies have stretched out their hands over all her precious things; she has even seen the nations invade her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation.

– Lamentations 1:10

Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.

– Micah 3:12

²They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth.

The 'faithful' are the *ḥāsîdîm* [חַסִּדִּים]: those who are faithful to God's loving-kindness and to the covenant. Verses two and three are quoted in 1 Maccabees 7:17 in relation to the destruction brought about by the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, in 168BC. See also 1 Maccabees 1:37-40 and 2:10-13; Revelation 11:7-9.

³They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them.

All your enemies open their mouths against you; they hiss, they gnash their teeth, they cry: 'We have devoured her! Ah, this is the day we longed for; at last we have seen it!'

– Lamentation 2:16

⁴We have become a taunt to our neighbours, mocked and derided by those around us.

It seems unfair that the punishment is out of proportion to their sin.

Part Two. When is God going to turn his anger against the enemy?

It seems unfair, too, that the enemy triumphs even though they do not honour YHWH. Verses six and seven are not used in the Mass or the Divine Office. The pharaoh is a classical example of one who did not know YHWH:

Pharaoh said, 'Who is YHWH, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know YHWH, and I will not let Israel go.'

– Exodus 5:2

YHWH, YHWH, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

– Exodus 34:6

As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so YHWH has compassion for those who fear him.

– Psalm 103:12-13

'Forgive' in verse nine translates the Hebrew kipper [כִּפֶּר]. The image is of the high priest seeking forgiveness for the people before the mercy-seat of YHWH in the inner sanctuary. It is sometimes translated by 'expiate' or 'atone'.

The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is *forgiven*.'

– Isaiah 6:7 (also 22:14)

By this the guilt of Jacob will be *expiated*, and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin.

– Isaiah 27:9

The following texts speak of confession of sin: Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9-10; Daniel 3,9; Baruch 2:15 - 3:8.

God's 'name' is YHWH, the God of the Exodus, the God who redeems those caught in slavery. When others witness God's forgiveness of Judah, they will honour and praise God.

⁵How long, YHWH*? Will you be angry* forever? Will your jealous wrath* burn like fire? ⁶Pour out your anger* on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.

⁷For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation.

⁸Do not hold against us the guilt of our ancestors. Let your tender compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low.

⁹Help us, O God of our salvation*, for the glory* of your name. Deliver us, and forgive our sins*, for your name's sake.

Part Three. A final plea

**¹⁰Why should the nations
say, 'Where is their God?'**

Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of YHWH, weep. Let them say, 'Spare your people, YHWH, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?"'

– Joel 2:17

Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, 'Where is YHWH your God?' My eyes will see her downfall; now she will be trodden down like the mire of the streets.

– Micah 7:10

My tears have been my food by day and by night, as they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God? ... My enemies taunt me, as they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'

– Psalm 42:3,10

Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'

– Psalm 115:2

**Let us see you punishing
the nations, avenging the
poured out blood of your
servants.**

On the subject of vengeance see Numbers 35:9-34.

Praise, O heavens, his people, worship him, all you gods! For he will avenge the blood of his children, and take vengeance on his adversaries. He will repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people.

– Deuteronomy 32:43

You shall strike down the house of your master Ahab, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of YHWH.

– 2Kings 9:7

When they resolved to kill the infants of your holy ones ... you in punishment took away a multitude of their children; and you destroyed them all.

– Wisdom 18:5 (referring to Egypt)

Surely there is a reward for the just;
surely there is a God who judges on earth.

– Psalm 58:11

Verse 12 is not used in the Mass or the Divine Office.

Remember, YHWH, the Edomites on the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!' O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

– Psalm 137:7-9

On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them. But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune. You should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin. You should not have boasted on the day of distress. You should not have entered the gate of my people on the day of their calamity. You should not have joined in the gloating over Judah's disaster on the day of his calamity. You should not have looted his goods on the day of his calamity. You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives. You should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress.

– Obadiah 11-14

The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter Zion, is accomplished, he will keep you in exile no longer. But your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish, he will uncover your sins.

– Lamentations 4:22

'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!' says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 23:1

'You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God', says YHWH God.

– Ezekiel 34:31

Why do you blaze with anger against the sheep of your pasture?

– Psalm 74:1

He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep he feeds by hand.

– Psalm 95:7

Know that YHWH is God. He that made us, we belong to him. We are his people, the sheep of his fold.

– Psalm 100:3

¹¹Let the groans of the prisoners come before you.

According to your great power preserve those doomed to die.

¹²Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbours the taunts with which they taunted you, O Lord!

¹³Then we your people, the flock of your pasture, will give endless thanks to you.

From generation to generation we will continue to praise you.