

Psalm 95 Reflection by Pamila Jaskowiak

As I have delved into Psalm 95, it's beauty has opened up and is once again an example of how interconnected the Bible is. This reflection is a stab at unfolding the mysteries contained within, but truly the sources at the end are of greater worth and more elegance. However, I bring what I can to this discussion. For this reflection, I will explore the major ideas in each stanza using other Bible passages, the Catholic Catechism (CC) and commentaries such as Navarre and Augustine. Here are some of the main themes that I will touch on and are worth deeper study: repentance, worship, providence, obedience, and rest.

Psalm 95: 1-2

Come, let us sing to the Lord
And shout with joy to the Rock who saves us.
Let us approach him with praise and thanksgiving and
Sing joyful songs to the Lord.

Repentance

This psalm starts with an invitation – come. The invitation to come implies that the hearer of the psalm is far away. This is where many of us start our journey and our day, far away from God. And so we are invited to come, to draw closer to God, to approach him. To draw closer to God means to repent and convert. We realize that we are far from God and we desire to leave behind whatever is keeping us from him.

Our God is indeed the Rock who saves us. In calling him the Rock, it brings to mind the Israelites in the desert who drank the water from the Rock who sustains them (Ex 17; Num 14). It also brings to mind the song of Moses at the end of his life (Deut 32). He sang praises to God as the Rock who saves them. It brings to mind too Jesus' words to the woman at the well ("If you would ask, he would give you living water") and his words to Peter ("You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church"). Jesus is the Rock from which flows the water of salvation and it is from the Church that it flows.

We are invited not only to approach our God, but to approach him with praise, thanksgiving and joyful songs. For our Lord is the Rock from whom salvation flows like honey and he invites us closer to his side, so that we can drink of this salvation. Because he is our Rock who saves us, it is right and just for us to come closer only with praise and thanksgiving and joyful songs.

Stanza 2:

The **Lord is God**, the mighty God,
The great king over all the gods.
He holds in his hands the depths of the earth
And the highest mountains as well.
He made the sea; it belongs to him,
The dry land, too, for it was formed by his hands.

There are many idols in our lives, many things that distracts us from the one true God. What we focus on, give our energy to and spend our time and thoughts, that is what becomes our idols if it is not the Lord. Adoration is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator (CC 2627). We come before our God to acknowledge our place as creature and him as Creator. In doing this we reject all other gods and idols in our lives. For we cannot serve God and mammon (Mt 6:44).

He is the Creator who made all things and every moment he holds us in existence. We do not draw a breath without him willing us to live. It is in this sense that he holds in his hands the lowest and the highest of the created things including us. All these things he made, not because he needed any of it, but for His Glory and out of love (CC 294). By the very fact that we exist, we can know his love for us (CC 301). Indeed he saw all that he made and declared it good (Genesis).

Stanza 3:

Come, then, let us bow down and worship,
Bending the knee before the Lord, our maker.
For he is our God and we are his people,
The flock he shepherds.

Worship

Again we are invited to come, and as Augustine says the repetition is an emphasis for us to draw closer to God. Once we have acknowledged our Lord as our Rock, our Savior, and our Creator, and we have repented and converted, we are called to do more than just sing praises and give thanks. We are invited to bow down to him, to bend our knees, to humble ourselves and exalt him. "The worship of the one God sets man free from turning in on himself, from the slavery of sin and the idolatry of the world." (CC 2097)

Something that I have struggled with in my own journey to God, in coming closer to him, is to understand what worship is and what is acceptable to God as worship. Coming from a Protestant background, worship has always been the music and singing praises of God. This is a good thing, yet I know that now as a Catholic, worship is something deeper and more wonderful, something more than just words. It is a participation in the work of God (in the liturgy!). It is doing his will. (CC 1070)

As the Catechism teaches, we are in the state of journeying on this side of heaven (CC 302). Journeying means that we have a destination, an end, and we are moving towards that end which should be heaven. Come the psalmist bids us a second time. Come and choose wisely, for our path is leading us either to God or away from him.

Providence

We can bend our knee before our God because all things come from him and in his divine providence, he is drawing us to him. To be on our knees is to place our trust in God as our Creator. When we do not trust, we cannot place ourselves in a vulnerable position on the floor, instead we try to become our own god and control everything around us. "The prayer of the Psalms is the great school of this trust." (CC 304).

Stanza 4:

Today, listen to the voice of the Lord:
Do not grow stubborn, as your fathers did
In the **wilderness**,
When at **Meriba** and **Massah**
They challenged me and provoked me,
Although they had seen all of my works.

Today, the psalmist says. Today – not the day of the psalmist, not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today right now, in every moment (CC 2659). As the flock that God shepherds, we are called each day to pray and converse with God. We acknowledge him and offer him our worship on blended knee, and open our hearts to the voice of the Lord.

Today calls to mind the Our Father (“Give us this day our daily bread”). It is in the liturgy that we answer the call “Come” and “Today”. The Catechism teaches that “This ‘today’ of the living God which man is called to enter is “the hour” of Jesus’ Passover, which reaches across and underlies all history”(CC 1165).

The voice of the Lord can be likened to sunlight and our hearts are either wax or clay. Whatever we do to condition our heart – worshipping God or idols, trusting in Him or in ourselves, repentance or sin – it makes our heart like wax or clay and then when the voice of the Lord touches our hearts, our hearts will either melt or harden. Today we pray. Today we choose to listen. Today we remove those things from our lives that harden our hearts.

The wilderness is an interesting place. This wilderness that the psalmist speaks of is referencing to the time that Israel spent in the desert between their exodus from Egypt and entering the promise land. We see another wilderness in the New Testament. John the Baptist – a voice crying out in the wilderness – and the temptation of Jesus. Also, when Jesus left the disciples to pray. What does the wilderness symbolize?

