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Psalm 22: To the choirmaster: according to "The Hind of the Dawn." A Psalm of David.

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Psalm 22
To the choirmaster: according to "The Hind of the Dawn."
A Psalm of David.

(RSV)

Introduction to Psalm 22

"The Hind of the Dawn" is presumably the name of a musical setting.

Appropriately enough verses 1-24 of Psalm 22 are appointed for Good Friday, because they so vividly describe Jesus' Passion. Now on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, as we celebrate the victory of Christ, verses 25-31 (verses 24-30 RCL) are appointed. But both parts constitute a theological unity, and so we shall consider the entire Psalm.

Here we need to observe a feature of the Christian reading of the Psalms which we have noted before, namely, that the riches of the Psalms are multiplied as we try to read them in their several layers. Psalm 22 is in the first instance the prayer of David at a time of intense personal agony in his life. Secondly, it is the prayer of Jesus on the Cross. When we read it as Jesus' prayer, it gives us a glimpse into the deep mystery of our Savior's inner life and into the appalling cost of our salvation. Thirdly, the Psalm is the Church's prayer, at least on Good Friday and Easter 5. When we read it as such, it can lead us deeper into our common Christian life of faith, our common life "in Christ." Even if in the present moment we do not feel anguish and agony, there are fellow Christians in other parts of the world who are experiencing hostility for their faith. Psalm 22 guides us toward greater compassion for the plight of fellow believers and leads us into prayer with them and for them. And finally, Psalm 22 gives us words, as it has given words to countless believers in the generations since David wrote them, for those terrible times in our personal lives when we feel abandoned by God.

Because Jesus prayed this prayer, and because we are "in Christ," we should also claim the Israel of old (verse 3) as our forebears in the faith. And because "in Christ" we are the New Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), grafted into the stock of God's People Israel (Roman 11:24), the fathers of Psalm 22:4-5 are also our fathers; we too are the descendants of Jacob (verse 23). When David prayed for a people yet unborn (verses 30-31), he was praying for us. And we in turn pray for the future generations who shall follow us in our wait for the Coming of our Lord Jesus, to take up his rule over the nations (verse 28).

Vv. 1-24, appointed for use on Good Friday
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Vv. 1-2

¹ My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

² O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer;

and by night, but find no rest (i.e., from my anguish).

Here you should read Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. They record that Jesus spoke these words from the cross.

Three times in these opening verses the Psalmist addresses his complaint to "my God." Although God seems to have abandoned him and does not answer his round-the-clock prayers, the Psalmist has not rejected God in return. The silent God is still my God.

Vv. 3-5

- ³ Yet thou art holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
⁴ In thee our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and thou didst deliver them.
⁵ To thee they cried, and were saved;
in thee they trusted, and were not put to shame.**

There is a tantalizing cruelty in the discrepancy between the Psalmist's experience and that of his ancestors. He is in all likelihood thinking back to the miraculous Exodus of the children of Israel from the oppression in Egypt. There God showed Himself to be holy. His holiness was not so much that He demonstrated superior strength over the gods of the Egyptians, although that was also true; but His holiness shone forth when He overcame the Pharaoh to rescue His People as He had promised He would (Exodus 15:11-12). The God of Israel is strong to save.

This God is enthroned "on the praises of Israel."

a. This could mean that the pedestal of His invisible throne is the Ark of the Covenant. This ark was the shrine which in David's time housed the two tables of the Law and those other precious remnants of the wilderness wandering: a pot of manna and Aaron's rod. It was the place where God dwelt among His People, and it was therefore Israel's pride and joy, the "praises of Israel."

b. This phrase could also be a lyrical way of referring to the psalms of praise which Israel once sang (Exodus 15) and continued to sing as the pedestal of God's throne. Where is God held higher as King than in the Hallelujahs of His worshippers!

Vv. 6-8

- ⁶ But I am a worm, and no man;
scorned by men, and despised by the people.
⁷ All who see me mock at me,
they make mouths at me,
they wag their heads;
⁸ "He committed his cause to the LORD; let him deliver him,
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"**

Read Matthew 27:39-43 and Mark 15:29-32. Notice how the Evangelists summarize the taunting of the passers-by with the expressions of derision that come from this Psalm.

The same people among whom God sits enthroned regard the Psalmist as little more than a worm. Their taunt is that the very God upon whom he had been relying is now rewarding His faithful devotee with such painful inactivity and embarrassing silence.

Vv. 9-11

- 9 Yet thou art he who took me from the womb;
thou didst keep me safe upon my mother's breasts.**
- 10 Upon thee was I cast from my birth,**
(REB -- To your care I was entrusted at my birth,)
and since my mother bore me thou hast been my God.

