

## **Psalms VI. Prayers of Petition**

We live in a broken world, facing war and disease, the uncertainty of the seasons and the inevitability of death, as well as internal turmoil and the ravages of sin on both a personal and a communal level. As one might expect, by far the most prevalent sentiment to be found in the psalms is that of a creature who, knowing our total dependence upon our Creator for life and for all that we receive, cries out to God, pleading with God to care for us, to protect us, to save us from all harm. Basing their faith especially on the miracle of the Exodus from Egypt and their entry into the Promised Land after years of trekking through the desert, the people of Israel recognised God as the one who hears the cry of the poor. In Psalm 50 we hear God saying:

‘Call on me in the day of distress. I will free you’(Psalm 50:15).

Whatever image the people of Israel had of God and however they imagined God responding to prayer, we have experienced Jesus and in him the fullness of revelation. We must be careful to clear away a number of possible misunderstandings. The first concerns the way in which God responds to our call for help. We cannot afford to behave like spoilt children who expect God to give us everything we ask for. After all God has a wisdom that is far beyond anything we can lay claim to. Furthermore, life has surely taught us that we do not always know what is best for us. Jesus uses the image of a little child who is hungry and who points pleadingly to a scorpion, mistaking it for a fried egg like the one that Dad cooked yesterday. Surely, says Jesus, you Dads will not give the child the scorpion just because the child is demanding it and threatening to give way to a tantrum. No, you have the wisdom to know what it is that the child really wants and you remove the scorpion on which the child is focusing and give the child the egg which it really wants (see Luke 11:12). We are encouraged to ask God for whatever we feel we need, but we are to be sensible and humble enough to know that we do not have the wisdom to know what really is for our good. We are to trust that God does know and that God will always hear our cry and ‘give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him’(Luke 11:13). The gift of God’s own Spirit means that whatever love can do happens for us. What that is, let us leave to God. God will give us what we really need, but not always what we ask for.

Secondly, there is the matter of timing. God hears our cry and responds, but we may not be ready yet to receive what God is offering. We might think we are ready, and we might think we have prayed too long without an answer. We are asked to trust. We are asked to believe that God is love, that God is listening, and that God is offering us what is best for us. Perhaps we are not yet ready to receive the grace which God is offering. If we received it now we might spoil it. We might take glory in it and use it to show off by drawing attention to ourselves rather than to the Father of all good gifts. God is our Father, our Mother, and God asks us to open ourselves to his steadfast love, to get to know him. Then we will cry out to him in our distress, knowing in trust that God will hear our cry and will respond to the deepest desires of our hearts that are causing us to cry out, even though we may not know them ourselves.

Of course the quality of our living is relevant. The prophet Isaiah has God say:

‘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’(Isaiah 1:15).

It is not so much that God does not listen. It is we who, because of our involvement in injustice, are unable to receive God’s response. We find Job giving a similar warning:

‘If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored, if you remove unrighteousness from your tents ... then you will delight yourself in the Almighty, and lift up your face to God. You will pray to him, and he will hear you’(Job 22:23,26-27).

The problem might be that while we are listening others are not, with the result that what God wishes to offer us through them does not happen. God, being love, cannot and will not force them.

Whatever the situation, the problem is never God's failure to offer his grace. God is love, and, as Saint Paul reminds us: 'We might be faithless, but God remains faithful, for he cannot deny his own self'(2Timothy 2:13). God's love is unconditionally offered to all of us all the time. Nor does God need us to remind him of our needs. The problem, if there is one, is always from our side, for love is received conditionally. It is measured by our readiness to receive as well as by the extent and depth of our longing.

With these considerations in mind, let us turn now to the psalms as we accept the invitation to open our hearts and our lives to the graces which God in his love is pouring out upon us. Our deepest need is for communion with God:

'Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved'(Psalm 80:3,7,19).

'Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name'(Psalm 80:14-15,18).

Though the author of the Book of Genesis, in the story of Cain and Abel, points out the stupidity of human violence, we live in a violent world. Psalm 80 from which the above two quotations come, is itself a prayer offered in a time of military disaster. The Psalmist frequently prays for victory in war.

'O God, you have rejected us, broken our defences; you have been angry; now restore us!  
You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open;  
repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering.  
You have made your people suffer hard things;  
you have given us wine to drink that made us reel.  
You have set up a banner for those who fear you, to rally to it out of bowshot.  
Give victory with your right hand, and answer us,  
so that those whom you love may be rescued'(Psalm 60:1-5).