To be in the wilderness is to be in the middle of God’s creation, away from civilization created by human hands. It is be dependent on God and his Providence. When we are in the wilderness – whether the wilderness outside or the wilderness of our lives, we have a choice to make on whether we trust God or not.

When Jesus was tempted, he rebuked Satan with scripture: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” (CC 2119, LK 4:9, Deut 6:16) To challenge God is to challenge his goodness and his providence. It’s to doubt all that God has done and will do and to doubt his love for us.

Meribah and Massah is a powerful story from the journey of the Israelites through the desert. These two names are Hebrew for “proving and strife” (Bible Hub). The Lord had brought the Israelites out of slavery to worship him in the wilderness, that they could learn that he is their God and they are the flock he shepherds. God had just visited plagues upon the people of Egypt and brought the people out through the parting of the Red Sea.

In Ex 15:26, we read:

It was there that the Lord, in making rules and regulations for them, put them to the test. “If you really listen to the voice of the Lord, your God,” he told them, “and do what is right in his eyes: if you heed his commandments and keep all his precepts, I will not afflict you with any of the diseases with which I afflicted the Egyptians; for I, the Lord, am your healer.”

After which the Israelites grumbled against God, first for bread and quail and then water. It is here at Massah and Meribah that they put the Lord to the test. They seemed to have forgotten everything he had done and what he had said, and instead of asking and trusting, they grumbled. They demanded to know why they were led out to the desert to die. There God commanded Moses to strike the rock to bring forth water.

The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" (Ex 17:7)

This is what sin does, it makes us blind to the goodness of God. It causes a deep dissatisfaction with our lives and ourselves. When sin is not dealt with, it grows and we become bitter. Full of sin, we ask whether the Lord is in our midst or not, because we cannot see him.

It was at the Waters of Massah that the Israelites, fearing death in the desert, in the wilderness said is the Lord with us or not? It was at the Waters of Maribah, after the death of Miriam, that they said, oh that we too would die! Why did you lead us here? It was in the boat at sea in the midst of a storm that the Apostles shook our Lord awake and said Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?

In fear and worry and anxiety, they forgot who God is, what he had done for them. Like Peter walking on the sea, they stopped looking to God and instead looked to their circumstances, to their environment, and to their predicament. Look at how they accused their God – Is the Lord with us? Why did you lead us here? Do you not care?

And look at how God responded: He brought forth water from the rock, quail and bread from heaven, calmed the sea, reached out to Peter and steadied him. He says to them and to us now, Oh man of little faith, look to your God! To your Father in Heaven, who created all of this that you might know him! To the Son, who opened the gates of heaven, that you would have access to heaven! To the Paraclete, who dwells within you, that you would never be alone!

We are journeying from slavery to the Promised land. We are in the desert. And our hearts yearn for the trappings of our slavery, of the comforts. In this desert, this desert of Stay-at-Home, we have our spiritual communion. We have the Holy Spirit and our Mother. We are not alone.

He asks for our hearts, that we would remove the disordered desires of slavery from them. He asks for our obedience, that he may show us the way to the Promised Land. He says, see what I have done for you, why do you mourn the loss of your slavery? Trust in God, have faith in Him. He will lead you to the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.

Stanza 5:

Forty years I endured that generation.
I said, "They are **a people whose hearts go astray**
And they do not know my ways."
So I swore in my anger,
"They shall not **enter into my rest.**"

When I contemplate the ties between the Passover and Sunday Mass, between the Israelites journeying to the Promised Land and us Christians journeying to heaven, it overwhelms me.

Obedience

Moses was handed the Decalogue, or the "ten words" by God on the holy mountain. These were the commandments that the people agreed to follow. They are pre-eminently the words of God. This is the law of the Old Covenant, the way that the slaves could learn freedom from their sins (CC 2057). The new

law brought forth by Jesus did not abolish the commandments, but are first in following Jesus. Through the commandments and through poverty and chastity, we come to know Jesus (CC 2053).

The Psalmist is warning us today, for we have something greater than the Israelites had which was the law of the Old Covenant. We are journeying to a Promise Land greater than the physical land they inherited. We are given signs greater than the manna in the desert. The old has been fulfilled in the new.

As we read in the Book of Hebrews:

Take care, brothers, that none of you may have an evil and unfaithful heart, so as to forsake the living God. Encourage yourselves daily while it is still “today”, so that none of you may grow hardened by the deceit of sin. (3:12 – 13)

And later on:

Therefore, let us strive to enter into that rest, so that no one may fall after the same example of disobedience. (4:11)

Summary

This Psalm beautiful encompasses the Christian life and the Holy Spirit’s call to us, to repent, worship, trust in God’s providence, obey and enter into his rest. It is worth meditating on and getting deeper into these subjects.

Further Reading:

Catholic Catechism

2627 – Adoration

294 – Creation

301 – our existence

2097 – worship

2070 – worship in liturgy

302 – Journey to heaven

304 – Trust

2659 – every moment for prayer

1165 – “Today”

2119 – Tempting God

2057 – Old Covenant

2053 – New Covenant

(Not cited in this reflection but good)

1165 – Liturgy

539 – Jesus freeing us from sin

345-349 – Sabbath and 8th day

Psalm 95 Commentary by Augustine on New Advent

(<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801095.htm>)

Exodus 15 - 17

Numbers 14

Deut 32

Hebrews 3

Mt 6:44

See biblical passages referenced in the Catechism

Urbi et Orbi Coronavirus by Pope Francis (<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/urbi-et-orbi-pope-coronavirus-prayer-blessing.html>)