

Holy Thursday Responsorial Psalm

[Ps 116:12-13, 15-16bc, 17-18](#)

Responsorial Psalm

R. (cf. 1 Cor 10:16) **Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ.**

How shall I make a return to the LORD

for all the good he has done for me?

The cup of salvation I will take up,

and I will call upon the name of the LORD.

R. **Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ.**

Precious in the eyes of the LORD

is the death of his faithful ones.

I am your servant, the son of your handmaid;

you have loosed my bonds.

R. **Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ.**

To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving,

and I will call upon the name of the LORD.

My vows to the LORD I will pay

in the presence of all his people.

R. **Our blessing-cup is a communion with the Blood of Christ**

Jerome Biblical Commentary

Ps 116. A thanksgiving Ps, divided into Pss 114-15 in the LXX and Vg. The life setting is in the Temple (19) where one who has been delivered—a from dire distress (“death,” 3) fulfills his “vows” (14, 18) with a “sacrifice of thanksgiving” (tōdâ), accompanied by this Ps. Structure: 1-2, the psalmist acknowledges that Yahweh “has heard”; 3-4, a description of the prayer uttered during distress; 5-9, a lesson (for the bystanders at the sacrifice) how Yahweh “keeps the little ones,” as exemplified by the psalmist; 10-11, he looks back on his reactions before Yahweh saved him; 12-19, he acknowledges Yahweh as rescuer, as he offers the sacrifice that was vowed. **1.** *I love:* Thanksgiving Pss usually begin with an expression of praise.**3.** See comment on Ps 18:5.**4.** To “call upon the name” is to invoke Yahweh’s help, but in 13 and 17 it indicates the proclamation of his name in thanksgiving.**5-6.** The didactic tendency of the acknowledgment of Yahweh is exemplified here; the psalmist teaches a lesson to those present.**8.** On such literal statements as this, see Barth, *Die Errettung vom Tode*, 143). There is more than poetry or metaphor here; death is a power that asserts its grip on man by sickness, etc.**9.** The phraseology is capable of fuller meaning: life with God.**10.** In a second phrase he recalls his trust in God alone, when he was afflicted.**13.** *cup of*

LXX Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT)

my salvation: A cup that saves (in contrast to the cup of God's wrath, Is 51:17ff.), and perhaps a libation is implied. This verse is appropriately used in the Mass of the Roman rite before Communion. **14.** *my vows*: He had vowed to perform the sacrifice he is now offering. **15.** The meaning is that Yahweh will not let his "faithful ones" die; they are too "precious" to lose. **16.** *son of your handmaid*: The houseborn slave, who has absolutely no rights (cf. Ps 86:16).

Daily Bible Study Series, Psalms Volume II (non-Catholic)

Someone has suggested that this psalm begins like a love letter: "Dear God, I love you; for you...*inclined your ear to me*. You did so because you *heard my voice and my supplication*." This is not so impossible, for all that the Hebrew actually says is, "I love, for Yahweh hears..."

The poem is in several strophes or paragraphs, and is carefully constructed by someone who has been either very ill physically, or has suffered a nervous breakdown. In either case he or she is immensely grateful for recovery. But this psalm can be ours too, even if we have not been ill. For we all live on "Death Row", so to speak, we all wait for the morning of execution. We might even focus our general and inevitable expectation of death on the fear that somewhere is a jittery underling who at this moment is about to press that fatal button on the nuclear monstrosity we all loathe and dread. In a word, no matter how we expound this psalm, it emphasizes that there is no hope in man (verse 11). Notice that death (Sheol) is actually shown to be aggressive. It has sent out its octopus-like tentacles, the poet implies, to pull me under. No wonder he "found" (AV) *distress and anguish*.

Verses 1–4. It was at that point of realization, that there is no hope for man, that *I called on the name of the Lord*, that is to say, I invoked his real presence as I knew it through all his goodness to me within the Covenant. My cry was: *O Lord, I beseech thee, save my life!*

Verses 5–7. Notice (a) that the psalmist did try to pray; (b) that he expected to receive an answer; (c) that he believed that God was stronger than those tentacles of Sheol that had laid hold on him; and (d) that he looked for the healing of his whole personality. The word *life* at verse 4 is only one way of translating the Hebrew *nephes*, which was usually translated in the old AV as "soul". It means "my whole being, my body, soul, mind and spirit". Finally (e) he found that God had answered him far beyond his asking.

ff. and the following verses

AV Authorized, or King James, Version of the Bible.

So he goes on: *The Lord preserves the simple*. *Preserves* means protects, shepherds. *The simple* includes those with a low I.Q., the intellectually handicapped, the simple-minded, the very ordinary, uneducated person. The LXX even translates the word by “babies”. Jesus seems to put the two ideas together at Matt. 11:25. The psalmist therefore is declaring here a reality to which we must ever hold fast, that we are not saved by a profession of our own faith. That would be what Paul calls a “work” on our part. For example, how could an intellectually handicapped child even know what the word “saved” means? What the psalmist is telling us is that we are saved by grace alone.

With such an assurance in his heart, then, the psalmist invited his own *nephesh*, his “life”, to “come home”, and to *rest* in the Lord, if we might borrow words from a well-known hymn. We should note however that the word *rest* can also mean, at the same time, “homes”—in the plural! For that is the way Hebrew expresses the idea of “many rooms in my Father’s house”, as Jesus puts it.

