

BOOK FOUR

PSALMS 90-106

Psalm 90

28th Sunday Year B
18th Sunday Year C; 23rd Sunday Year C
Office of Readings Thursday Week 3
Morning Prayer Monday Week 4

Reflecting on the amount of suffering human beings endure in our all too brief life, the psalmist prays that God will desist from punishing us for our sins and look upon us with love so that we may prosper and experience happiness. The title reads: ‘A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.’ We are invited to pray with Moses as he confronts the murmuring of the people when they received the report concerning Canaan. They wanted to go back to Egypt. God says that they will wander in the wilderness till their generation is dead. They will not see the Promised Land (Numbers 13-14).

Part One. God, the source of our existence, is stable and eternal

¹Lord, you have been our
refuge from generation to
generation.

‘Lord’ translates the Hebrew (אֱלֹהֵינוּ *’ēlōhānū*).

²Before the mountains were
born, before you had formed
the earth and its continents,
from everlasting to everlasting
you are God.

Part Two. We humans return to the dust of which we are made

³You make human beings turn
back to dust. You say: ‘Turn
back, O human beings.’

‘Human beings’ first translates the Hebrew *’ēnōš* [אָנוֹשׁ]. and then the Hebrew *b’ēnîm ’ādām* [בְּנֵי אָדָם].

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until
you return to the ground, for out of it you were
taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

– Genesis 3:19

Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and
will you turn me to dust again?

– Job 10:9

In the context we understand God’s words as telling
us to turn back to dust. Is God also telling us
to turn back to God?

All that is of earth returns to earth, and what is
from above returns above.

– Sirach 40:11

Our reflections on the passing nature of our life continue:

A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last ... There is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grows old in the earth, and its stump dies in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant. But human beings die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they? As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so human beings lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep.

– Job 14:1-2,7-12 (see Job 4:19-21)

Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.

You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather.

– Psalm 39:4-6

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

– 2Peter 3:8-9

In the final analysis, the length of human life matters little, for we return to dust:

Whether life lasts for ten years or a hundred or a thousand, there are no questions asked in Hades.

– Sirach 41:4

Like abundant leaves on a spreading tree that sheds some and puts forth others, so are the generations of flesh and blood: one dies and another is born.

– Sirach 14:18

⁴For you a thousand years are like yesterday when it is past, like a watch in the night.

⁵You sweep them away; they pass away like a dream when we wake up. They are renewed like grass:

⁶in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

Part Three. The tragedy of sin and the Anger of God

⁷We are consumed by your anger*, overwhelmed by your wrath*.

As the psalmist sees it, we have to live not only with our natural limits, but also with divine punishment for our sins, the anger of the very one who is our only ultimate refuge (verse 1). Paul writes:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

– Romans 1:18

⁸You have set our guilt before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

⁹For all our days pass away under your wrath*; our years come to an end like a sigh.

¹⁰Even if we live seventy years, or even eighty if we are strong; life is only toil and trouble; the years soon pass, and off we fly.

¹¹Who understands the power of your anger*? Who appreciates the force of your wrath*?

When human beings have finished, they are just beginning, and when they stop, they are still perplexed. What are human beings, and of what use are they? What is good in them, and what is evil? The number of days in their life is great if they reach one hundred years. Like a drop of water from the sea and a grain of sand, so are a few years among the days of eternity. That is why the Lord is patient with them and pours out his mercy upon them.

– Sirach 18:7-11

Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good.

– Job 7:7

For misery does not come from the earth, nor does trouble sprout from the ground; but human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward.

– Job 5:6-7

So what am I waiting for? Lord, my hope is in you. Free me from all my transgressions. Do not make me the scorn of the fool. I am silent; I do not open my mouth. Since it is you who have done it. Take away from me your stroke; I am worn down by the blows of your hand. You chastise us in our guilt, consuming like a moth what is dear to us. We human beings are no more than a mere breath. Hear my prayer, YHWH, attend to my cry; do not be deaf to my tears. For I am your guest, a stranger passing by, like all who have gone before me. Turn your gaze away from me, give me the breath of life, before I depart and am no more.

– Psalm 39:7-13

Part Four. A plea to God

The psalmist prays for wisdom of heart:

For old age is not honoured for length of time, or measured by number of years; but understanding is gray hair for anyone, and a blameless life is ripe old age.

– Wisdom 4:8-9

Christ the wisdom of God.

– 1Corinthians 1:24

In verse three the psalmist spoke of God telling us to turn back. Here we pray for God to turn back to us!

¹²Teach us to count well our days that we may gain a wise heart*.

¹³Turn, YHWH! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

Human desire is unbounded. We pray for the happiness and joy that comes when our hearts are satisfied.

The steadfast love of YHWH never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

– Lamentations 3:22-23

¹⁴Satisfy us in the morning with your kindness*, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

In his commentary on this verse, Augustine writes:

Anticipating in hope the good things that are to be ours in the future and considering them as already real for us now, the psalmist says: ‘In the morning we are filled with your mercy’. In the toil and sufferings of the night, prophecy was lit for us, ‘like a lamp burning brightly in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts’(2Peter 1:19). ‘Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God’(Matthew 5:8). So it is that the just will be filled with that happiness for which they hunger and thirst now as they walk in faith and are exiled from the Lord. For this reason, the psalmist says: ‘You will fill me with joy in your presence’(Psalm 16:11). In the morning they will be in your presence contemplating you.

Other translations read: ‘In the morning we are satisfied with your mercy’. Well then, they will be satisfied. Elsewhere it is written: ‘I will be satisfied when your glory is revealed’. Therefore it is said: ‘Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied’(John 14:8). To which the Lord replies: ‘I will show myself to them’. Until all this happens, no lesser good can satisfy, nor should it, for it cannot happen that a desire which must last till the end should be satisfied while the journey is yet incomplete.

In the morning we are filled with your mercy; we rejoice and are glad all our days’. That day will be a day without end ... such is the nature of eternity. Our spirit burns with desire for those days, yearning with unquenchable thirst, that we may be filled there, satisfied and be able to say what now we say in anticipation: ‘In the morning we are filled with your mercy; we rejoice and are glad all our days’. We are glad for the days when we knew affliction, for the years which we passed in disgrace.

Give meaning to our brief lives

¹⁵Give us joy for the many days you have afflicted us, for the years when we have suffered evil.

¹⁶Let your actions be manifest to your servants, and your glory to their children.

¹⁷Let the favour of YHWH our God be upon us. Give success to the work of our hands. Give success to the work of our hands.

The psalmist is praying for a new dawn filled with hope. We think of the Resurrection dawn which we celebrate at the Sunday Mass.

We are invited to pray that God will reveal himself, and through his action will give meaning and value to our action, however passing its nature.

YHWH will fulfil his purpose for me.

Your steadfast love, YHWH, endures forever.

Do not forsake the work of your hands.

– Psalm 138:8

It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

– Philippians 2:13

I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in YHWH.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them.’

– Revelation 14:13

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

– Ephesians 2:4-7

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

– Romans 8:18