

**Meditation at Morning Prayer by
Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam.**

*"We are to celebrate joy so that the liturgy mirrors
the abundance of good things provided by God"*

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Psalm 95 – This Psalm is a Psalm of personal dedication. It helps to refocus our life on God as we live in a busy world. It calls for a personal decision. Recognising the fact that God pertains to my whole life, then a way of life, a practical moral response follows.

As Christians we dedicate our whole day to God in the morning offering. This Psalm does something similar for the Israelite. The Israelites experience God in their history. With this God they had entered into a special relationship which they called the Covenant. Moving from God as Lord in their history they acknowledged God as the creator and Lord of all that exists.

They recognised the need to renew their Covenant with God every day. By praying this Psalm we are ready for our encounter with God in daily life. God is the rock (Verse 2). This image alludes to the rock in the wilderness from which water flowed when the people were thirsty. Here God as rock is seen as the fountain and source of life.

God is the sovereign God. The Pagan Gods were thought to abide on the mountain tops, here the heights of the mountains and the raging seas are all subject to God. So God is the only God of absolute power.

The result and the only possible reaction for us is one of adoration – come in, bow, bend low, kneel. This is the reaction of the creature to the creator.

The special relationship with God which we call the covenant is acknowledged: “he is our God and we are his people”. The perennial presence of God is underlined. This God is with us today “owe that today you would listen to his voice”. We are challenged to open our hearts, unlike the dessert generation who put the Lord to the test.

Today by praying this Psalm we have access to God in a special way.

Psalm 80.

This Psalm is a national lament. The background of a national lament Psalm is some disaster, such as defeat in war which effects the whole people. On such occasions it would be fitting to hold a day of fasting and prayer. During this the nation would remember a particular catastrophe the people intercede for the restoration of Israel. In this Psalm the particular circumstances which gave rise to this lamentation are not obvious.

As you read the Psalm you will notice it is characterised by a refrain:

“God of hosts, bring us back;

let your face shine on us and we shall be saved”.

That refrain is repeated a few lines further on and again at the very end.

The first section, Verses 1-3 is a cry for God’s help. The Psalmist is very conscious of the contrast between God’s presence in the liturgy of the temple and his absence from the people’s human experience at a national level. This comes out very much in the refrain in Verse 3, God of hosts, bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved”. Here the Psalmist asks God to turn towards us with his favour and blessing and restore the broken relationship.

In Verses 4-7 we sense the divine anger. God is depicted as being angry with the people. The fact that their prayers have not been answered so far is interpreted as due to God’s continued anger which was regarded as fully deserved. Trouble has become as much a part of the people’s life, as food and drink “you have fed them with tears for their bread and an abundance of tears for their drink”. The people have become a laughing stock for their neighbours and enemies.

In Verses 8-13, the Psalmist focuses on Israel’s glory and defeat. Israel is frequently compared to a vine. We think particularly of Isaiah’s song of the vineyard, where God declares that “I will break down its wall and it shall be trampled down, I will make it a waste”. (Isaiah 5:5-6). Without walls, a vineyard was open to the public, for walking and picking the fruit. The vine was one of the most prized plants, so it provided a fitting metaphor for the people of God, the most privileged of the nations. In this Psalm, Israel, the vine is brought from Egypt, and is planted in Canaan. The Land is prepared by driving out nations, a poetic account of the settlement of the tribes in the Promised Land. God is depicted as the vine dresser “before it you cleared the ground; it took root and spread through the land. Israel had complete possession of the land. Even the mighty cedars were overshadowed by the vine. Then in the next verse the same vineyard that was so carefully prepared and made fruitful was now ravaged even by the wild boar, an unclean animal in the Jewish mind. This verse conveys the idea of the withdrawal of divine protection.

A Prayer for Divine Help – Verses 14 – 19.

Conscious of their separation from God the people implore God to look down from heaven and see, to visit the vine that is Israel. The Psalmist does not doubt the fact that God is “a good shepherd”, despite the overwhelming loss and devastation. Israel begins every prayer with firm faith in God; no question can dislodge the devout Israelite from that position, even though reality may seem to deny it. The people undertake not to relapse into idolatry “and we shall never forsake you again”.

This Psalm is a consolation and a challenge for us as we cope with difficult situations which seem to herald the absence of God in our contemporary culture. Nevertheless our faith transcends this experience of the eclipse of God. We are reminded of the way in which the apostle Paul confronted the challenges of his day when he said “neither death nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, will be able to separate from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”. (Romans 8: 38-39).

Canticle Isaiah 12:1-6.

Here we have a hymn of thanksgiving. This hymn is unique in that it does not relate the past favours but rather anticipates future graces. It is the song of a redeemed people who are drawn to praise God. There is confidence in God who has pardoned Israel’s sins and gathered his dispersed people. The language and form reflect the psalms, particularly the individual psalms of thanksgiving. While the threats have been carried out, a time of salvation is at hand:

“I thank you Lord, you are angry with me,

But your anger has passed and you give me comfort”.

God is presented as the source of living water, “with joy we draw water from the wells of salvation”. The people have a responsibility for making God known to the other nations “declare the greatness of his name”. So while the Psalmist looks back on hard times, now he can praise God, since the crises are passed. As we recite the Psalm we too are encouraged to deepen our faith in the God who is, the Holy one in our midst.

Psalm 81.

To appreciate this Psalm it may be helpful to think of it within the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles. This was the most joyful of Israel’s feasts. In the Psalm we have the emphasis of blowing the trumpet, the new moon, the full moon and the feast day. That feast was ushered in with trumpets on the first day of the month, the celebration of the new moon and again on the full moon, the 15th day.

Towards the end of the Psalm there are references to Israel’s wandering in the desert. The Feast of Tabernacles was instituted to remind the people of Israel that they dwelt in tents when the Lord brought them out of the land of Egypt.

The first part of the Psalm summons to festivity. Verses 1-3.

The second part consists of a prophetic challenge. Here we have reference to the way the Israelites were oppressed in Egypt when they were employed in forced labour: “I have freed your shoulder from the burden.....you called in distress and I saved you”.

God does not tolerate rival deities “let there be no foreign God among you, no worship of an alien God”. The Lord is the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt.

“But my people did not hear my voice, Israel would not obey. So I left them in their stubbornness of heart to follow their own designs”. Here is a note of sadness and irony: in spite of all that God has done for his people, they are still rebellious. If Israel would submit to the will of God, then God would subdue all their enemies. We sense a mingling of God’s kindly pity on the people’s stubbornness; the promise at the end shows that God’s goodness finally wins the day. The mention in the last verse of finest wheat and honey from the rock form an allusion to the familiar promise of a land flowing with milk and honey, a scene of abundant generosity. All this goodness awaits Israel if they turn to the Lord. We are to celebrate joy so that the liturgy mirrors the abundance of good things provided by God.

Scripture Reading from Romans.

This takes up the theme of food and drink from the Psalm but deepens the idea by insisting on righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Obedience to Jesus Christ will make us acceptable to God.

The Prayers of Intercession acknowledge what God has done in Jesus Christ and so we must keep him before our eyes, walk in his ways, asking for courage to direct our steps.