Again the agonizing disparity. God had brought the Psalmist to life. Eight days later he had been given the "sacrament" of initiation into God's People in circumcision. He was thereby entitled to share in the blessings and privileges of the Covenant community: "You shall be My People and I will be your God." But neither the Creator's goodness nor the special mercy of the LORD for His People seemed to be there for him in his hour of need.

The translation of the Revised English Bible is rich in its suggestion of an initiatory rite for infants. It expresses an important dimension also of Christian Baptism. According to the Rite of Baptism of the LBW and the LW, God has added the person baptized to His own People. And toward the end of the Rite the congregation welcomes the newly baptized into the LORD's family. So Christians will also experience the temptation of the Psalmist, "If I am a member of God's family, having been entrusted to the LORD at my birth, why does He abandon me?"

- 11 Be not far from me, for trouble is near and there is none to help.**

When trouble is near and when other helpers fail and comforts flee, we do not want God to be far away. There is no sure way of knowing what these troubles are; they are described only as the Psalmist feels them and in their effect. The following verses employ various stark images to convey the feelings of growing despair which the Psalmist experiences.

Vv. 12-18

- 12 Many bulls encircle me** (ready, as it were, to trample me),
strong bulls of Bashan (in northern Israel, where the best bulls were raised) **surround me;**
- 13 they** (the enemies) **open wide their mouths at me,**
like a ravening and roaring lion (an image used of the devil in 1 Peter 5:8).
- 14 I am poured out like water,**
(REB -- My strength drains away like water,)
and all my bones are out of joint (like a skeleton becoming disjointed);
my heart is like wax,
(REB -- My heart has turned to wax,)
it is melted within my breast (an image for losing courage and hope);
- 15 my strength is dried up like a** (very brittle) **potsherd,**
and my tongue cleaves to my jaws;
thou dost lay me in the dust of death (the grave).
- 16 Yea, dogs** (a contemptuous designation for my enemies) **are round about me;**
a company of evildoers encircle me;
they have pierced my hands and feet –
- 17 I can count all my bones –**
they stare and gloat over me;
- 18 they divide my garments among them,**
and for my raiment they cast lots.

The Hebrew of verses 16-17 is somewhat uncertain; hence you will find slightly differing translations.

Notice how in verses 12-18 the Psalmist's plight becomes increasingly desperate. Enemies surround him; their growing menace causes him to become increasingly helpless, until at length he must witness in advance how they treat him as if he were already dead by gloating over him and dividing his clothing among them.

If the Psalmist was using poetic imagery to depict his plight before his enemies, then we can recognize here the literal torture Jesus was suffering in his Passion and crucifixion. Read John 19:24; Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; and Luke 23:34. The Evangelists find in this Psalm the appropriate description of so many of the events of the Crucifixion of Jesus. Such a fulfillment opens their eyes to hitherto unsuspected prophecies of the Messiah!

Perhaps the most startling feature of these verses occurs in verse 15c. In the middle of the description of what the enemies are doing and how they are causing him to suffer, the Psalmist says to God, "Thou dost lay me in the dust of death." This is an unsettling notion: in the suffering of the Psalmist God is playing a very active role behind the scenes, as it were. That is even more the case in the death of Jesus. While it is right to tell the unfolding drama of the Passion and Death of Jesus on the human stage, it is profoundly necessary also to say what the Apostle Paul says about the crucifixion of Jesus in Romans 3:25. There he teaches that Jesus is the one whom God Himself put forward as a sacrifice of atonement. When we ask the question, "Who killed Jesus?" we can answer truthfully only if we give a multi-layered answer to that question. It was the Jewish leaders who pressed the charges; it was the Roman officials who gave sentence; it was we who by our sins necessitated such a redemption, if there was to be any salvation at all. But above all, it was God who was the primary actor, behind the scenes, in sacrificing His own Son.

Vv. 19-21

¹⁹ But thou, O LORD, be not far off!

O thou my help, hasten to my aid!

²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,

my life from the power of the dog!

²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion,

my afflicted soul from the horns of the wild oxen!

