

Psalm 104

Easter Vigil; Pentecost; Baptism Year C
Office of Readings for Easter Wed, Pentecost Sunday and Sunday Week 2.

It has been suggested that this psalm may have been adapted from an Egyptian Hymn to Aton. It extols the greatness of the Creator as revealed by his presence and action in creation.

**¹Bless* YHWH*, all my being*.
YHWH my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with beauty and majesty,
²wrapped in a mantle of light.**

These sentiments are echoed throughout the psalm:

YHWH, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

– verse 24

I will sing to YHWH as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

– verse 33

I have more on my mind to express: I am full like the full moon. Listen to me, my faithful children, and blossom like a rose growing by a stream of water. Send out fragrance like incense, and put forth blossoms like a lily. Scatter the fragrance, and sing a hymn of praise; bless the Lord for all his works.

– Sirach 39:12-14

**You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
³you set the beams of your chambers on the waters.
You make the clouds your chariot,
and ride on the wings of the wind.
⁴You make the winds your messengers,
the flaming fire carries out your will.
Verse 4 is quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews 1:7.
⁵You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never ever be shaken.
⁶You cover it with the deep as with a garment.
The waters rise up to assault the mountains,
⁷but you rebuke them and they flee;
at the rumble of your thunder they take to flight.
⁸The mountains rise high and the valleys sink down;
each in its appointed place.
⁹You set a boundary that the waters may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.
¹⁰You make torrents gush forth from their fountains;
they flow between the hills,
¹¹giving drink to the wild animals;
the wild asses quench their thirst.**

- ¹²The birds of the air nest near the streams;
they sing among the branches.
- ¹³From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is filled with the fruit of your work.
- ¹⁴You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants through human labour,
to produce food from the fields,
¹⁵wine to gladden the human heart*,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart*.
- ¹⁶The trees of YHWH are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
¹⁷In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
- ¹⁸The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the rock hyrax.
- ¹⁹You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
²⁰You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
²¹The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.

Compare these lines from the Egyptian hymn to Aton

When you set in the western horizon, the land is in darkness, in the manner of death.
They sleep in a room with heads wrapped up, nor sees one eye the other.
All their goods which are under their heads might be stolen, but they would not perceive it.
Every lion is come forth from its den; all creeping things, they sting.
Darkness is a shroud and the earth is in stillness, for he who made them rests in his horizon.

- ²²When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens.
- ²³People go out to their work and to their labour until the evening.
- ²⁴YHWH, how manifold are your works!
Everything you have done is masterly;
the earth is full of your creatures.
- ²⁵Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
innumerable creatures swim there,
living things both small and great.
- ²⁶There go the ships, and Leviathan that you made for sport.

Compare the following from the hymn to Aton

The ships are sailing north and south as well, for every way is open at your appearance.
The fish in the river dart before your face; your rays are in the midst of the great green sea.

Praise the Creator

²⁷All these creatures look to you to give them their food in due season.

²⁸When you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.

³⁰When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the earth.

³¹May the glory* of YHWH endure forever;
may YHWH rejoice in his creation.

³²He looks on the earth and it trembles,
he touches the mountains and they smoke.

³³I will sing to YHWH as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have breath to do so.

³⁴May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I delight in YHWH.

³⁵Let sinners* disappear from the earth,
and let the wicked exist no more.

Bless* YHWH, all my being*.

Praise YH!

As we reflect back on this psalm seven themes stand out. The first is how creation reveals God's work. Compare the following:

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

– Isaiah 6:3 (in the liturgy of the Mass)

From the greatness and beauty of created things
comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.

– Wisdom 13:5 (see Romans 1:20)

Compare this poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'God's grandeur'.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

A second theme is that the Transcendent God is continually present and acting in creation as Lord. It is interesting to contrast this with the theme of Sabbath rest in the Book of Genesis.

A third theme is that human beings work in harmony with the rhythms of creation, intelligently and creatively.

People go out to their work and to their labour until the evening.

– verse 23

A fourth theme is that of sharing in God's delight in his creation. The author is a contemplative: he is attentive to the sacred in the inter-connectedness of things. He is a poet, working with language to share what he recognises to be beyond comprehensive expression.

A fifth theme is expressed well in the following words from the Preacher: 'All have the same breath'(Ecclesiastes 3:19).

When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.

– verses 29-30

A sixth theme is how creation reveals the beauty of the Creator. Praying it as Christians we contemplate Jesus, God's focal word, the perfect expression of divine beauty. We might read 'The Windhover' by Gerard M. Hopkins, composed in 1877, just before his ordination, and dedicated 'To Christ our Lord'.

I caught this morning, morning's minion,
kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in its riding
of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
high there, how he rung upon the rein of the wimpling wing
in his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
as a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and gliding
rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah, my dear,
fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

Jesus - God's focal word

We might reflect also upon the following stanzas and the accompanying commentary from *'The Spiritual Canticle'* of John of the Cross.

Stanza 4

O woods and thickets
planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
coated, bright, with flowers,
Tell me, has he passed by you?

Stanza 5

Pouring out a thousand graces,
He passed these groves in haste;
And having looked at them,
with his image alone,
He clothed them in beauty.

St. Paul says: The Son of God is the splendour of his glory and the image of his substance (Hebrews 1:3). It should be known that only with this figure, his Son, did God look at all things, that is, he communicated to them their natural being and many natural graces and gifts, and made them complete and perfect, as it is said in Genesis: God looked at all things that he made, and they were very good (Genesis 1:31). To look and behold that they were very good was to make them very good in the Word, his Son.

Not only by looking at them did he communicate natural being and graces, as we said, but also with this image of his Son alone, he clothed them in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This he did when he became man and elevated human nature in the beauty of God, and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all. Accordingly the Son of God proclaimed: If I be lifted up from the earth, I will elevate all things to myself (John 12:32). And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of his Son and through the glory of his resurrection according to the flesh not only did the Father beautify creatures partially, but, we can say, he clothed them entirely in beauty and dignity.

– Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 5,4

Stanza 14

My Beloved is the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands,
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes

Stanza 15

The tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music,
sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

This spiritual flight denotes a high state and union of love, in which, after much spiritual exercise, the soul is placed by God. This state is called spiritual espousal with the Word, the Son of God.

– Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 14-15,2

I have heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eyes see you.

– Job 42:5

I stand at the door and knock; if you open I will enter and sup with you, and you with me.

– Revelation 3:20

The seventh theme concerns sin. In the final verse (verse 35) the psalmist longs to see the end of sin, for it is sin that obscures the glory of God and spoils creation.