

Psalm 89

Christmas Vigil; St Joseph; Mass of Chrism
13th Sunday Year A; 4th Sunday of Advent Year B
1-37: Office of Readings Wednesday Week 3 and 30th December
38-52: Office of Readings Thursday Week 3

At a tragic time for the Davidic dynasty (see verse 38) – perhaps the death of Josiah in 609 (2Kings 23:28-30), or the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 – the psalmist expresses his faith in God's mighty deeds as Creator and in the commitment made to David (verses 1-37). This leads into a prayer of supplication (verses 38-51). The psalm seems also to be modelled on 2Samuel 7.

If the psalm was composed during the exile that followed on the capture of Jerusalem, it may draw for some of its cosmic imagery on the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian Hymn to Marduk, which speaks of cosmic sovereignty, enthronement, homage from other gods, and victory over the ocean Tiamat.

The words *hesed* (kindness) and *'mûnâ* (faithfulness/truth) recur throughout the psalm. The basis of faith and of trust is God's promise (covenant, verses 3, 28, 34 and 39). God rules heaven and has promised that this power will be exercised on earth through his vassal king David (verses 3, 20, 35 and 49), the beneficiary of God's loving choice (verses 3, 28, 34 and 39) whose throne would continue through his descendants (verses 4, 14, 29, 36 and 44). The dynasty would be stable (verses 2, 4, 21 and 27) and would last for ever (verses 1, 2, 4, 28, 36 and 37).

The psalmist does not doubt God's faithfulness (verses 33-37). How long will it be, then, before YHWH intervenes on behalf of the Davidic king?(verse 46). The title reads: 'A Maskil* of Ethan the Ezrahite'. Ethan is mentioned along with Asaph and Heman as being among the musicians in David's court:

The singers Heman, Asaph, and Ethan were to sound bronze cymbals.

– 1Chronicles 15:19

¹I will sing forever of your kindness*, YHWH. I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.

²I declare that your kindness* is established in the heavens; there your faithfulness is fixed.

³You said: 'I have made a covenant* with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David:

⁴I will establish your dynasty forever. I will ensure your throne throughout the ages.'

What is established in the heavens guarantees (whatever the present appearances) what has been established on earth.

Is not my house like this with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?

– 2Samuel 23:5

Part One. God's action in creation (89:5-18)

The 'holy ones' refers to divine beings (see Job 5:1; 15:15; Deuteronomy 33:3; Zechariah 14:5). Psalm 82 reflects the same mentality. As monotheism strengthened the 'gods' were thought of more as 'angels' (compare the 'holy angels' of Luke 9:26).

'To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?' says the Holy One.

– Isaiah 40:25

References to the divine 'council' can be found in Jeremiah 23:18,22 and Job 15:8. On God as inspiring awe see Psalm 76 and Isaiah 2:9-19.

It is hard to read verse 9 without thinking of Jesus calming the sea (Mark 4:39-41). Tradition tells us that the Gospel of Mark was inspired by Peter. The point of the Gospel story is to recall this statement of Psalm 89 (and a number of other passages), and to draw us to see God working in the ministry of Jesus to bring order to our chaotic world.

Rahab, the mythological sea serpent or dragon, is mentioned also in Psalm 87:4 (see Isaiah 51:9).

Mount Tabor (see Jeremiah 46:18) is located in the north-east corner of the valley of Jezreel, not far from the lake of Galilee. Mount Hermon (see Psalm 133:3 and the Song of Solomon 4:8) rises at the northern boundary of Galilee.

⁵Let the heavens proclaim your wonders, YHWH, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.

⁶For who in the skies can be compared to YHWH? Who is like YHWH among the heavenly beings.

⁷God is feared in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome throughout his court.

⁸YHWH God of hosts*, who is like you? Your power, YHWH, and your faithfulness surround you.

⁹You rule over the arrogance of the sea; you tame its swelling waves.

¹⁰You pierced and crushed Rahab. You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

¹¹The heavens are yours; yours is the earth; the world and all that is in it – you have established it all!

¹²You created the north and the south; Tabor and Hermon joyously acclaim your name.

God's justice

¹³You have a mighty arm; your left hand is strong, your right hand is raised.

¹⁴Justice* and right judgment* are the foundation of your throne; kindness* and faithfulness go before you.

You passed judgment in my favour,
seated on the throne, O just judge.

– Psalm 9:4

Justice and right judgment are the
foundation of his throne.

– Psalm 97:2

It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the
throne is established by righteousness.

– Proverbs 16:12

Loyalty and faithfulness preserve the king, and
his throne is upheld by righteousness.

– Proverbs 20:28

Take away the wicked from the presence of the
king, and his throne will be established in right-
eousness.

– Proverbs 25:5

If a king judges the poor with equity, his throne
will be established forever.

– Proverbs 29:14

¹⁵Happy* are the people who acclaim you. YHWH, they will walk in the light of your countenance.

¹⁶Your name is their constant joy, your justice* is the subject of their boast.

¹⁷For you are their glory* and their strength. It is through your grace that we are exalted.

¹⁸For our shield belongs to YHWH, our king to the Holy One of Israel.

We have been contemplating the lordship of YHWH in creation. Here we look at people's response. Verse 15 and Psalm 144:15 are the only times that a beatitude refers to 'the people'.

Happy are the people to whom such blessings fall; happy are the people whose God is YHWH.

– Psalm 144:15

It is YHWH's anointed king who is to protect Israel. He does so through the power of YHWH.