I find it significant that when the Psalmist gives voice to his complaints he addresses them to God. There is that marvelous confidence that somehow God will not be annoyed by such a lament. But now, when he makes his appeal for help and salvation, he appeals to – the LORD, to Yahweh. His enemies had taunted him (verse 8), "He committed his cause to the LORD, to Yahweh; let this Yahweh now deliver him, if He is indeed so well-pleased with him." Those taunts were cruel, all the more so because they seemed so patently well grounded: Yahweh was not answering the Psalmist's plea, and that only added to his inner agony. But his extreme agony does not deter the Psalmist, nor cause him to abandon, or to renounce, or to curse the LORD, his God. Instead the Psalmist calls out to that very God, to Yahweh, who seems so remote. That is indeed extraordinary faith. The LORD may (appear to) abandon the Psalmist, but not even under such adversity does the Psalmist abandon the LORD. He continues to call upon Yahweh. We may well ask where such courage and faith come from. For the Psalmist, and therefore for us also, there is the history of the LORD's dealings briefly alluded to in vv. 4-5.

The long years of Israel's sighing and bitterness in Egypt finally came to an end in the marvelous Exodus from Egypt under Moses. For Jesus in his humanity, and therefore for us also, there is in addition the baptismal promise in Mark 1:11: "You are my beloved son/daughter, with whom I am well-pleased." Nothing can stand against that divine promise. Above all, there is for us the climax of the whole story of salvation, namely, the vindication of that kind of faith when the Father raises His Son Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day, and imparts to us that death-proof Life. That impartation and the influence of that gift we know as the work of his Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.

Vv. 22-24

**²² I will tell of thy name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee:**

"Thy Name" is not simply the generic name "God," but – once more – the Name by which He wills to be known to all generations as the Savior God: Yahweh, the LORD (Exodus 3:13-15). That is the Name that grows: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Moses and the Exodus; the God of David and the prophets; the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who is at work among us by His Spirit.

The Psalmist, of course, will praise God for his salvation privately; but he here is giving us the good example of one who sings the praises of the LORD in the congregation of all God's children. It is the premier way of witnessing to God's goodness.

The New Testament epistle to the Hebrews also teaches us that this Psalm is the prayer of Jesus. Read Hebrews 2:10-12. Here we are told that Jesus learned the obedience of faith through what he suffered (Hebrews 5:8). In his resurrection glory Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. He is the Sanctifier, and calls God his Father. And he is sanctifying us, teaching us to call God our Father in heaven. Since in him we all have the one Father, we are brothers and sisters of the LORD. And Jesus Christ is not ashamed of that relationship!

^{23a} You who fear the LORD, praise him!

Although David was likely thinking here of all the faithful Israelites (as is suggested below by verse 23 b & c), the term "you God-fearers" was by New Testament times used in Judaism to refer to non-Israelite Gentiles who, though they did not keep the ceremonial Law of Israel, did worship the God of Israel. To "fear God" is to reverence, honor and worship Him. It does not mean to stand in craven fearfulness before Him, but to hold in Him in high and holy regard. In the parallelism of verse 23 b & c we are called upon to glorify Him and stand in awe of Him.

**^{23b} All you descendants of Jacob, glorify him,
^{23c} and stand in awe of him, all you descendants of Israel!**

We may, indeed must, regard ourselves as the descendants of Jacob (Israel), not of course through lineal descent, but because we hold genuine faith. That faith was evoked by the promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel), and they have now been fulfilled in Christ. Paul's argument in Galatians 3 culminates with the conclusion of 3:29: "Since you are Christ's, you are Abraham's offspring, heirs of the promise." Paul offers a similar argument in Galatians 4, which culminates in 4:28: "Now we, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of the promise." And once more Paul argues, this time in Romans 11, culminating in 11:25-26: "And so all Israel (i.e. the new Israel) will be saved." It is a tragic mistake, or a false teaching

which emasculates Christianity, to imagine that the Old Testament is the Hebrew (Jewish) Bible, while the New Testament contains the Christian Scriptures. The Christian Bible consists of the Old Testament (written mostly in Hebrew) and the New Testament (written in Greek). We simply cannot jettison the Old Testament and remain Christian.

**²⁴ For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted;
and he has not hid his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.**

This verse makes it clear that the Psalmist (presumably David) is writing his Psalm from the point of view of one who has now been delivered from his enemies and their life-threatening attacks. Likewise, it is the prayer of Jesus when he has been raised from the grave to the glory of the Father. This verse is the basis of the verses that follow and make them an appropriate liturgical inclusion for one of the Sundays of our Easter celebration.

Vv. 25-31, appointed for use on the Fifth Sunday of Easter
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Vv. 25-26

**²⁵ From thee comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
²⁶ The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD!
May your hearts live for ever!**

David recognizes that his deliverance comes from “Thee,” the LORD, just as Jesus also knew that his vindication had come from the same LORD, his heavenly Father. That praise is first shared in the congregation of the faithful, those who fear the LORD, who rejoice to receive the promise of verse 26. But as the next verses show, that Good News does not stay there.

