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Psalm 133: A Song of Ascents.

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Psalm 133
A Song of Ascents.
(RSV) (LW Lectionary)

You will notice that Psalms 120-134 form a section of the Psalter in which all the Psalms are called songs of Ascents. These are Songs which were sung by pilgrims coming from the various corners of Israel as they were making their way to the Temple on Mount Zion for the festivals. It is altogether likely that, when Jesus as a 12-year old boy went with his parents to the Temple in Jerusalem, this company from Nazareth would have been singing these Songs of Ascents, including this Psalm 133.

V. 1

**Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers (and sisters) live together in unity!**

Deuteronomy 25:5 speaks only of brothers, not sisters, living together in the father's house, as it provides for the levirate marriage in the event that a brother should die without heir. For a long time it was possible to think of "brothers" as an all-inclusive generic term for all the offspring in the family. That is simply not possible in our day. When we look around for a gender-inclusive term in English, it is not easy to find one. The New Revised Standard Version has "kindred." That is as good as any, I suppose. It would be better, in my judgment, to use the word "sibling." My preference is still simply to add "sisters," as I have above.

The theme of this short Psalm is the unity which pilgrims experience. The Psalm is not so much reflecting on the sense of unity that is to characterize life in the parental or extended family. I think all of us have reason to be grateful for a strong family life, and I know that you are all working hard at maintaining that precious oneness of family life in your own homes. Prayer to God to assist us in that endeavor should be near the top of our prayer agenda. But the Psalm is looking at the spiritual family, God's people of the Covenant family, and at that family bond which comes into being when all are gathered together in the worship and praise of the LORD. Good and pleasant as is the unity in the natural family life, so much the more is the unity good and pleasant in that family which shares God as our Father, the Church as our Mother, the Lord Jesus Christ as our brother, in the unity created by the Holy Spirit.

The verb translated "live together in unity" can also be translated "sit together in unity." This could then suggest sitting down together at a meal as a sign a deep fellowship. It would thus also be an appropriate Psalm to sing at the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

V. 2

**It is like the precious oil upon the head,
running down upon the beard,
upon the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!**

The figures the Psalmist employs to depict the pleasantness of brotherly concord were very meaningful in his day, but are more difficult to appreciate in ours. While we today can

appreciate the blessing of unity, it is difficult for us to liken it to oil dripping down the head and into the beard! Especially so in a day when they did not have a shower to jump into after it was all over, or a washing machine into which to throw the soiled vestments! So we have to work at trying to understand why it was a suitable simile. In Bible days, to anoint a guest's head with oil was to offer respectful hospitality. Jesus complained to his host, Simon that he had neglected that courtesy (Luke 7:46). Psalm 23:5 likens the Good Shepherd to a gracious host who anoints my head with oil. And in no way will the Psalmist accept such a gift from a wicked person (Psalm 141:5).

But there is more. It is not just the precious oil of generous hospitality that is here described, but it is the oil of anointing the High Priest Aaron. The holy anointing oil was a sweet-smelling mixture of olive oil, myrrh, cinnamon and other spices, and high priests were anointed with this oil when they were consecrated, or ordained, into their office (Exodus 30:22-33). No other use of this special mixture was permitted.

The priests were mediators of the blessings which God designed for His People. The blessing of unity has something to do with the priestly office in the Temple. Priests direct the attention of the pilgrim worshippers to the God from whom all blessings flow, and from whom comes also the gift of unity. (The LBW Psalm Prayer below helpfully sees the oil as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, but unfortunately not so helpfully by-passes the agency of the priesthood, or the ordained ministry.)

V. 3

**It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.**

A second metaphor likens the unity of the family of God to the heavy, refreshing, life-sustaining dew that they found on Mt. Hermon, the tallest mountain in Palestine, a 9,100 foot peak in the Antilebanon range in Syria north of Israel. Such generous dew is a picture of the life God gives on Mt. Zion. For it is *there* that the LORD commands the blessing of life eternally.

Mount Zion was the seat of the Temple, the place on earth where God dwells, and the Temple is the place from which God distributes his blessings among His worshippers. You can see why Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that he, in his own body, is now the Temple of God; for Jesus is the mediator of the blessings of God to His People, and it is to Jesus we need to look to obtain blessings from the LORD.

"Life forevermore" is not here immortality; it is rather the inexhaustible and unending supply of life which God alone can give. Of course, once we put on our New Testament lenses, we can see here another foreshadowing of the resurrection life which comes to us through Christ.

This Psalm is chosen for this Sunday because the Gospel for the Seventh Sunday of Easter (John 17:1-12) concludes with this verse from Jesus' high priestly prayer:

"And now I am no more in the world, but they (my disciples) are in the world, and I am coming to Thee. Holy Father; keep them in Thy Name, which Thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one."

The LBW Prayer to accompany Psalm 133:

Lord God, you have poured into our hearts the precious oil of your Spirit of love. Make us of one heart and of one will, so that we may be true members of the body of Jesus Christ, united as he has commanded us; and to you be the glory now and forever. Amen.

Walter E. Keller

May 16, 1999 – **The Seventh Sunday of Easter**