

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

Lectionary: 37 and 38

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish?¹

The drama in the Passion Narrative of Luke is truly overpowering, thereby providing us with an opportunity to reflect on one incident at a time. Luke's Gospel, unlike the others, begins with the institution of the Eucharist during which both Judas and Peter are challenged. Then we move to the garden where Jesus, in great agony, prays with such intensity that his sweat is like blood, the mob comes for him and one of his own betrays him with a kiss, while some of the other disciples run and at least one engages in violent defense of Jesus; We might consider Peter's denial of ever having known Jesus in light of his declaration never to betray him but rather to die for him. Also unique to the Lucan account of the Lords' Passion, are the moments when he intercedes for the people asking the Father to forgive them, and the conversation between Jesus and the men being crucified on each side of him. Consider, in which of these scenes can you see yourself—with which characters do you identify most.

Today though, I would like to focus on the words of King David in Psalm 22, spoken by Jesus on the Cross. They can sound scandalous or confusing for a Christian, but the whole of scripture tells us, and Church teaching affirms, God does not abandon / forsake anyone, especially Jesus. In fact, in the conversation between the two criminals and Jesus we see Jesus, during his human suffering, continuing to do the will of the Father, loving both men but giving mercy and forgiveness to the one who repents, who receives the gift of faith and is able to make an act of faith as he asks Jesus, by name, to remember him in His kingdom. In this moment we see both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus.

St Thomas Aquinas wrote: *'Among other matters this psalm has as its special theme the Passion of Christ; hence this is its literal sense'*. When we read this Psalm in light of what happened on Mount Calvary, we see the fulfillment of this scripture throughout Psalm 22. His garments were divided among his executioners (**19**). He experienced the parching thirst (**16**); his bones were disjointed (**15, 18**); his hands and feet were dug into by nails (**17**). His enemies mocked him, using the very words of verse (**9**); they stood staring at him (**18**). Therefore, St. Thomas continued: *'And so, although in a figurative sense the psalm speaks of David, yet especially it refers literally to Christ'*.²

There are other Psalms like Psalm 22. Psalms that express human anguish, pleas for God's mercy, suffering, healing, deliverance, trust in God's steadfast love and protection, a refuge, God's faithfulness and power. They all capture the range of human emotions and experiences and reflect a reliance on God's loving providence and the belief that He has the power to change situations of suffering. But none of them are spoken by the Suffering Servant – Son of God with the prophetic clarity of Psalm 22 which points to the convergence of our cries for salvation and God's response, ushering in the Kingdom of God.

It is very likely that Jesus recited the whole psalm that day. Voicing from the second verse of the Psalm and continuing to the 23rd verse a cry of real anguish, of extreme suffering and isolation. They express confusion about the felt silence of God, who could help if it was God's will. From the 24th verse through to the end the words remind us of the deliverance and mercy of God in times past and they express great trust in God's mercy now. That in the midst of the suffering of God's servant, the servant is not without hope. He is confident that God is at work bringing about salvation.

¹ [New American Bible](#), Revised Edition (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ps 22:2.

² T. E. Bird, ["The Psalms,"](#) in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard and Edmund F. Sutcliffe (Toronto; New York; Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 451.

The Fathers of the Church, as is expressed in the quote of St. Augustine on the topic, often draw on this psalm because they believed that by adopting the feelings expressed in it, Jesus showed himself to be truly man while being at the same time God: *“Keep our faith alive; try to understand that the one whom we a short time ago contemplated in his divine state took on the form of a slave, made himself in all things like men, made himself in his way of being identical to human beings; that he was humbled and made obedient unto death. Let us consider how he even wished to make his own those words he spoke from the cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Although we turn to him as God, he makes his petition to God as a servant. In the first place we see him as the Creator, and in the other, as a creature. Without suffering any change to his being, he took on our created nature to transform it and to make us along with him one man, head and body. Let us pray, therefore, to him, through him, and in him, and let us speak with him, for he speaks to us”*³

Justin Martyr, Augustine of Hippo, and many subsequent theologians have interpreted Psalm 22 as a prophecy of Christ's Passion. Pope Benedict XVI noted that Jesus, in quoting Psalm 22, made his own the cry of humanity that suffers from God's apparent absence, carrying this cry to the Father's heart.⁴ The feelings of a pious sufferer in sorrow and deliverance are vividly portrayed. He earnestly pleads for divine aid on the ground of his relation to God, whose past goodness to His people encourages hope, and then on account of the imminent danger by which he is threatened. The language of complaint is turned to that of rejoicing in the assured prospect of relief from suffering and triumph over his enemies. The use of the words of the first verse of Psalm 22 by our Savior on the cross, and the quotation of Ps 22:18 by John ^{Jn 19:24}, and of Ps 22:22 by Paul ^{Heb 2:12}, as fulfilled in His history, clearly intimate the prophetic and Messianic purport of the Psalm.⁵ In his suffering, Jesus identifies with all those who feel abandoned and alone, offering hope and redemption through his love.^{6 7}