Vv. 27-29

**²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.
²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.
²⁹ Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and he who cannot keep himself alive.**

These are astonishing statements. First, the LORD will in the end receive the universal acknowledgement and worship He alone deserves. He will be LORD of all, even over the non-Israelite nations. All will in the end turn to this LORD. The Christian Church, drawn from all nations and races and tongues and kindred, is the down-payment and show-case of that divine promised future. We in the church are living by the promise of such a future, which in turn is the heart of the Christian mission program.

Second, all the ends of the earth shall remember the LORD. In part this is another affirmation that there is only one God, and His Name is Yahweh. But it is also in part, perhaps, suggestive of a revelation of Himself that the One God has given to the nations, but a revelation that needs much pruning and shall indeed receive much purifying in the end. I say "perhaps," because the Hebrew verb does not so much mean to recall something long forgotten, but to bring Yahweh to mind in worship.

Verse 29 presents difficulties in the Hebrew text; hence you will find different translations in the various versions. The RSV makes good sense and is defensible. The proud who shall finally bow down and acknowledge the LORD's dominion are those who currently oppose Him; in their pride they refuse to submit themselves to Him. The LORD's dominion extends even to those who are dying and dead; that acclamation makes this section of the Psalm appropriate for use in the Easter season.

Vv. 30-31

³⁰ Posterity shall serve him;

men (and women) shall tell of the Lord to the coming generation,

**³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
that he has wrought it.**

The Christian Church has the joyful duty of instructing and forming the next generation in the way of the LORD's salvation. These verses can well serve as a motto for all fathers and mothers, as well as for Christian day schools. And you may be sure that grandparents become just a bit teary for joy when they see – as we do – that the children remain among the faithful worshippers of the LORD, and that also their grandchildren are being raised to sing the praises of our wonderful God. It bodes well for the Good News being handed on to the generation yet unborn. Praise the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit!

Psalm 8:1 begins: "O LORD, our Lord." That is the RSV translation for, "O Yahweh (the Name), our Lord (the title, e.g., our Master, our Boss). Here in verse 30 "Lord" translates as the title, not as the Name.

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 22:

Father, when your Son was handed over to torture and felt abandoned by you, he cried out from the cross. Then death was destroyed, and life was restored. By his death and resurrection save the poor, lift up the downtrodden, break the chains of the oppressed, that your Church may sing your praises; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We do well to reflect on the fact that we customarily think of Jesus on the Cross groaning out in the cry of dereliction, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" as though that were the whole of his word. And certainly both Matthew and Mark leave it there. It is however a most intriguing possibility that Matthew and Mark may have wanted to suggest that Jesus also prayed the rest of the Psalm, so that beyond the utter bleakness of this word there is also a distant ray of hope and confidence.

Nuggets

What do we affect during our lifetime? What, ultimately, is our legacy? I believe, in most cases, our legacy is our friends. We write our history onto them, and they walk with us through our days like time capsules, filled with our mutual past, the fragments of our hearts and minds. Our friends get our uncensored questions and our yet-to-be-reasoned opinions. Our friends grant us the chance to make our grand, embarrassing, contradictory pronouncements about the world. They get the best, and are stuck with the absolute worst, we have to offer. Our friends get our rough drafts. Over time, they both open our eyes and break our hearts.

Emerson wrote, “Make yourself necessary to someone.” In a chaotic world, friendship is the most elegant, most lasting way to be useful. We are, each of us, a living testament to our friends’ compassion and tolerance, humor and wisdom, patience and grit. Friendship, not technology, is the only thing capable of showing us the enormity of the world.

Stephen Dietz, as reported in *Context*, March 1, 2000

Sin the best news there is... Because with sin, there is a way out.... You can’t repent of confusion or psychological flaws inflicted by your parents – you’re stuck with them. But you can repent of sin. Sin and repentance are the only grounds for hope and joy, the grounds for reconciled, joyful relationships.

John Alexander, as reported in *Context*, March 1, 2000

A Daily Prayer

Day by day, dear God, of Thee three things we pray:
to see Thee more clearly,
love Thee more dearly,
follow Thee more nearly,
day by day. Amen.

Author unknown

In the beginning God made man in His own image, and ever since man has been returning the compliment.

Author unknown

1. O for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame;
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb.
2. What peaceful hours I once enjoyed,
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.
3. Return, O Holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest;
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn,
And drove Thee from my breast.
4. **The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from Thy throne
And worship only Thee.**

William Cowper (1731-1800)

Walter E. Keller

May 21, 2000 – **The Fifth Sunday of Easter**