Verses 8–11. *For the Lord has dealt bountifully with you*, he says to his “life”, to his “self”. Literally this is: “The Lord has poured out his goodness over you”. Sheol, the land of death, was supposed to be down below the ground, or, as we have noted in other psalms, down in the depths of humanity’s evil *subconscious* mind. But now, I am back up on this good earth again, he declares with joy; *I walk before the Lord in the land of the living*. He is quoting Ps. 56:13, just as we might quote a favourite hymn—but he adds to the quotation a very personal line about his *tears*!

We know that Paul was impressed with the psalmist’s faith to which he held even in great *affliction*, for he quotes verse 10 at 2 Cor. 4:13. He spoke according to even the tiny degree of faith that was left to him in his misery, yet the smallness of his faith did not trouble God, for, as we see, God went on to honour his cry (verse 1).

TRUST MEANS OBEDIENCE

Psalm 116: 12–19

¹²What shall I render to the Lord

for all his bounty to me?

¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation

and call on the name of the Lord,

¹⁴I will pay my vows to the Lord

LXX The Septuagint or Greek Version of the OT.

in the presence of all his people.

¹⁵Precious in the sight of the Lord

is the death of his saints.

¹⁶O Lord, I am thy servant;

I am thy servant, the son of thy handmaid.

Thou hast loosed my bonds.

¹⁷I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving

and call on the name of the Lord.

¹⁸I will pay my vows to the Lord

in the presence of all his people,

¹⁹in the courts of the house of the Lord,

in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the Lord!

How then can I thank *him*, not thank *men*, who are but a vain hope? At this point, in all probability, the priest would show the psalmist, who would be an ordinary father of an ordinary family, exactly how he should perform the rites that acted out the words of his mouth, so as to say “Thank you, God” (see Lev. 7:11ff; Deut. 12:17–18). Even today in our liturgies we repeat the words that follow at verses 12–14, employing them as the invitation we need before we partake of Holy Communion.

What then can I give him? *What shall I render* (lit. “give back”) to God? Nothing! So the priest helps me to declare. It is not a case of giving back at all, he says. It is a case of *taking the cup of salvation*. This last word is in the plural. So it hints at “full salvation”, bountiful, the cup running over, the cup which God, acting in grace before I can make a move, has now handed to me to drink. (For the origin of this action see Num. 28:7.) We remember that, at the Last Supper, Jesus too acted first. He first handed the cup to his disciples, who only then took of it. In the *Torah* drink offerings were meant to be drunk by the priest only. In this psalm, and at the Last Supper, God offers the cup of salvation to all believers.

The action here is the opposite of that found at Jer. 25:15–29. It is our custom today in our modern world to touch glasses, and then to drink to each other’s health. But in that passage God told Jeremiah to make all the nations of the earth drink to their own

damnation. In this psalm, however, I am to drink to my own *salvation*. So we note: (a) the rejection of God's grace means damnation; (b) acceptance of it means life and joy; but (c) for many heroes of the Faith drinking this cup has meant both of these at once, for it meant the cup of martyrdom. This psalmist sees himself as having been almost in that category (verse 15). His cry to God was thus not "one-dimensional". Rather he was able to praise God only through the tension and pain he had suffered till the moment of his cry.

I will call on the name of the Lord, he continues. I will witness to those around me that it is the Lord who saves, and that I have not saved myself. And I will do it in public, at worship, *in the presence of all his people*.

In verses 15–19 the psalmist is "thinking aloud to God". He remembers how he has been at death's door; there is even the suggestion that he has been scorned, almost martyred (verses 10–11). But he now knows that God so loved him that he would never let him go. But the phrase in verse 15 means more than this. As the Jerusalem Bible renders it, "The death of the devout costs Yahweh dear". That is to say, the Lord feels the death of his Covenant folk. He mourns with those who mourn, because he is actually present with them through the bonds of the Covenant. And so, when they suffer, he suffers too. We can see how this old psalmist points the way to a much later phrase: "The Cross at the heart of the universe".

The next words, *O Lord*, reflect a deep, heartfelt cry. The "O" is a very strong expression in Hebrew, for it is used of a cry that only comes out of pain. O Lord, I see now that that is what being a *saint* means. (For this word *hasid* describes one who is completely loyal to the *hesed* of Yahweh.) *Ki* (I swear that) I am your loyal *servant*, even unto death, *the son of thy handmaid*, meaning, "your adopted son, brought into the Covenant fellowship not by birth, but by grace" (see Gen. 16:1–11). How deeply then the psalmist feels he must make this cry and sincerely confess his love and faith! For what else can he do, now that, out of sheer grace, God has handed him the cup of salvation that he is to drink to the dregs, so that its wine may flow through all the veins of his body, and through his mind and soul as well? And then, along with that great thought, he is to be able also to cry: *Thou hast loosed my bonds*.

We have seen that Sheol, the powers of death and hell, had grasped him, octopus-like, with its terrible tentacles that no man can loosen (verses 3, 11). But God had done just that for him. The Lord had overcome the power of both death and evil.

There is nothing left for the psalmist to do, then, but to *offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving*, and to do it in public, so that what he says and does becomes a witness to the city. The word "thanksgiving" (*todah*) means two things. It means thanksgiving (a) by the spoken word, and (b) by an action. These two cannot be separated—in fact there is only one word in Hebrew to cover the two! "I will not offer unto the Lord that which costs me nothing," said David in 2 Sam. 24:24. In David's case it is an expensive burnt offering that is meant. In our case, also, we should remember that no Christian congregation celebrates Holy Communion without at some point taking up an offering

for the work of God. Contributing to it, for us, is pointed to by the words: *I will "pay" my vows to the Lord.*