

SUNDAY THEOSIS #3-26

Praying the Psalms By Father Jack Custer

The LampLighting Psalms (Part 1)

PSALM 141 (140)

A Psalm of David

1 O LORD, I have cried to you; hear me.¹
Give ear to my voice

[the voice of my prayer]
when I cry to you.

2 Let my prayer be directed as incense
before you,
the lifting up of my hands *[+like]*
an evening sacrifice!

3 Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD;
keep watch over the door of
my lips!

4 Incline not my heart to evil things, to
*making excuses for evil deeds,*²
and let me not partake of what
they choose.³

5 Let a just man strike me out of kind-
ness and rebuke me
but let not the oil of the wicked
anoint my head,

1 Thus LXX; MT: "hasten to me." The
LXX reading is ingrained into the Byzantine
liturgical tradition..

2 MT reads instead: "together with
evildoers."

3 Following LXX; MT: "let me not eat
their delicacies."



for my prayer is ever against their
harm.⁴

6 Their judges were brought
down by the rock;

They will hear my words for they were
pleasant.

7 Like one who plows and
splits open the earth⁵

4 LXX: "for their good pleasures"
which hardly translates the current Hebrew.
I have attempted to preserve the ambiguity:
are they at risk of harm or causing it?

5 LXX: "like a lump of earth broken
up."

our⁶ bones will be scattered at
the mouth of Hades.⁷

8 My eyes are on you, LORD,

O Lord; in you I take refuge;
Do not leave my soul
unprotected.

9 Guard me from the trap they have
laid for me,
and from the snares of evildoers.

10 Let the wicked fall into their own
nets.

I am all alone until I escape.⁸

PSALM 142 (141)

The Psalms of Vespers

A Maskil [of understanding] of David, when he was in the cave. A Prayer.

1 With my voice I cry to the LORD,
with my voice I entreat the
LORD.

2 I pour out my prayer before Him,
before Him I recount my distress.

3 When my spirit was faint,
still⁹ you knew my way.

6 A variant reading in Hebrew and
Greek, "their bones" is supported by the
Syriac. It would be more logical, but we read
with the combined majority witnesses of MT
and LXX.

7 MT: "Sheol."

8 Literally "until I make it through/pass
through/get beyond."

9 MT and LXX both have a note of
insistence here.

On the path where I was walking
they hid a trap for me.

4 I looked to the right and saw
there was no one looking out
for me.

There was no escape for me;
no one to avenge¹⁰ my soul.

5 I cried to you, O LORD; I said,
You are my refuge, my portion
in the land of the living.

6 Give heed to my cry
for I have been brought very low.

Deliver me from my pursuers
for they are too strong for me
+O LORD].

7 Bring my soul out of prison
so that I may give thanks to
Your name.

The righteous will surround¹¹ me
because *[until]* you have
requited me.

PSALM 117 (116)

[+Alleluia]

1 Praise the LORD all you nations!
Extol Him, all you peoples!

2 For strong is His mercy toward us
and the truth of the LORD
endures forever. [*>Alleluia*]

10 The sense of the Hebrew and Greek
"to seek" in this context.

11 LXX reads "wait for me" but the MT
has the sense of surround (etymologically as
a crown surrounds the head).



The Lord Himself defined for the Israelites how He should be worshipped and the details given to Moses are an earthly replica of the heavenly pattern (Exodus 25; Hebrews 8,5). The worship offered by human beings on earth reflects the eternal worship given by the angels in heaven. Our Liturgy reaffirms this truth repeatedly but never more clearly than in the Cherubic Hymn: "Let us who mystically represent the cherubim and sing the Thrice-Holy Hymn to the life-creating Trinity now set aside all earthly cares." The Thrice Holy Hymn (or Trisagion) itself was revealed to the Prophet Isaiah in a vision of heavenly worship: he heard the angels singing "Holy, Holy Holy" and reports that "the house was filled with smoke" (Isaiah 6,3-4; Revelation 4,8). The Jerusalem Temple would likewise have been filled with smoke from the mandatory and voluntary sacrifices offered there daily. In addition to the animal and cereal offerings, incense was also regularly

offered.¹² It was mixed with cereal offerings to create "a pleasing odor to the Lord" (Leviticus 2,1-2) and was also offered alone every morning and evening. The High Priest himself offered incense, not on the usual altar of incense, but rather inside the Holy of Holies, as part of the special sacrifices for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16,12).

In the ancient world, lighting the lamps every evening was an occasion for prayer even among pagans. Exodus 30,7

specifies that the priest must also offer incense at sundown, when the lamps are lit. The Byzantine Church continues this practice at the daily celebration of Vespers.¹³ Psalms 141, 142, 130 and 117 are collectively known as the "Lamplighting Psalms" and are read every evening to accompany the lighting of the sanctuary lamps and a great incensation. Psalm 141 has figured in the

12 Four ingredients are given in the incense recipe of Exodus 30,34. Incense was offered on a special altar located outside the veil before the Holy of Holies (Exodus 30,1-6) and could only be offered by priests (Numbers 17,5).

13 John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, tr. Hill, II, 279, applies the OT legislation regarding the evening and morning sacrifices to the Church, which must likewise offer praise every evening and morning. Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, 43, doubts that incense was offered along with this psalm in Chrysostom's Antioch.

evening prayer of the Church at least since the 4th century. In current practice, an expanded form of Psalm 141,1-2 is always chanted as an introduction in the tone of the week or of the feast. Depending on the solemnity of the day, poetic stanzas (stichera) begin to be inserted between psalm verses at Psalm 142,7 or thereafter.

The first four verses of Psalm 141 are also chanted with melody as a refrain with verses at the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts while the clergy circle the altar offering incense. The tradition of prayer with uplifted hands is confirmed for the NT by 1 Timothy 2,8. This custom reminded St John Cassian (+ca. 435) of Christ, who stretched out His hands and offered the perfect evening sacrifice for sin from the Cross.¹⁴ Building on a homily by St John Chrysostom, Euthymius Zigabenus (12th c.) contrasts the OT altar of sacrifice with the gold altar of incense, which he claims foreshadows the "new worship" of the NT.¹⁵

It is generally accepted that the evening incense offering was meant as a sin offering.¹⁶ This is how we should under-

14 John Cassian, *The Institutes* 3; tr. Boniface Ramsey (ACW 58; New York: Newman Press, 2000), 62.

15 Euthymius Zigabenus, *Commentary on Psalm 141 (140)*, PG 128, 1268-1269; a much longer interpretation of the OT incense offering is given in John Chrysostom's *Commentary on the Psalms*, tr. Hill, II, 279-280.

16 Baruch 1,10 mentions incense and

stand the underlying unity of Psalms 141, 142, 130 and 117. The first three are individual complaint psalms which describe, in different ways, situations of hostility, violence and evil. In Psalm 142, the psalmist seems to present himself as an innocent victim, as is often the case in complaint psalms. Yet the reality is that no human being can ever really claim complete innocence. Psalm 141,3-4 recognizes that I need to be protected from my own sinfulness at least as much as from the evil intentions of others. Unless I keep watch over myself (Ephesians 5,15), I am likely to sin in my speech or in my thoughts. The more "religious" I am, the more likely I am to be able to explain my own faults away. Making excuses for sin began with the very first sin: Adam tried to blame Eve and Eve laid the blame on the serpent (Genesis 3,12-13). The repetition of Psalm 141 at the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts wisely highlights the verses that address my faults, not my neighbor's.

To be continued ...

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sin offerings side by side. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest first offered incense inside the Holy of Holies before the blood sacrifice of expiation (Leviticus 16,11-13).