



# Praying the Psalms of Mercy: Continuity and Discontinuity

*By Veronica Lawson, rsm*

The Book of Psalms resonates with Israel's rich experience of the mercy of God. Echoes of that mercy as expressed in these songs of Israel persist in our liturgical celebrations and in the hearts of those who now make them their own. As we pray the psalms in this Jubilee Year of Mercy, then, we find ourselves deeply connected with those who first prayed them and those who have prayed them across two and half millennia or more.

The ancient three-tiered cosmogony informing the Bible is evident in Israel's psalms. As contemporary believers who espouse a scientifically sophisticated view of the formation of the universe, however, we no longer accept that view of the cosmos, but we can surely acclaim the enduring love or mercy of God that brought everything into being. We can do so in the words of the psalms while at the same time informing our prayer with an appreciation that the universe continues to expand and evolve and give glory to God.

In Psalm 136, the formation of the cosmos is celebrated precisely as a manifestation of the mercy or steadfast love of God. With the psalmist and with countless Jewish and Christian believers, we give thanks to the God of Israel whose steadfast love or mercy endures forever in the mysterious workings of the universe and specifically in the Earth community. We can likewise praise God for God's work in history, although some aspects of Israel's rationale for praising God's action in history may need to be critiqued and modified if they are to form part of our liturgical or personal prayer. We no longer, for example, affirm the death or destruction of the Egyptians as the work of a merciful God.

## The Language of "Mercy" in the Psalms

While mercy in the Bible is generally understood as a characteristic or quality of God, it also predicated of humans in their relationship with God and with each other. Two Hebrew words or word groups account for most of the references to mercy in the psalms. The most frequently occurring word for mercy in the psalms is the noun *ḥesed*. Occasionally we find the related adjective *ḥasîd*. The other

main word group derives from *reḥem*, the Hebrew word for womb, and includes the verb *raḥam*, the noun *raḥamîm* and the adjective *raḥûm*.

Translators struggle to convey the sense of both of these word groups. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) usually translates the noun *ḥesed* as “steadfast love” and the adjective *ḥasîd* as “faithful”, “devoted” or “loyal”. The New American Bible (NAB), on the other hand, tends to use “kindness” or “mercy” for *ḥesed* and almost invariably “faithful” for *ḥasîd*. Words like faithful, loyal, and steadfast indicate that the translators detect in mercy an inherent sense of fidelity, of not giving up in the face of difficulty or resistance. The context in which the terms are used is crucial for understanding their meaning.

*Raḥamîm* is translated variously as “mercy,” “compassion” or “pity”; *raḥam* as “to love”; and *raḥûm* as “merciful” or “compassionate”. It would be more accurate to translate *raḥamîm* as “womb-compassion,” *raḥam* as “to show womb-compassion,” and *raḥûm* as “womb-compassionate” and thus honour the fact that this mercy language derives from the female bodily organ, the womb. If the lyricists of Israel name God as “womb-compassionate,” then they experience their God as showing the deeply felt compassion that a woman demonstrates for the child in her womb.

## Two Psalms of Mercy in the Lectionary (Year C)

With these preliminary remarks in mind, let us now turn to the responsorial psalms for the Sundays of this liturgical year (Year C) where the language of mercy appears. The *ḥesed* group appears some thirty times - twenty-six times as a noun (*ḥesed*) and four times as an adjective (*ḥasîd*). The *raḥamîm* group appears eleven times - twice as a verb (*raḥam*), four times as a noun (*raḥamîm*), and five times as an adjective (*raḥûm*).

**Psalm 103.** Verses taken from Psalm 103, a hymn of praise to God, form the responsorial psalm for the Third Sunday of Lent in Year C. While only eight of the twenty-two verses of the psalm are included in the lectionary (vv.1-4, 6-8, 11), this is clearly a “mercy” psalm that merits attention in the context of our reflections on mercy. I invite you to take your Bible and read the whole psalm aloud, feeling the rhythm and power of the text and attending to the recurring use of the language of mercy, as many as seven times in the space of twenty-two verses.

The psalmist begins and ends with repeated calls that his/her very being or *nephesh* might bless the God of Israel (vv. 1, 2, 20, 21, 22). We find here an echo of Genesis 2, where the earth-creature (*‘adam*) becomes a living being or *nephesh*. While *nephesh* becomes “soul” in most English translations, it is not to

be understood in a dichotomous way as the spiritual element in distinction from the material. Rather *nephesh* encompasses the whole person, so that it is the whole person who blesses God and God's Holy Name.<sup>1</sup> God is immediately identified as a forgiving and healing God, a liberating God who crowns the life of this person with steadfast love or kindness (*hesed*) and womb-compassion or mercy (*rahamim*). Forgiveness, healing, and liberation are constituent elements of God's mercy (vv. 3-4). In praying this psalm, one's very being becomes a hymn of praise for the steadfast love and womb-compassion of God known through personal and communal experiences of forgiveness, healing, and liberation.

For those who have been oppressed, violated, or defrauded, God brings judicial justice (*mishpat*) and restores right relationship (*sedeqah*) (v.6). Such action is a function of God's mercy. God is "merciful/womb-compassionate [*rahum*] and gracious [*hannun*], slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*]" (v. 8). This description of God echoes the definitive description of Israel's God in Exodus: "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love [*hesed*] for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7).

The boundless nature of God's mercy is spelled out by the psalmist: "God will not always accuse nor be angry forever. God does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above earth, so great is God's steadfast love [*hesed*] toward those who reverence God; as far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us" (vv. 9-12).

