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Psalm 33

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Psalm 33

(RSV) (LBW Lectionary)

This Psalm is a call to all the righteous to praise the LORD, in song, and with whatever musical instruments are available, as skillfully as possible, and even with new compositions. It is therefore completely relevant to our contemporary concerns for freshness.

Vv. 1-3

- ¹ Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright.**
- ² Praise the LORD with the lyre,
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!**
- ³ Sing to him a new song,
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.**

To rejoice, to praise in music, and to sing -- these are all complementary artistic activities. They befit, that is to say, they are the appropriate expression of, the righteous and upright. The righteous and the upright are the People whom the LORD has gathered as His own.

Why such rejoicing in the LORD? Because, as the following verses go on to say, His word and work combine to show His reliability, and the earth abounds with repeated demonstrations of His justice, steadfast love, righteousness, and mercy.

Vv. 4-5

- ⁴ For the word of the LORD is upright;
and all his work is done in faithfulness.**
- ⁵ He loves righteousness and justice;
The earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.**

The word of God is never an idle word; what He says, in fact happens. Likewise, when something in fact happens, it is because the LORD has spoken a prior command. Faithfulness points to the reliability and the trustworthiness of God as He reveals Himself in word and deed. Justice begins with seeing what is wrong, but God's justice does not stop with merely declaring something to be wrong, but goes on to right the wrong. Thus the justice of God is never passive, but always active. So also God's righteousness is never simply a spoken declaration that something is righteous, but it is a word of God that effects what it says. God's righteousness refers to the fact that when God sees something wrong, He takes action to correct it. And, so an observant Psalmist confidently asserts, the earth is full of cases in which God has shown Himself to be a God of steadfast love. So my rejoicing in the LORD occurs, or ought to occur, not merely when I personally have occasion to be glad; but instead it ought to occur also at the great numbers of times others are recipients of God's lavish and abundant mercies. This ought to be the case especially when others among the People of God receive the LORD's blessings.

In the following verses the Psalmist calls our attention to the fact that the LORD is not Israel's little tribal Deity, but the LORD, the God of Israel, is indeed the sovereign Creator of heaven and earth.

Vv. 6-9

**⁶ By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.**

As this unknown Psalmist undoubtedly intended it, this is a reference to the work of the original creation "in the beginning." You might want to recall Genesis 1:1-3:

⁽¹⁾ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.... ⁽²⁾ And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the (chaotic) waters. ⁽³⁾ And God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light.

Notice how in the poetic Hebrew parallelism of the Psalm "the word (command) of the LORD" is paralleled in the second stanza by "the breath (of speaking) of his mouth." When we would use our New Testament lenses, we can see a reference to the Second Person of the Trinity in the Word of God, and a reference to the Third Person of the Trinity in the Breath, that is, the Spirit, of God.

When the Psalmist speaks of the heavenly "host," he uses a conventional image of the numerous stars in the sky as a great army. Christian piety sometimes thinks of these as the angel armies of the heavens.

**⁷ He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses (reservoirs).**

Again, the Hebrew parallelism has both stanzas saying much the same thing, but in slightly different words. There is here another reminiscence of the ancient picture of the primeval chaos, and of the gathering of the churning waters by which the almighty God ordered the world. It is a poetic reference to the great power of God the Creator.

**⁸ Let all the earth fear the LORD,
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!**

The call to fear the LORD goes out, not only to the LORD's Chosen People, but also to all that He has created. Because He is the Creator of all, He is worthy to receive blessing and honor from all the inhabitants of the world. This verse prophetically looks forward to the future time when all creation will fear the LORD. The poetic parallelism is a good instruction in the biblical "fear of God." To "fear" God is to "stand in awe" of Him.

**⁹ For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood forth.**

Once more the basis for such fear and awe is celebrated. The LORD is the Creator of heaven and earth, and what is more, He accomplished this feat by the power of His word. Both members of the parallel attribute effectiveness to the speaking and command of God; whatever God says happens. That attribute of the speaking of God is also at work and on display in Jesus' declaration of forgiveness in Matthew 9:1-8; whether it is a word of healing or a word of forgiveness, what Jesus says happens.

In the verses that follow there is a strong accent on the sovereignty of the LORD, even and especially over the super-powers of the day. It is a strong confession of faith in the LORD to say that such powerful sovereignty belongs to the LORD, the God of tiny Israel, and that it is He who disposes the affairs of men and of nations.

Vv. 10-11

**¹⁰ The LORD brings the *counsel* of the nations to nought;
he frustrates the *plans* of the peoples.**

**¹¹ The *counsel* of the LORD stands for ever,
the *thoughts* of his heart to all generations.**

The nations and *the peoples* in verse 10 are synonyms, and both refer to the Gentiles, to the nations of the unbelievers. The LORD frustrates their designs, both those by which they commit their idolatries, and those by which they seek to inflict injury or harm on the People of God.