'May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!'  
(Psalm 29:11)

'Do not let them say to themselves, "Aha, we have our heart's desire."  
Do not let them say, "We have swallowed you up"'(Psalm 35:25).

'O save your people, and bless your heritage; be their shepherd, and carry them forever.'  
(Psalm 28:9)

'Let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low'(Psalm 79:8).

A number of psalms pray for the king and so for the victory of God's reign. An example can be found in Psalm 2, though this psalm must be read in the light of Psalm 1: God's assurances concerning the king are conditional on the king's behaviour. Perhaps Psalm 2 is a Messianic psalm composed at a time when the nation is humiliated and looking forward to the time when God would raise up a faithful king who would rule Israel and subject all the nations to God. The Psalmist warns foreign nations that Judah is a vassal of the Lord who will not see it kept enslaved.

Psalm 21 is a psalm of thanksgiving for the victory requested in Psalm 20. In the opening verse victory is credited not to the king, but to God, for it is God's strength and God's help that counts:

'In *your* strength the king rejoices, O Lord,

and in *your* help how greatly he exults'(Psalm 21:1).

The Psalmist continues:

'You have given to the king his heart's desire, and have not withheld the request of his lips.'

(Psalm 21:2)

Psalm 72 is presented as David's prayer for his son who is to succeed him. The mood is set in the opening verse which asks God to give *his* justice to the king. Only when God's justice prevails can true peace be attained.

Other psalms express a plea to God for relief from dangers of all kinds. In Psalm 55 the Psalmist is suffering under extreme aggression and internal anxiety. Towards the close of the psalm, he is reassured: 'Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you'(Psalm 55:23).

In Psalm 142, the Psalmist appeals to God as his only hope . His way is blocked; he cannot move. There is no going back because of those pursuing him (142:6) and there is no help from any direction. He pleads for the only help that can save him: that which comes from above!

Psalm 143 is a plea from one in a desperate situation, pursued by enemies (143:3). He pleads with God to reveal his will to him and teach him to obey. He also cries out to God his Lord, trusting that God will be faithful to the commitment which he has given in the covenant. He knows that he is not innocent and so recognises that he deserves punishment, but not the losing of his life.

'I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.

Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails.

Do not hide your face from me, or I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.'

(Psalm 143:6-7)

We find similar sentiments in other psalms:

'Have pity on my, O God, look upon me with love (pietà), my refuge is in you;

In the shelter of your wings I take refuge, till the affliction passes'(Psalm 57:1).

'Spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you.'

(Psalm 5:11)

'How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?'(Psalm 13:1-2)

'Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"

But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you;

may those who love the salvation that comes from you

say continually, "Great is the Lord!"'(Psalm 40:15-16 = Psalm 70:3-4)

'In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me,

for you are my rock and my fortress.

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb.

My praise is continually of you'(Psalm 71:1-6).

'But you, O Lord my Lord, act on my behalf for your name's sake;

because your steadfast love is good, deliver me.  
For I am poor and needy, and my heart is pierced within me.  
I am gone like a shadow at evening; I am shaken off like a locust.  
My knees are weak through fasting; my body has become gaunt.  
I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads.  
Help me, O Lord my God! Save me according to your steadfast love.  
Let them know that this is your hand; you, O Lord, have done it' (Psalm 109:21-27).

'Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt' (Psalm 123:3).

Other psalms express the plea that God will continue his special love for the oppressed. Psalm 12 is a plea to God to stop the powerful from using words to oppress the poor and to corrupt society. God's word is pure; the word of the arrogant is described in all its corruption.

Psalm 22 is a psalm of supplication distinguished by the intensity of human suffering which it conveys and the experience of being abandoned by God. It is this psalm which is placed by Mark and Matthew on the lips of the dying Jesus:

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Psalm 22:1).

Psalm 31 is written by a person who sees himself as belonging to those bonded to God by fidelity to the covenant (The *hasidim*, 31:23). He seems to draw on the experience of David as a model. The opening verses of the psalm are repeated in Psalm 71. The psalmist has experienced a serious breakdown as a result of the way others are treating him. He remembers God's love and goodness and the times when his trust in God has been vindicated. He struggles to find that trust again and to invite others to join him in it:

'Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord' (Psalm 31:24).

