

Psalm 128

Holy Family Year A; 33rd Sunday Year A

27th Sunday Year B

Prayer during the Day Thursday Week 4

Supplementary Psalms

As with the other psalms from 120 to 134, the title reads: 'A Song of Ascents.' This is a psalm celebrating the positive value of work and the blessing and the joy of family life, including the family of Israel centred in the mother-city, Jerusalem.

There are a number of key themes expressed in this psalm. The first is that genuine communion with God involves ethical obligations which affect the way we live. If we obey God's wise will, our lives will be happy and blessed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by YHWH – and their descendants as well.

– Isaiah 65:21-23 (contrast Deuteronomy 28:30-41)

YHWH has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have laboured; but those who garner it shall eat it and praise YHWH, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts.

– Isaiah 62:8-9

You shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.

– Jeremiah 31:5

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.

– Amos 9:14

¹Happy* is the person who fears* YHWH, and walks in his ways.

²You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy*, and it shall go well with you.

Intimacy and God

³Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;

The vine is a symbol of enjoyment of the intimacy and joy of the love of God for his people Israel. Isaiah speaks of Israel as ‘the fruitful vine’(Isaiah 32:12).

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard ... What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

– Isaiah 5:1,5

May your breasts be like clusters of the vine.

– Song of Solomon 7:8

Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches from abundant water. Its strongest stem became a ruler’s sceptre; it towered aloft among the thick boughs; it stood out in its height with its mass of branches.

– Ezekiel 19:10-11

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the Great River.

– Psalm 80:8-11

your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

The olive is a symbol of fruitful Israel.

YHWH once called you, ‘A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit.’

– Jeremiah 11:16

⁴Such is the blessing* upon the person who fears* YHWH.

See the article ‘Fear of YHWH’ in the Introduction.

Fear of YHWH does not consist in being terrified. Rather, it consists in being wise in what one holds as doctrine, in obedience, in innocence, in knowing the truth. If we must fear God as we fear lightning and thunder, where is faith in this form of fear?

For us fear of God consists wholly in love, and the consummation of this fear is perfect love, which chases away all dread. The witness to fear of God is obedience.

– Saint Hilary of Poitiers

⁵May YHWH bless* you from Zion. May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

⁶May you see your children’s children. Peace* be upon Israel!

The blessing and the intimacy of which this psalm speaks invites reflection on our personal relationship to the Church (our mother), and on the Church as the bride of Christ.

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish ... For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body.

– Ephesians 5:25-27, 29-30

Saint Cassiodorus writes of the ultimate reality of the Church:

The gathering of all faithful saints in one soul and one heart, the bride of Christ, the Jerusalem of the life to come.

It also invites us to reflect upon an ancient tradition in the Christian community which speaks of God and of Christ as our Mother. Saint Augustine in his commentary on Psalm 101:7 (Hebrew Psalm 102:7) ‘I am made like to the pelican in the desert’ writes:

Christ exercises fatherly authority and maternal love just as Paul is also father and mother ... through his gospel preaching.

Augustine is referring to Paul’s statement to the Thessalonian community:

We were gentle among you, like a mother tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God ... As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children.

– 1Thessalonians 2:7-11

Saint Anselm in his Prayer to Saint Paul writes:

You, too, good Jesus, are not you also a mother? Is not he a mother who like a hen gathers his chicks beneath his wings? Truly, Lord, you are a mother too.

He is referring to Jesus’ words in regard to Jerusalem:

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

– Matthew 23:37 (and Luke 13:34)

The motherhood of God and of Jesus is a favourite theme of Saint Julian of Norwich

I saw that God rejoices that he is our Father, and God rejoices that he is our Mother, and God rejoices that he is our true Spouse, and that our soul is his beloved wife. And Christ rejoices that he is our Brother, and Jesus rejoices that he is our Saviour.

– Showings, chapter 52

In our making, God almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord. And in the joining and the union he is our very true spouse and we his beloved wife and his fair maiden, with which wife he was never displeased; for he says: I love you and you love me, and our love will never divide in two ...

God and Jesus as Mother

In our almighty Father we have our protection and our bliss, as regards our natural substance, which is ours by our creation from without beginning. In the second person, in knowledge and wisdom we have our perfection, as regards our sensuality, our restoration and our salvation, for he is our Mother, brother and saviour. In our good Lord, the Holy Spirit we have our reward and our gift for our living and our labour, endlessly surpassing all that we desire in his marvellous courtesy, out of his great plentiful grace. For all our life consists of three: in the first we have our beginning, and in the second we have our increasing, and in the third we have our fulfilment. The first is nature, the second is mercy, the third is grace. I saw and understood that the high might of the trinity is our Father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our Lord ... In our Mother Christ we increase, and in mercy he reforms and restores us ... In our Father, God almighty we have our being, and in our Mother of mercy we have our reforming and our restoring, in whom our parts are united and all made perfect man, and through the rewards and gifts of grace of the Holy Spirit we are fulfilled.

– Showings, chapter 58

Jesus Christ is our true Mother. We have our being from him, where the foundation of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly follows ... Our great Father, almighty God, who is being, knows us and loved us before time began. Out of this knowledge, in his most wonderful deep love, by the prescient, eternal counsel of all the Trinity, he wanted the second person to become our Mother, our brother and our saviour. From this it follows that as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms. And therefore it is our part to love our God in whom we have our being, reverently thanking and praising him for our creation, mightily praying to our Mother for mercy and pity, and our Lord the Holy Spirit for help and grace ... And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by his taking our created nature. All the lovely works and all the sweet loving offices of beloved motherhood are appropriated to the second person, for in him we have this godly will, whole and safe forever, both in nature and in grace, from his own goodness, proper to him.

– Showings, chapter 59

We are brought back by the motherhood of mercy and grace into our natural place, in which we were created by the motherhood of love, a mother's love which never leaves us ... Our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be. So he carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be, and at last he died. And when he had finished and had borne us so for bliss, still all this could not satisfy his wonderful love ... He could not die any more, but he did not want to cease working; therefore he must needs nourish us, for the precious love of motherhood has made him our debtor. The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life; and with all the sweet sacraments he sustains us most mercifully and most graciously ... The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us there a part of the Godhead and the joy of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss.

– Showings, chapter 60