

Psalm 78

18th Sunday Year B
Not in the Prayer of the Church

The title reads: ‘A Maskil* of Asaph*. The psalmist recalls the wonderful things God did at the time of the Exodus. He recalls also the recurring infidelity of God’s people. In spite of God’s compassion (verses 38-39), they persisted in ‘having no faith in God. They did not trust God’s saving power’(verse 22). Finally God lost patience and rejected the northern kingdom (verse 67). The people of Judah must learn from this to ‘set their hopes in God, and not to forget what God has done, but keep God’s commandments’(verse 7). The psalmist speaks of this psalm as a teaching (tôrâ, verse 1), a parable (māšāl, verse 2), and a paradox or enigma (hîdâ, verse 2).

It is a parable in which God is compared to a shepherd guiding his people through the desert to pasture: ‘YHWH led out his people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock’(verse 52). God led and tended them (verses 14, 53 and 72). God guided them (verse 52). God brought them to his pasture (verse 54). The psalm concludes with God choosing David as his shepherd: ‘He chose his servant David, and took him from the sheepfolds’(verse 70). A second element that suggests a parable is using the destruction of Shiloh as a type for the destruction of Samaria (verses 60-64).

The paradox that the psalmist is struggling with is how could the people fail to trust God after what God had done, and after the many ways in which God continued to demonstrate divine compassion (verses 38-39).

In the end, tragically, God lost patience and rejected the northern kingdom, choosing Judah, Jerusalem (Mount Zion) and David: ‘He rejected the tent of Joseph, he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever. He chose his servant David’(verses 67-70).

Though Judah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph.

– 1Chronicles 5:2

The people of Judah must not repeat the mistakes of their northern neighbours.

The psalm is rich in expressions for sin

- stubborn, verse 8
- rebellious, verses 8, 17, 40 and 56
- sinning, verses 17 and 32
- failing to obey, verse 10
- unbelieving, verses 8, 22, 32 and 37
- failing to trust, verse 22
- wavering heart, verses 8 and 37
- unfaithful, verse 57
- putting God to the test, verses 18, 41 and 56
- untruthful, verse 36
- provoking God, verses 41 and 58
- speaking out against God, verse 19
- grieving God, verse 40

The key sin is failing to trust God after all that God has done. Note that the focus throughout is on their personal relationship with God not on their obedience to particular precepts.

The importance of tradition (verses 1-8).

The psalmist exhorts his audience to remember the past and not do what their ancestors did. We are to remember what God has done, hope in God, and obey God.

Verse 2 is quoted by Matthew (13:35). In relation to verses 3-4, compare the following:

Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

– Deuteronomy 4:9

I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, turning aside from the way that I have commanded you. In time to come trouble will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of YHWH, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands.

– Deuteronomy 31:29

¹Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; pay special attention to the words I speak.

²I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter an ancient paradox.

³Those things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.

⁴we will not hide from their children; we will tell the coming generation of the glorious deeds of YHWH, and his might, and the wonderful things that he has done.

⁵He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children,

⁶so that the next generation might know, the children yet unborn, and that they in turn would tell their children

⁷that they should set their hope* in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

⁸They should not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart* was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

The failure of their ancestors (verses 9-11)

The psalmist focuses on the failures of Ephraim, the largest tribe in the northern kingdom.

⁹The archers of the tribe of Ephraim retreated on the day of battle.

¹⁰They did not keep God's covenant*, but refused to walk according to his law.

¹¹They forgot what he had done, and the miracles that he had shown them.

unfaithful to God's kindness

**God's wonderful deeds in Egypt, at the Red Sea and in the desert
(verses 12-16)**

¹²In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

¹³He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a dyke.

¹⁴In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all night long with a light of fire.

¹⁵He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.

¹⁶He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

The Hebrews became familiar with Zoan in the East delta of the Nile during the period of the monarchy, when it was the Egyptian capital (Isaiah 19:11, 13; 30:4; Ezekiel 30:14). The psalmist places the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh (Exodus 7-11) in the 'fields of Zoan'.

