

Psalm 80

1st Advent Year B; 4th Advent Year C
27th Sunday Year A
Morning Prayer Thursday Week 2
Prayer during the Day Thursday Week 3

This psalm was composed at a time of national military disaster in the northern kingdom, a disaster interpreted as a sign of God's punishment. See the article 'Anger of YHWH' in the Introduction. The occasion may have been the collapse of Samaria (721BC). There are also echoes of the Philistine victories over Saul. Note mention of the Ark (verse 1) and 'right hand' (verse 17). Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin ('son of the right hand'). The psalmist is pleading with God to turn back to his people in love. 'Then we will never turn back from you' (verse 18). The title reads: 'To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant*. Of Asaph*. A Psalm*.'

The first key image in the psalm is the shepherd. God is called 'Shepherd of Israel' (verse 1; compare Psalm 23) – the only time this is used as a title for God. A Christian reading thinks of Jesus:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

– John 10:11

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

– Luke 15:4

You were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

– 1Peter 2:25

The second key image is the vine (verse 8). Compare Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2-5; Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10; Ezekiel 17:5-10; 19:10-14. Again we think of Jesus:

He will come and give the vineyard to others.

– Mark 12:9

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.

– John 15:1

¹Listen, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock, you who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

²before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, Come and save* us!

The tribe of Joseph occupied the northern hill country, south of the valley of Esdraelon, and was separated from Judah by the small tribe of Benjamin. In the biblical narrative, Joseph and Benjamin were the sons of Jacob and Rachel. The tribe of Joseph was so large that it was divided into Ephraim and Manasseh, sons of Joseph adopted by Jacob (Genesis 48; Psalm 77:15).

The cover of the ark in the Holy of Holies was considered YHWH's throne. It was guarded by two cherubim (1Kings 6; Ezekiel 9-10; 2Kings 19:15; 2Samuel 22:11).

Verse three functions as a refrain (see verses seven and nineteen). Is the psalmist praying that the kingdom will be restored, or that the people may be restored from exile? Or is he praying that God will bring about repentance? See the article 'Face of God' in the Introduction. The psalmist is praying that God will look favourable on the nation.

The present calamity

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

– Isaiah 1:15-17

They are scorned by enemy and neighbour alike.

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

– Psalm 42:3

I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink.

– Psalm 102:9

This refrain is repeated from verse three, with the addition of 'of hosts'. See also verse nineteen.

The former prosperity of the vine

Though archeology has shown otherwise, the biblical account portrays God as driving out the people of Canaan to make way for his chosen people (see Exodus 23:28-31; Joshua 24:12).

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

– Exodus 15:17 (see Amos 9:15)

Israel, the humble vine, triumphed over the neighbouring powers (see Isaiah 2:12-13).

³*Restore us, O God; let your face* shine forth and we will be saved*.*

⁴**YHWH* God of hosts*, how long will you be angry* while your people plead with you?**

⁵**You have fed them with tears to eat, given them tears to drink in full measure.**

⁶**You make us the scorn of our neighbours and our enemies laugh among themselves.**

⁷*Restore us, O God of hosts*; let your face* shine forth and we will be saved*.*

⁸**You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.**

⁹**You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.**

¹⁰**The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.**

¹¹**It sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the Great River.**

Let your face shine on us

The present calamity (80:12-13)

**¹²Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along
the way pluck its fruit?**

**¹³The boar from the forest
ravages it, and all that move
in the field feed on it.**

**¹⁴Turn again, O God of
hosts*; look down from
heaven, and see; have re-
gard for this vine,**

**¹⁵the stock that your right
hand planted.**

**¹⁶They have burned it with
fire, they have cut it down.
May they perish at the re-
buke of your countenance.**

**¹⁷But let your hand be upon
the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made
strong for yourself.**

**¹⁸Then we will never turn
back from you. Give us life,
and we will call on your
name.**

**¹⁹Restore us, YHWH God of
hosts*; let your face* shine
forth and we will be saved***

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

– Isaiah 5:4-5

I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?

– Jeremiah 2:21

This is a variation on the refrain of verses three, seven and nineteen.

An oracle of YHWH to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’

– Psalm 110:1

Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

– Isaiah 41:10

I have found in David a servant, and I have anointed him with my holy oil. My hand will always remain with him and my arm will strengthen him.

– Psalm 89:20-21

YHWH is added to the refrain (compare verses 3 and 7). God’s face shines upon us through the eyes of Jesus.

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

– John 14:9

He is the reflection of God’s glory.

– Hebrews 1:3

While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

– Luke 9:29

It is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

– 2Corinthians 4:6