*“As we read and reread the Psalms, we learn the language of prayer... teaching every man and woman how to praise him, how to thank him and supplicate him; how to invoke him in joy and in suffering, and how to recount the wonders of his works and of his Law. In short, the Psalms are the Word of God that we human beings use to speak with him. In this book we do not encounter ethereal people, abstract people, those who confuse prayer with an aesthetic or alienating experience. The Psalms are not texts created on paper; they are invocations, often dramatic, that spring from lived existence. We must not forget that to pray well we must pray as we are, without embellishment. Go in front of the Lord... with the good things, the bad things, the things that no one knows about. In the Psalms we hear the voices of men and women of prayer in flesh and blood, whose life, like that of us all, is fraught with problems, hardships and uncertainties.”*⁸

The promises made by the psalmist in verses 25 and 26 imply an invitation to praise the Lord, extended to all who seek Him, and who desire to have unending happiness, a contentment greater than earthly things can offer. Verses 27 and 28 take account of all nations, looking forward to a universal kingdom of God. Even the dead, verse 29 will join in the praise of God. Finally, verses 30 and 31 speak of the future in which praise and worship of God will continue to be offered by future generations and by the new people that will emerge.⁹

There are several great so called ‘takeaways’ when reflecting on Psalm 22, especially since Jesus has raised it so powerfully to our attention.

³ St Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 85, 1

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI 2008 AD [Homily](#)

⁵ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 353.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI [General Audience of 8 February 2012](#)

⁷ Pope Saint John Paul II 1982, *Salvifici Doloris*: On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering

⁸ Pope Francis, [General Audience](#) of 14 October 2020

⁹ James Gavigan, Brian McCarthy, and Thomas McGovern, eds., *Psalms and the Song of Solomon*, The Navarre Bible (Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers, 2003), 92–96.

- **Trust in God during suffering:** Even when feeling forsaken, the Psalmist continues to call God "my God," demonstrating unwavering faith. This teaches us to maintain trust in God, even in our darkest moments.¹⁰
- **Remember God's Faithfulness:** The Psalmist recalls how God delivered their ancestors, providing a basis for hope. Remembering God's past faithfulness can strengthen us during trials.
- **Prayer as a Means of Coping:** Even when God seems silent, prayer can help us express our pain, seek comfort, and find strength.
- **Suffering Can Lead to Praise:** Ultimately shifting from lament to praise, the Psalm suggests that even in suffering, God is at work. This teaches us that suffering can be a path to deeper faith and gratitude.
- **Empathy and Solidarity:** Jesus's use of Psalm 22 on the cross connects his suffering with the suffering of humanity. This encourages us to show empathy and solidarity with those who are in pain.¹¹
- **God's Apparent Absence:** The Psalm acknowledges the very common human experience of feeling that God is absent, silent, and teaches us that even when God seems distant, He is still present and working in our lives.¹²
- **Hope in the Face of Despair**¹³

Reflection Questions

1. Consider the significance of Jesus Christ quoting Psalm 22 on the cross in relation to both his divine and human nature, drawing upon the interpretations of theologians mentioned in the text.
2. Consider the role of the Psalms, particularly those expressing suffering and anguish, in the spiritual lives of believers. How do these ancient prayers remain relevant for contemporary experiences of hardship and doubt?
3. Explore the concept of God's apparent absence in the context of Psalm 22 and the Passion of Christ. How does the Psalm address this feeling, and what does it ultimately reveal about God's presence and action in the world?
4. Compare and contrast the initial lament and the eventual praise found in Psalm 22. What does this movement reveal about the nature of hope and trust in God amidst suffering?
5. Considering the various "takeaways" from Psalm 22 discussed in the text, how can reflecting on this Psalm deepen one's understanding of Palm Sunday and the events leading up to Easter?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Passion Narrative:** The account in the Gospels of Jesus Christ's suffering and death, from the Last Supper to his burial.
- **Eucharist:** The Christian sacrament commemorating the Last Supper, in which bread and wine are consecrated and consumed as the body and blood of Christ.
- **Psalm:** A sacred song or hymn, many of which are found in the Old Testament Book of Psalms.
- **Messianic:** Relating to the Messiah, the promised deliverer of the Jewish people, believed by Christians to be Jesus Christ.
- **Prophetic:** Containing a prediction or foretelling, often believed to be divinely inspired.
- **Literal Sense:** The primary or straightforward meaning of a text.
- **Figurative Sense:** A non-literal meaning of a text, often involving symbolism or allegory.
- **Providence:** God's benevolent guidance and care of creation.
- **Lament:** An expression of sorrow, grief, or regret.
- **Supplicate:** To ask for something earnestly or humbly.
- **The Fathers of the Church:** Influential early Christian theologians and writers whose works are considered authoritative.
- **Homily:** A religious discourse or sermon, usually delivered during a church service.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, [General Audience](#) of 14 September 2011

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI 2008 AD [Homily](#)

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, [General Audience](#) of 14 December 2005

¹³ Pope Francis, [Homily](#): Palm Sunday (2 April 2023)