Notice that there is a contrast between the *counsel* of the nations (verse 10a), and the *counsel* of the LORD (verse 11a). You should know further that the *plans* of verse 10b and the *thoughts* of verse 11b are in Hebrew the same word differently translated.

Thus the meaning is that the unbelievers have counsels and plans, but the LORD will bring them to nothing. At the same time the LORD also has counsels and plans which He will effect, and which no one can alter or destroy. They shall last forever. I like the expression, "the thoughts of His heart." I am reminded of a passage from a letter the prophet Jeremiah wrote on God's behalf to the disheartened displaced Israelites who had been taken into Babylonian Exile (Jer. 29:10-14):

⁽¹⁰⁾ For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ⁽¹¹⁾ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ⁽¹²⁾ Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ⁽¹³⁾ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ⁽¹⁴⁾ I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

V. 12

**¹² Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!**

Israel is blessed; it is the nation whose God is the LORD. But it is not a matter of choosing the LORD as your national God; the nation whose God is the LORD is the nation whom God the LORD has chosen.

Sometimes you see an appeal that we in the United States of America should become that nation; or, what may be worse, that we are that nation, only now sadly lapsed. But that is not the way it works. As any individual becomes a LORD-fearer, typically through baptism, s/he thereby becomes a citizen of the "nation" whom the LORD has already chosen. That nation is Israel in the

Old Testament; and now in the New Testament that “nation” turns out to be not a nation at all, at least not in any political sense, because the New Israel is the Church.

Hence, what at first looks like a self-congratulatory beatitude, turns out to be a further praise of the LORD and of His gracious elective choice of Israel/the Church as His heritage.

Vv. 13-15

- ¹³ The LORD looks down from heaven,
he sees all the sons of men** (all humanity).
**¹⁴ From where he sits enthroned he looks forth
on all the inhabitants of the earth --
¹⁵ he who fashions the hearts of them all,
and observes all their deeds.**

When the LORD looks down from heaven, He sees not only the external actions of people down below, but, since he has fashioned not only the human body but also the human heart, He knows how the human mind works! He knows the human being perfectly and completely, inside and out.

Vv. 16-17

- ¹⁶ A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
¹⁷ The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.**

This is the corollary of saying that God the Creator is completely in charge of the world and its history. He directs history according to His plan, and nothing can impede His will.

Vv. 18-19

- ¹⁸ Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
¹⁹ that he may deliver their soul from death,
and keep them alive in famine.**

To fear and stand in awe of the LORD is also to hope in Him, and more specifically, to hope in His steadfast love. Never does the Bible oppose fearing God to loving God. They are two sides of the same coin of faith. The content of such fear and love is that we may be delivered from death and other life-threatening scourges. God keeps a watchful eye upon all such, the way parents keep a watchful eye upon their children.

The concluding three verses of the Psalm are a beautiful summary prayer. Notice that it is a communal prayer. Even if and when we pray it in privacy and solitude, the words of the Psalm teach us to pray it as a member of the People of God, with full awareness that we are not alone, but surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

Vv. 20-22

- 20 Our soul waits for the LORD;**
he is our help (in time of need) **and shield** (protection against the foe).
21 Yea, our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
22 Let thy steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in thee.

The person of faith prays. The person of faith is one who waits for the LORD, who rejoices in the LORD, who trusts the LORD, and who hopes in the LORD.

The LBW Prayer to accompany Psalm 33:

Lord God, through your Son you made the heavens and earth; through him you continue to accomplish the intentions of your heart. Make your chosen people witnesses of your truth among the nations and heralds of your glory in the heavens; for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Nugget

Interviewer : On some level or another, it appears that many evangelicals may be yearning for richer ecclesial formation. As you may know, students at a number of evangelical Protestant schools have over the past couple of decades gotten increasingly interested in Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, and more recently in Eastern Orthodoxy. But these developments have dismayed a number of evangelical theologians and other leaders. How much do you think evangelicals should care if their children embrace Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy?

Methodist Theologian Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University : I think they ought to rejoice. Then their children have the best possible of worlds and the parents did good (*sic*). Look, there's no way that evangelical life is sustainable within a liberal economy. And so their children are just figuring out now where you have to go to survive. Evangelical parents ought to be happy about that.

Interviewer : Why is evangelical life not sustainable in a liberal economy?

Hauerwas : There's no way it will be able to resist, for example, the church-growth movement. Churches in the church growth movement may last then years, but I don't think they'll last a century. Evangelicalism cannot help but be susceptible to a market economy to try to attract people on the grounds that "we have what you've been looking for." Traditional Christianity says, "Outside Christ and the church, you don't have the slightest idea what you're looking for. That's why you need us to reshape you and your desires."

Walter E. Keller

May 2, 1999, **The Fifth Sunday of Easter**