The crossing of the Red Sea is narrated in Exodus (especially Exodus 14:22). See also:

YHWH went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light.

– Exodus 13:21

The account of the water from the rock is narrated in Exodus 17.

In spite of this the ancestors rebelled (verses 17-20)

¹⁷Yet they sinned* still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert.

¹⁸They tested God in their heart* by demanding the food they craved.

¹⁹They spoke against God, saying, 'Can God spread a table in the wilderness?

²⁰He struck the rock so that water gushed out and torrents overflowed, can he not also give bread, or provide meat for his people?'

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'

– Numbers 11:4-6 (see 11:22)

Do not exalt yourself, forgetting YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.

– Deuteronomy 8:14-16

God's abundant blessings turned to destruction because of sin (verses 21-31)

The account of the manna and the quails is narrated in Exodus 16. John chapter six is a homily on verse twenty-four (see John 6:31; see also Exodus 16:4).

²¹When YHWH heard this, he was filled with rage*; his fury was kindled against Jacob, his anger* flared against Israel,
²²because they had no faith in God, and did not trust* his saving* power.

²³In spite of this, he commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven;
²⁴he rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. YHWH said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you.'

²⁵Mortal human beings ate of the bread of angels. He sent them food in abundance.

²⁶He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens, and by his power he led out the south wind.

²⁷He rained flesh upon them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas.

²⁸He let them fall within their camp, all around their dwellings.

²⁹And they ate and were satisfied, for he gave them what they craved.

³⁰But before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths,

³¹the anger* of God rose against them and he killed the strongest of them, and laid low the flower of Israel.

Human infidelity and divine compassion (verses 32-39)

³²In spite of all this they still sinned*; they did not believe in the wonderful things God had done.

³³So he made their days vanish like a breath, and their years in terror.

³⁴When he killed them, they sought for him; they repented and sought God earnestly.

³⁵They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer*.

³⁶They flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues.

³⁷Their heart* was not steadfast toward him; they were not true to his covenant*.

³⁸Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them. Often he restrained his anger*, and did not stir up all his wrath*.

³⁹He remembered that they were but flesh*, a breath of air that passes and does not come again.

The psalmist reflects on human sin. They remembered that God is their Rock and their Redeemer, but their belief was not from the heart and their repentance was not genuine. The psalmist reflects on divine compassion. God remembered human frailty and protected them against the worst effects of their sin.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
YHWH is gracious and tenderly compassionate.

– Psalm 111:4

In your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

– Nehemiah 9:31

They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them ... YHWH has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

– Isaiah 49:10,13

Can a woman forget her child at the breast, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

– Isaiah 49:15

As a father has compassion for his children, so YHWH has compassion for those who fear him.

– Psalm 103:13

The psalmist reflects on human frailty.

‘You have given me only a short span of life,
my days are as nothing in your sight.

We human beings last no longer than a mere breath. I will pass away like a shadow.

– Psalm 39:5

The fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

– Qohelet 3:19-20

Rebellion (verses 40-42)

See, for example, Numbers 16:41 and 20:24.

⁴⁰How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!

⁴¹They tested God again and again, and provoked the Holy One of Israel.

⁴²They did not keep in mind his power, or the day when he redeemed them from the foe.

The plagues in Egypt (verses 43-51)

‘The fields of Zoan’ (see verse 12).

⁴³He displayed his signs in Egypt, and his miracles in the fields of Zoan.

The first plague of Egypt (Exodus 7:14-24).

⁴⁴He turned their rivers to blood, so that they could not drink of their streams.

The fourth plague of Egypt (Exodus 8:16-28, and the second plague of Egypt (Exodus 7:26 - 8:11).

⁴⁵He sent among them swarms of flies, which devoured them, and frogs, which destroyed them.

The eighth plague of Egypt (Exodus 10:1-20).