In Psalm 40, the Psalmist begins by thanking God for the goodness shown in the past. He goes on to express a commitment to carry out God's will which he experiences as a call to witness to God's justice, uprightness, truth, saving action, covenant love, fidelity, and compassion. Since the mission given to the psalmist by God involves risk, he prays for God's protection and help.

Psalm 82 may be a pre-Israelite psalm prayed to the chief god. The early Israelites took it over and referred it to the Lord ('Yahweh'), identified as the sovereign god summoning the lesser gods to act justly. In monotheistic Judaism the psalm was retained. The 'gods' are now those responsible for administering justice in God's name and with God's power. The Aramaic version translates 'gods' as 'lords', referring either to angels or to human administrators of justice.

'Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked' (Psalm 82:3-4).

Psalm 69 is a cry from one who is being ridiculed because he refuses to give up hope. A number of its verses are applied to Jesus in the New Testament.

In other psalms, too, we hear a cry to the God who hears the cry of the oppressed:

'Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed' (Psalm 10:12).

'Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!  
Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?  
For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.  
Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love' (Psalm 44:23-26).

'Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked' (Psalm 82:3-4).

In the psalms we hear a plea for prosperity:

‘Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands –  
O prosper the work of our hands!’(Psalm 90:17)

‘May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy’(Psalm 126:5).

We hear, too, a plea for a renewal of intimacy with God:

‘O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?’(Psalm 88:4).

‘Give ear to my words, O Lord; give heed to my sighing.

Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray’(Psalm 5:1-2).

‘Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?’

(Psalm 10:1)

‘Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings’(Psalm 17:8).

‘May he grant you your heart’s desire, and fulfil all your plans’(Psalm 20:4).

‘May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us’(Psalm 67:1).

‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts’(Psalm 139:23).

Again and again, we hear a plea for relief from physical suffering and for a delay of death. This is especially poignant in Psalm 88, but we find it in many psalms:

‘Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;

O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror’(Psalm 6:2).

‘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 ...

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears.

For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears.

Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,

before I depart and am no more’(Psalm 39:4-6,12-13).

‘Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you.

Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress.

Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call.

For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.

My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread.

Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin.

I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places.

I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

All day long my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse.

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

because of your indignation and anger; for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.’

(Psalm 102:1-12)

The Psalmist also pleads to know God’s will and to have the grace to follow it faithfully:

‘Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies’(Ps.27:11)

‘Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long’(Psalm 25:4-5).

‘Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth;

give me an undivided heart to revere your name'(Psalm 86:11).

'Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law'(Psalm 119:18).

'I call upon you, O Lord; come quickly to me; give ear to my voice when I call to you.

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,  
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.

Do not turn my heart to any evil,

to busy myself with wicked deeds in company with those who work iniquity;  
do not let me eat of their delicacies'(Psalm 141:1-4).

Many psalms express a plea for forgiveness from sin. Psalm 50 is a liturgical psalm, the first part of a penitential liturgy in which God accuses his people of their failure to keep the covenant. There are many allusions in Psalm 50 to the Sinai Covenant. Psalm 51 follows as the second part of the liturgy. The people acknowledge their sin and ask for pardon. There is no psalm which contains the third part of the liturgy, namely the statement of God's forgiveness and taking the people back into communion. However we find expressions of this in other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, notably Ezekiel:

'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you'(Ezekiel 36:25-26)<sup>1</sup>.

Psalm 130 is also a penitential psalm, composed to be sung on pilgrimage. It is a cry for forgiveness rising from the depths of misery that is the consequence of sin. Psalm 38 is a cry from one who has sinned. He pleads with God not to leave him in his terrible state of physical and mental anguish, surrounded by those who are maligning him unjustly (38:19-20). Other psalms, too, plead for forgiveness and peace for the sinner:

'O Lord, rebuke me, but not in anger, discipline me but not in wrath'(Psalm 6:1).

'Who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me.  
Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression'(Psalm 19:12-13).

'Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.

Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress.

Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins'(Psalm 25:16-18).

'O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you'(Psalm 41:4).

'Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered'(Psalm 130:1-4).

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<sup>1</sup> See also Isaiah 4:4-6; Psalm 130 and Psalm 103; Ezra 9:6-15; Nehemiah 9:6-37; Daniel 3:24-45 (LXX); Daniel 9:4-19; Baruch 1:15 - 3:8.