

Psalm 58: Wanting to see the wicked punished



Psalm 58 (57) (Mode 4. 3....4 / 2...171)

This psalm is not used in the Liturgy

Surrounded by violence and injustice, the psalmist can see little good in the human race. He blames the gods and calls on the Lord to act by sweeping the evil away and ensuring a reward for the just. The final verse sums up his sentiments.

As we pray the psalm we would do well to reflect on the fact that the evil that the psalmist is complaining about is not all 'out there'. It can be found also 'within'. The same applies when we pray in the 'Our Father': 'rescue us from evil'(Matthew 6:13).

You gods, are your verdicts just?

Do you judge people fairly?

No! In your hearts you devise crimes;
you deal out violence on earth.

The wicked go astray from the womb;
they err, uttering lies from their birth.

They have venom like that of a serpent,
like the deaf adder that stops its ear
lest it hear the sound of the snake charmer,
expert in casting spells.

‘When an ungodly person curses Satan,
he curses himself’(Sirach 21:27).

‘Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron’(Micah 3:1-3).

‘Wicked rulers who contrive mischief by statute’(Psalm 94:20).

‘They devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds. When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power’(Micah 2:1).

‘The ungodly say: “Let us oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow or regard the grey hairs of the aged. But let our might be our law of right. What is weak is clearly useless.”’

(Wisdom 2:10-11)

He is crying out against those whose hearts are corrupt and who act accordingly. They are dead inside. They have no problem in sacrificing the innocent for an ideology, a cause or a party. When they act in an evil way, it is premeditated, deliberate and cold-blooded. Their evil is second nature to them. It does not occur to them that they are doing wrong, though this takes away neither responsibility nor guilt.

‘You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened. For I knew that you would deal very treacherously, and that from birth you were called a rebel.’(Isaiah 48:8).

They are hardened against compassion, so puffed up are they with their own power and importance.

‘He pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity; he maintained his anger perpetually, and kept his wrath forever’(Amos 1:11).

They are snakes – the epiphany of Evil.

Their bite is poisonous (verses 4-5).

‘I am letting snakes loose among you, adders that cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you, says the Lord’(Jeremiah 8:17).

‘Flee from sin as from a snake; for if you approach sin it will bite you. Its teeth are lion’s teeth, and can destroy human lives’(Sirach 21:2).

‘They rely on falsehood, they speak lies, conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity. They hatch adders’ eggs, and weave the spider’s web; whoever eats their eggs dies, and the crushed egg hatches out a viper’(Isaiah 59:4-5).

‘They make their tongue sharp as a snake’s, and under their lips is the venom of vipers.’

(Psalm 140:3).

Deuteronomy 32:32-35, 41-43

Their vine comes from the vine stock of Sodom, from the vineyards of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of poison, their clusters are bitter; their wine is the poison of serpents, the cruel venom of asps. Is not this laid up in store with me, sealed up in my treasuries? Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly ...

Deuteronomy 32:32-35, 41-43

When I whet my flashing sword, and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries, and will repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh – with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired enemy. 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.’

O God, break their teeth.

Lord, tear out the fangs of the young lions!

Let them drain away like water;

like grass let them be trodden down and wither.

Let them be like the snail

that dissolves into slime;

like the aborted foetus

that never sees the sun.

Sweep them away like bushes

caught in a sudden whirlwind,

like wild beasts,

like a funeral pyre!

The just will rejoice
when they see vengeance done.
They will bathe their feet
in the blood of the wicked.

People will say,
‘Surely there is a reward for the just;
surely there is a God
who judges the earth.’

‘O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance,
shine forth!’(Psalm 94:1).

‘I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor. Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall live in your presence’(Psalm 140:12-13).

‘Listen, O kings, and understand; learn, O judges of the ends of the earth ...The Lord will search out your works and inquire into your plans. Because as servants of His kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law, or walk according to the purpose of God, who will come upon you terribly and swiftly, because severe judgment falls on those in high places’(Wisdom 6:1-6).