⁴⁶He gave their crops to the caterpillar, and the fruit of their labour to the locust.

The seventh plague of Egypt (Exodus 9:13-35).

⁴⁷He destroyed their vines with hail, and their sycamores with frost.

The fifth plague of Egypt (Exodus 9:1-7).

⁴⁸He gave over their cattle to the hail, and their flocks to thunderbolts.

In a world which thought of God as controlling everything that happens, natural disasters were considered actions of God’s anger, punishing the offenders. See the article ‘Anger of YHWH’ in the Introduction. When we think of God loving (not controlling) the world, our perspective changes.

⁴⁹He let loose on them his fierce anger•, wrath, indignation, and distress, a company of destroying angels.

This is the tenth plague of Egypt (Exodus 12:29). The Egyptians thought of themselves as the first born of the gods. The story of God killing the first born is a dramatic way of stating that it is Israel, not Egypt, that God favours.

⁵⁰He made a path for his anger; he did not spare them from death, but gave their lives over to the plague.

⁵¹He struck all the first born in Egypt, the first issue of their strength in the tents of Ham.

Israel, whom you have named your first born.
– Sirach 36:17

In the promised land

God brings his flock to the Promised Land (verses 52-55)

⁵²Then he led out his people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.

⁵³He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid; but the sea overwhelmed their enemies.

⁵⁴And he brought them to his holy hill, to the mountain that his right hand had won.

⁵⁵He drove out nations before them; he apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.

Exodus 15:5, 10.

Exodus 19.

Archeology has established that Israel was formed in Canaan not by mass ethnic cleansing, but by the conversion of the inhabitants of the highlands to YHWH,

There can be no rival to Israel's God (verses 56-58)

⁵⁶Yet they tested the Most High God, and rebelled against him. They did not observe his decrees,

⁵⁷but turned away and were faithless like their ancestors; they twisted like a treacherous bow.

⁵⁸For they provoked him to anger* with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols.

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of YHWH, worshipping the Baals and the Astartes, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. Thus they abandoned YHWH, and did not worship him. So the anger of YHWH was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites.

– Judges 10:6-7

They made him jealous with strange gods.

– Deuteronomy 32:16

Shiloh (verses 59-64)

⁵⁹When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel.

⁶⁰He abandoned his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt,

⁶¹and delivered its power to captivity, its boasting to the hand of the foe.

⁶²He gave his people to the sword, and vented his wrath on his heritage. ⁶³Fire devoured their young men, and their girls had no marriage song. ⁶⁴Their priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation.

The ark was kept at Shiloh (Judges 18:31; 1Samuel 1:3), halfway between Bethel and Shechem. The Philistines captured the ark when they laid waste the sanctuary of Shiloh (1Samuel 4; Jeremiah 7:14). This was a warning, realised in 721BC when Samaria was captured and the northern kingdom wiped out.

Israel rejected in favour of Judah (verses 65-72)

The northern kingdom has been rejected by God. He has chosen Judah, Jerusalem (Zion) and David. Hence the exhortation for the people of Judah not to follow the example of their northern brothers and sisters, but to remember and to hand on the tradition, and learn to trust God and not keep putting him to the test.

Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God.

– Psalm 87:3

On God's choice of David see 2Samuel 7; Psalm 89; 1Samuel 16; 1Kings 11. Christ is the new David, the Good Shepherd.

⁶⁵Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, like a warrior shouting because of wine.

⁶⁶He put his adversaries to rout; he put them to everlasting disgrace.

⁶⁷He rejected the tent of Joseph, he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;

⁶⁸but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves.

⁶⁹He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever.

⁷⁰He chose his servant David, and took him from the sheepfolds;

⁷¹from tending the nursing ewes he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel, his inheritance.

⁷²With upright heart he tended them, and guided them with skilful hand.

Paul carries on the tradition of Psalm 78 when he writes:

These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.

– 1Corinthians 10:11