

The Day the Lord Has Made

Easter Points for Prayer | Fr. Matthew Baugh, SJ

In the U.S., it is easy for us to overlook the fact that Sunday is the first day of the week. We tend to think of it as the end of the weekend, the last little reprieve before the work week begins again on Monday. But there is no mistaking it in Israel. A few years ago, a group that I was accompanying on pilgrimage arrived at the airport in Tel Aviv early on a Sunday morning. I remember the relief I felt when I noticed this on our schedule, since I had been tasked with driving the van for our group. “Good,” I thought, “I’ll have a chance to acclimate to driving in Israel before the Monday morning rush.” No such luck! As soon as we pulled out of the rental car lot, we were instantly engulfed in the white-water rapids of the Sunday morning commute. Perhaps noticing my wide eyes and white knuckles, the seasoned British Jesuit who was leading our group leaned over: “It *is* the first day of the week of course!” Right ... I knew that. Sunday is the first day of the week!



At Easter, we celebrate the strange and wonderful fact that Christ rose on the *first day* of the week. What is so significant about that? The title of one of the great masterpieces of American literature can help us see more deeply into the mystery: *The Eighth Day* by Thornton Wilder (which I warmly commend to you). Easter is not merely the *first day* of the week. In a profound

sense, it is also the *eighth day*: the Lord who created the world in six days and rested on the seventh undertook a mighty new work on the day of the Resurrection, making it the *first day of a whole new creation*. “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!” (Psalm 118:24) A new day, a new creation, a whole new horizon that is opened to us.

How can you and I enter into the joy of this new horizon? Where can we turn in Scripture to find our bearings? A mysterious silence reigns over the Gospel accounts from the moment the stone is rolled over the tomb until the breathless discovery after the Sabbath that it is empty. What happened in between? How did the Lord inaugurate the new creation early on that Sunday morning? What is this new horizon which he opens to us?

We can take our cue from the liturgy, which throughout the octave of Easter returns over and over to **Psalm 118**. No psalm was more familiar to the Jews of Jesus’ time. Three times a year, they gathered in Jerusalem from every corner of the nation to celebrate the great pilgrimage feasts, including Passover. At these feasts, Psalm 118 formed the rousing conclusion of a series of psalms that they sang praising God (Ps 113-118). It was this that the disciples sang with Jesus on the night of the Last Supper just before making their way to the Mount of Olives, where the Lord would enter into his Passion (cf. Mk 14:26). They knew Psalm 118 by heart. But in the wake of the Resurrection, it suddenly seemed completely new. As wave after wave of realizations began to dawn on them, they came to see that Psalm 118 opened a window on the mystery of what had happened — and what was still unfolding.

In the following exercise, we pray with Psalm 118 in the light of the Easter mystery, asking for the grace to experience the joy of the Son as he leads the rejoicing crowd into the presence of the Father.

1) Consider the Background: Ps 118 in Ancient Israel

More than just a prayer, or even a song, Psalm 118 was the text for a full liturgy that was performed at the Temple in Jerusalem by the priests and people. The liturgy unfolds in three parts. It opens with a call to prayer (vv. 1-4), which probably would have been sung by the Temple choir. Then, a single voice emerges to recount the marvel of how he was rescued by God from an agonizing and certain death (vv. 5-18).

Mysteriously, the rescue of this individual has personal consequences for the whole nation, which the liturgy reflects by interrupting his speech to note the cries of victory that his rescue elicits from others (vv. 15-16).

The third part of the liturgy is the most remarkable of all (vv. 19-29). It takes the form of a literal procession, in which the one who has been rescued from death leads a rejoicing crowd to the Temple to give thanks to God in his very presence for this unimaginable gift. On their way, they are stopped at the gate of the Temple by the priests, who are charged with maintaining the sacredness

of the precincts: only the just may enter here! Remarkably, the one leading the procession is found to be just, and in that very moment, he thanks God for answering this prayer too. That opens the way for the great crowd to make their way in procession (with palms!) all the way up to the altar, the sacred center of the Temple, where the leader makes his own sacrifice of thanksgiving followed by the whole people. The question of who precisely this great leader might be remained a mystery in ancient Israel, but the tradition pointed to the messianic king whom God would send to save his people.

2) Read the Psalm

¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

² Let Israel say,

“His steadfast love endures forever.”

³ Let the house of Aaron say,

“His steadfast love endures forever.”

⁴ Let those who fear the Lord say,

“His steadfast love endures forever.”

⁵ Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place.

⁶ With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?

⁷ The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

⁸ It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals.

⁹ It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.

¹⁰ All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

¹¹ They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;

in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

¹² They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns;

in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

¹³ I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me.

¹⁴ The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

¹⁵ *There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: “The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;*

¹⁶ *The right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.”*

¹⁷ I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.

¹⁸ The Lord has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

(LEADER / KING)

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

(PRIEST)

²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

(LEADER / KING)

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

(CONGREGATION)

²² The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

(PRIEST)

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. ²⁷ The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

(LEADER / KING)

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

(CONGREGATION)

²⁹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

3) Listen

This lyrical modern setting of Psalm 118 by a devout American Jewish woman beautifully captures the joy of both leader and people as they go into God's presence giving thanks. *Click the image below.*



4) View the Gate

According to ancient rabbinic tradition, the gate through which the Messiah would pass is the eastern gate of the Temple. The "Gate of Mercy" remains intact in Jerusalem to this day, but was sealed up with stone as far back as the 9th century. For Christians, there is much fruit for prayer in considering this image of the Messiah's gate sealed with stone, like the Lord's tomb.



5) Go into Prayer

After recollecting yourself before the Lord, spend 15-20 minutes in prayer using your natural and spiritual senses to see what the Lord wishes to show you through Ps 118.

See the Place: Jerusalem, early on Easter morning

Ask for the Grace: To sense interiorly the great joy and gladness of the Son as he comes into the Father's presence, opening the way for me to do the same in the company of the great throng of those he has saved

Meditate: Recalling particular words and actions in Psalm 118 that have moved me, I watch as Jesus rises on Easter and goes into the presence of the Father, passing through the gate of death and the sealed tomb, inaugurating the new and eternal day.