Psalm 118

“This is the day the LORD has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it.” Psalm 118’s verse 24 was the responsorial verse for Easter Sunday. It is also prayed each day from Monday to Saturday as the Gospel Acclamation during the Octave of Easter. On Divine Mercy Sunday, we complete the Octave of Easter with Psalm 118 as the responsorial psalm for the 4th time in 8 days. The biblical notes do an excellent job in explaining the psalm’s Old Testament Context:

A thanksgiving liturgy accompanying a procession of the king and the people into the Temple precincts. After an invocation in the form of a litany (Ps 118:1–4), the psalmist (very likely speaking in the name of the community) describes how the people confidently implored God’s help (Ps 118:5–9) when hostile peoples threatened its life (Ps 118:10–14); vividly God’s rescue is recounted (Ps 118:15–18). Then follows a possible dialogue at the Temple gates between the priests and the psalmist as the latter enters to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice (Ps 118:19–25). Finally, the priests impart their blessing (Ps 118:26–27), and the psalmist sings in gratitude (Ps 118:28–29).

In light of the resurrection of Jesus, the psalm takes on an even deeper meaning. Let’s look at each of the seven sections again in light of the Easter Resurrection.

I

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
his mercy endures forever.
Let Israel say:
his mercy endures forever.
Let the house of Aaron say,
his mercy endures forever.
Let those who fear the LORD say,
his mercy endures forever. (Vs 1-4)

We are thankful and rejoice at the resurrection of Jesus. His mercy first offered to Israel is now extended to the whole world.

II

In danger I called on the LORD;
the LORD answered me and set me free.
The LORD is with me; I am not afraid;
what can mortals do against me?
The LORD is with me as my helper;
I shall look in triumph on my foes.
Better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put one’s trust in mortals.
Better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put one’s trust in princes. (Vs. 5-9)

With sin and death conquered, there is nothing to fear. We see the disciples fear throughout the Octave of Easter. Jesus appears to them repeatedly to calm their fears:

- Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid” (Mt 28:10)
- “Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts?” (Lk 24:38)
- The disciples were behind locked doors in fear, when Jesus appeared and said, “Peace be with you.” (Jn 20:19,21).

III

All the nations surrounded me;
in the LORD’s name I cut them off.
They surrounded me on every side;
in the LORD’s name I cut them off.
Psalm 118

They surrounded me like bees;
they burned up like fire among thorns;
in the LORD’s name I cut them off.
I was hard pressed and falling,
but the LORD came to my help.
The LORD, my strength and might,
has become my savior. (Vs. 10-14)

With Pharaohs Charioteers closing in, Moses parted the Red Sea and led the Hebrews to freedom. Jesus has parted the chasm between death and eternal life, the Savior leads the dead to the Promised Land of Heaven.

IV The joyful shout of deliverance
is heard in the tents of the righteous:
“The LORD’s right hand works valiantly;
the LORD’s right hand is raised;
the LORD’s right hand works valiantly.”
I shall not die but live
and declare the deeds of the LORD.
The LORD chastised me harshly,
but did not hand me over to death. (Vs. 15-18)

Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father. He is the just judge who desires mercy not sacrifice. He has died that we might share in eternal life.

V Open the gates of righteousness;
I will enter and thank the LORD.
This is the LORD’s own gate,
through it the righteous enter.
I thank you for you answered me;
you have been my savior.
The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
By the LORD has this been done;
it is wonderful in our eyes.
This is the day the LORD has made;
let us rejoice in it and be glad.
LORD, grant salvation!
LORD, grant good fortune! (Vs. 19-25)

Jesus is the stone rejected by the builders, the scribes, Pharisees, and chief priests. He had foretold, “Destroy this temple [His Body] and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:19-20). For our sake, Jesus was crucified. “He suffered death and was buried and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (Nicene Creed). Let us rejoice in the Paschal Mystery now for God has promised us a share in the Kingdom of Heaven, when we suffer death and are buried.

VI Blessed is he
who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
The LORD is God and has enlightened us.
Join in procession with leafy branches
up to the horns of the altar.
Psalm 118

On Palm Sunday we hear: “Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest” (Mt 21:9), before processing into the church with our palm branches. We also pray these words with the Holy, Holy at each Mass.

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

VII You are my God, I give you thanks;
my God, I offer you praise.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
his mercy endures forever.

The psalm of thanksgiving ends on a note of gratitude for God’s enduring mercy as we heard in the first 4 verses. We can properly show our gratitude by following the example Jesus set for us: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (Jn 13:34).

In closing, it seems most fitting to highlight the 4 Responsorial Verses used from Psalm 118 throughout the Octave of Easter:

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad. Easter Sunday: (v. 24)
The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone. Friday: (v. 22)
I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me. Saturday: (v. 21a)
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his love is everlasting. Divine Mercy: (v. 1)