In verse thirteen, God's womb-compassion is likened to parental compassion: "As a father has womb-compassion for his children, so God has womb-compassion for those who fear God." The verb used of both God and a human parent (in this case the father or male parent) is *raham*. This same verb appears in Psalms 18:1, 102:13, and 116:5. You might notice if you read these verses that the verbal form does not always appear in translation.

As the psalm continues to unfold in vv. 14-17, the transitory nature of human existence is contrasted with the ever-present and everlasting nature of God's mercy, God's *hesed*. The interconnectedness of the human with the other-than-human is evoked in the reminder that humans are formed from the dust of the earth. The repetition of *nephesh* in the closing verses alerts us once more to the gift of life that God breathes into us, the life that enables us to sing out in praise to the God of mercy, the God of *hesed* and of *rahamim*.

**Psalm 145.** The verses selected from Psalm 145 for both the Fifth Sunday of Easter (vv. 8-13) and the Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time (vv. 1-2, 8-14) are replete with the language of mercy. God is praised as king. While we may not wish to address God as king in our times, we can acknowledge God's reign or God's sustaining creative presence in the still emerging cosmos and in the whole Earth community. We can, with the psalmist, acclaim again and again and meditate on the greatness of God's wondrous works in our lives and in "our common home."

Like the psalmist, we can celebrate the abundant goodness and righteousness of God. With the psalmist, we can name as steadfast love (*ḥesed*) (v.8) and as womb-compassion (*raḥamîm*) God's goodness and righteousness and God's patience in the face of human sinfulness (v.9). God's womb-compassion is said to encompass all that God has made (v.9). This affirmation is a call to honour "all" that is and to heed the call of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* to shift from an anthropocentric or human-centred world view to one that acknowledges the intrinsic value of all that inhabits our common home.

God is described in verse eight as "gracious [*ḥannûn*] and merciful [*raḥûm*]" and in verse thirteen as "faithful [*ḥasîd*] in word and gracious [*ḥannûn*] in deed." When Hebrew words are paired or placed in parallel, one informs the other. In other words, to be gracious is to be merciful and to be merciful is to be gracious. To be faithful is to be gracious and to be gracious is to be faithful. To be merciful is to be faithful in word and gracious in deed. I have commented elsewhere on the relationship between grace and mercy and have suggested that the Greek translation of *ḥesed* in Esther 2:9 as *charis* permits us to claim grace (*ḥen*) and its cognates, including *ḥannûn*, as "mercy" language.<sup>2</sup> In verse seventeen, God is said to be "just" (*tsaddiq*) and "kind" (*ḥasîd*). Again, we can assert that to be merciful or kind is also to be just.

The Liturgy excludes some of the more problematic aspects of Psalm 145, such as God's readiness to "destroy" the wicked. It is well to exclude them from our prayer and to be alert for other passages that present God as less than merciful or affirm human behaviour that negates the ways of mercy and compassion to which we are called.

## An invitation

We have explored just two of the psalms that speak of mercy, psalms that sing of the womb-compassion and steadfast love of God. My hope is that this exploration will have set you free to engage in our own study of the other "mercy" psalms in this year's lectionary so that mercy might echo in your hearts as you continue to celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy. You might begin with a study of mercy in Psalms

30, 33 and 118 in preparation for the Easter Season. The following list is intended to guide your reflections.<sup>3</sup> The "mercy" word or words that appear in any particular psalm (*ḥesed*, *ḥasîd*, *rahûm*) are indicated in parenthesis.

- Psalm 16, a psalm of trust (*ḥesed* and *ḥasîd*) - Thirteenth and Sixteenth Sundays in Ordinary Time.
- Psalm 30, a thanksgiving psalm (*ḥasîd*) - Easter Vigil; Third Sunday of Easter; Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- Psalm 33, a hymn of praise (*ḥesed*) - Easter Vigil; Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- Psalm 63, an individual lament (*ḥesed*) - Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- Psalm 66, a thanksgiving psalm (*ḥesed*) - Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- Psalm 78, a wisdom psalm (*rahûm*) - Exaltation of the Holy Cross.
- Psalm 90, a psalm of lament (*ḥesed*) - Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- Psalm 98, an enthronement psalm (*ḥesed*) - Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time.
- Psalm 100, a hymn of praise (*ḥesed*) - Fourth Sunday of Easter.
- Psalm 117, a hymn of praise (*ḥesed*) - Ninth and Twenty-First Sundays in Ordinary Time.
- Psalm 118, a song of thanksgiving (*ḥesed*) - Easter Vigil; Easter Sunday; Second Sunday of Easter.
- Psalm 138, an individual prayer of thanksgiving (*ḥesed*) - Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

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## Notes

1. Most English versions translate YHWH, Israel's name for their God, as "Lord," following the earlier Jewish practice of avoiding any vocalising of the divine name. In our efforts to be respectful of Jewish practice at one level, we create another problem by employing the language of domination to name God. My practice is to speak simply of "God" or of "the God of Israel" or to use "YHWH," as is increasingly the practice among contemporary Jewish scholars.

2. See Veronica M. Lawson, *The Blessing of Mercy: Bible Perspectives and Ecological Challenges* (Northcote: Morning Star Publishing, 2015), 38-41, 64.

3. For general commentary on the responsorial psalms for Year C, see Dianne Bergant with Richard Fragomeni, *Preaching the New Lectionary Year C* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

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