

Psalm 138

The following is a line-by-line look at the verses from Psalm 138 that are used in the Mass this weekend.

I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with all my heart, for you have heard the words of my mouth. The first line of the Psalm invokes the greatest of commandments, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut 6:5, Mt 22:37, Mk 12:30, Lk 10:27). God does not want just part of us, nor does he want something external to us. He wants *all* of us, and not merely externally, but from the inmost depth of our being. The Greek version says **I will confess to you, O Lord, with all my heart**, and St. Jerome interprets this to mean that in confessing sins, it is not enough to say one and leave out the other, but that the rewards of God will only come to one who makes a full confession.

In the presence of the angels I will sing your praise; I will worship at your holy temple. Someone who truly lives out the great commandment of love and makes a full confession to God from the heart becomes worthy to worship him in the fullest manner. By this manner of life, one becomes equal to the angels and worships in their company. The holy temple referred to here is not the one destroyed 2000 years ago, but it is the eternal and unseen temple. “For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb 9:24).

I will give thanks to your name, because of your kindness and your truth. These two qualities are the attributes of God most frequently named in the Book of Psalms. **Kindness** (in Hebrew, *chesed*) appears 127 times. **Truth** (in Hebrew, *’emeth*) appears 37 times. In daily human life, it is often tempting to see these two characteristics as opposites or contradictory, such that you have to pick one or the other. “Should I say the truth, or should I just be nice?” But in God, his kindness and his truth always go hand in hand, similarly to the line of the Psalm we heard last week,

“Justice and peace shall kiss” (Ps 85:10). God sends his Son into the world so that we too can reconcile in our lives both truth and loving kindness.

When I called, you answered me; you built up strength within me. The end of this line, in both the Hebrew and Greek, is more accurately **you built up strength in my soul**. Though we can certainly pray to God for our material needs (“give us this day our daily bread,”) it is in receiving from him our spiritual needs that we are prepared for eternal life. A man cannot attain any spiritual strength without the help of God, and so is dependent on him entirely for this gift.

The Lord is exalted, yet the lowly he sees, and the proud he knows from afar. This is an axiom of the spiritual life: In seeking to become lower, God will know us and lift us up. In seeking to go higher, we become puffed up and God will cast us down. This is repeated constantly in Our Lord Jesus’ life and teaching: “When you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, go up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. **For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted**” (Lk 14:10-11). We see this rule played out in a remarkable way in the contrast between Mary and the devil, the woman and the serpent (Rev 12:1-11, Gen 3:15). Mary, when greeted by the angel, responded, “I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). For this she is exalted and can truly say, “All generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me” (Lk 1:48). The devil, in contrast, says, “I will not serve” (Jer 2:20) and is cast down from heaven in his pride.

Your kindness, O Lord, endures forever; forsake not the work of your hands. The Psalm by asking that God, whose mercy endures forever, to continue being merciful for those who call to him. Let us make this our prayer as well.