Part Two. God's action in history (89:19-37)

compare Psalm 2, Psalm 18:20-27 and Psalm 110

**¹⁹Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said:
'I have set a royal crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted a soldier from the troop.**

Is he referring to David's victory over Goliath, where David fought:

that all this assembly may know that YHWH does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is YHWH's and he will give you into our hand.

– 1Samuel 17:47

This is quoted in Acts 13:22. For the account of Samuel anointing David in his father's house see 1Samuel 16.

This psalm continues the dream of a kingdom extending from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates (see 1Kings 5:1; Zechariah 9:10; Psalm 80:12; Micah 7:11).

You are my son; today I have begotten you.

– Psalm 2:7

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

– 2Samuel 7:14

Israel is referred to as God's first born:

Thus says YHWH: Israel is my first born son.

– Exodus 4:22

It is this truth that lies behind the story of God choosing Israel and rejecting the first born of the Egyptians in the so-called tenth plague of Egypt (Exodus 4:23). Verse 27 is quoted in the Book of Revelation 1:5.

God's love is offered unconditionally. However, as the following verses indicate, God's love is not forced upon anyone. We are free to welcome it in faith, or to reject it. The consequences of rejection are now spelt out as though they are divine punishment. They are, however, the results of the abuse of human free will.

²⁰I have found in David a servant, and I have anointed him with my holy oil.

²¹My hand will always remain with him and my arm will strengthen him.

²²The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him.

²³I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him.

²⁴My faithfulness and kindness* shall escort him, and in my name his horn shall be exalted.

²⁵I will extend his left hand as far as the sea and his right hand as far as the Great River.

²⁶He shall call to me: 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation*!'

²⁷I will nominate him my first born, the highest of the kings of the earth.

²⁸I will maintain towards him my eternal kindness*, and my covenant* with him will stand firm.

²⁹I will establish his line forever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure.

God's chosen king

³⁰**If his children forsake my law* and do not walk according to my ordinances,**
³¹**if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments,**
³²**then I will punish* their transgression* with the rod and their guilt* with scourges;**
³³**but I will not remove from him my kindness*, or be false to my faithfulness.**
³⁴**I will not violate my covenant*, or alter the word that I have spoken.**

³⁵**Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness that I will not fall short of what I have promised to David.**
³⁶**His line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun.**
³⁷**It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies.**

Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?
– Malachi 2:10

They do not amend their ways, nor do they fear God. They raised their hand against one who was bound to them by covenant, this violating their pledge.
– Psalm 55:19-20

I will never break my covenant with you.
– Judges 2:1

Note the connection here between God's kindness and the covenant.

It is the hope expressed in these verses that led to the longing for a Messiah, once the Davidic line had come to an end after the destruction of Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 33:15-21). Different Jewish groups had different ways of envisioning the promised Messiah. Jesus' disciples saw him as the fulfilment of these hopes.

Part Three. The throne has been torn down(89:38-45)

Thus says YHWH: 'I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted.'

– Jeremiah 45:4

Just as YHWH took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so YHWH will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction. You shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to possess.

– Deuteronomy 28:63

If you forsake YHWH and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.

– Joshua 24:20

Since there is no mention of fault in relation to the king, the psalmist may be referring to the death of the saintly Josiah in 609BC. Compare the following:

He leads counsellors away stripped, and makes fools of judges. He looses the sash of kings, and binds a waist cloth on their loins. He leads priests away stripped, and overthrows the mighty. He deprives of speech those who are trusted, and takes away the discernment of the elders. He pours contempt on princes, and looses the belt of the strong.

– Job 12:17-21

The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ And to him he said, ‘See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe you with festal apparel.’

– Zechariah 3:4

Part Four. A prayer (89:46-51)

He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel; he has withdrawn his right hand from them in the face of the enemy; he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around.

– Lamentations 2:3

See, the name of YHWH comes from far away, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke; his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue is like a devouring fire.

– Isaiah 30:27

How long, YHWH? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealous wrath burn like fire?

– Psalm 79:5

³⁸But now you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath* against your anointed.

³⁹You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust.

⁴⁰You have made a breach in his walls; you have reduced his strongholds to ruins.

⁴¹All who pass by plunder him; he has become the scorn of his neighbours.

⁴²You have exalted the right hand of his foes; you have made all his enemies rejoice.

⁴³Moreover, you have turned back the edge of his sword, and you have not supported him in battle.

⁴⁴You have removed the sceptre from his hand, and hurled his throne to the ground.

⁴⁵You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with shame.

⁴⁶How long, YHWH? Will you hide yourself forever?

How long will your wrath* burn like fire?

The king prays

⁴⁷**Remember how short my time is – for what vanity you have created all us mortal human beings!**

⁴⁸**Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?**

⁴⁹**Lord, where is the kindness* you showed of old, the faithfulness you swore to David?**

⁵⁰**Remember, YHWH, how your servants are taunted; how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples.**

⁵¹**How your enemies taunt, YHWH, how they insult your anointed* at every opportunity.**

I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

– Jeremiah 31:3

Many of the expressions used in this psalm of the king are used in the New Testament of Jesus: ‘Christ’ (Matthew 16:16); ‘Chosen One’ (Luke 9:35); ‘Servant’ (Acts 3:13,26; 4:27,30); ‘Anointed’ (Luke 4:8; Acts 10:38); ‘First born’ (Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15,18; Revelation 1:5; Hebrews 1:6).

Paul, too, speaks of God’s promises and faithfulness:

Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

– Romans 15:8-9

If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself.

– 2Timothy 2:11-13

⁵²**Blessed be YHWH forever. Amen and Amen.**

This verse marks the end of Book III of the psalms