The first nine verses end with him suffused with thanksgiving as he 'clings' to the divine Lover, knowing he will always be held.

As you ponder this profound contemplative Psalm and take its meanings into your life, let its opening line become your word for this day:

O God, you are my God, eagerly I seek you.

Silently repeat it.

Psalm 123

Mercy within mercy within mercy

1 To you I lift up my eyes,
to you that are enthroned in the heavens.

2 As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,
or the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,

3 So our eyes wait upon the Lord our God,
until he have mercy upon us.

4 Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

5 Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of the arrogant,
and of the contempt of the proud.

Reflection

There are Psalms in the psalter that can pass you by almost unnoticed, but are in fact gems, worth pondering deeply. Psalm 123 is one of them.

It was originally a Psalm of lament, with the stress being on the last two verses which speak of contempt. Maybe it had some connection with the Israelites' experience of exile when their tormentors goaded and jeered at them.

The experience of a whole people suffering contempt does not belong just to the ancient world. Genocide is also a reality of modern times. In the bleak conditions of life in 1943 in the transit camp at Westerbork, the young Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum writes of Psalm reading being part of her daily routine. In that bitter context, Psalm 123 was perhaps one she turned to often. The phrases 'scorn of the arrogant' and 'contempt of the proud' would have had a special resonance. In one passage of her letters she describes the weekly train destined for Auschwitz being loaded through the night. As she watches the weakest of her fellow Jews being herded together and crammed into freight cars, she describes the camp commandant arriving to survey the scene, or, as she puts it with her own particular style of well-crafted irony, 'to inspect his troops'.

> He appears at the end of the asphalt path, like a famous star making his entrance during a grand finale . . . With military step he walks along the line of freight cars, bulging now with people. He is inspecting his troops: the sick, infants in arms, young mothers, and shaven-headed men. A few more ailing people are being brought up on stretchers. He makes an impatient gesture; they're taking too long about it.[1]

The two verses at the end of this Psalm are echoed in her description of this strutting figure and remind us of humankind's capacity for evil.

But for the contemporary reader in the Western world, where we now enjoy extraordinary freedoms, what makes this little Psalm a gem are the first three verses and the first line of verse 4.

The first thing to note is the emphasis upon the eyes. Eyes that look. Eyes that long. Eyes that in adoration and hope, wait. Simone Weil is one among many spiritual writers who describes true prayer as an attitude of total attention – 'nothing else but a looking'.[2] This is what this Psalm speaks of. A patient and focused attentiveness that will not be diverted. The eyes – mentioned four times in the first three verses – signal this unwavering posture. This is what it means to pray.

In our contemporary Western culture, cultivating such attentiveness is increasingly problematic. The fact that we find it so difficult, that we are so easily diverted, that our minds are so restless – a restlessness provoked by a consumerist culture which never stops tugging at us – is a measure of how far we have to go in this journey of prayer.

However because of what the eyes search and wait for, this Psalm is about hope. In just two verses the psalmist skilfully builds tension as the two verses stretch forward towards the

object of their longing, which is 'mercy'. Mercy: a word at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian narrative, or 'Hesed' in Hebrew, sometimes translated as 'loving-kindness'. Difficult to translate into English, it means a total all-embracing commitment of love come what may. The Greek word for mercy, 'eleison', gets near the truth of it, for it has the same root as the word for oil, 'eleon'. Mercy is like oil being poured into the aching wounds of a damaged world, as balm for healing. That is its intimacy.

At the end of his meditation 'Fire Watch' at the end of *The Sign of Jonas*, Thomas Merton, whose whole life and spirituality was shaped by mercy, addresses God. The voice of God is heard in Paradise speaking back to him:

> What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me Jonas my child? Mercy within Mercy within Mercy.[3]

God is given identity. He is 'Mercy within Mercy within Mercy'.

The trouble is we cannot believe it, we cannot *see* it, so caught up are we in the tangle of our own fears and self-condemnations projected onto the great space of the Divine.

'So our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until he have mercy upon us', writes the longing psalmist. He might have said, 'Our eyes wait until we can see clearly, until we can see without distortion, see *without the shadow of our own projections*'. Then mercy will be poured out.

And when it does come, when we have waited sufficiently, have begun the long task of decluttering the idolatrous mind, it

is so often like a shock, a kind of waking up out of a perpetually inhabited blindness. We *see*, at last! Merton teaches us this too. His story is punctuated with epiphanies of mercy, enabling him quite suddenly, to see.

The moment in the shopping district in Louisville was one moment. Another was in Advent 1964 as he made his way in the darkness of the early morning down from his hermitage in the woods to the Monastery:

> . . . this morning, coming down, seeing the multitude of stars above the bare branches of the wood, I was suddenly hit, as it were, with the whole package of meaning of everything: that the immense mercy of God was upon me, that the Lord in infinite kindness had looked down on me and given me this vocation out of love, and that he had always intended this, and how foolish and trivial had been all my fears and twistings and desperation.[4]

And then in 1965, in the silence of the night in that hermitage in the woods he writes of a quieter moment as his reading of the Psalms speaks a single word to him:

> I am out of bed at two-fifteen in the morning, when the night is darkest and most silent . . . I find myself in the primordial lostness of night, solitude, forest, peace, a mind awake in the dark, looking for a light, not totally reconciled to being out of bed. A light appears, and, in the light, an icon. There is now in the large darkness a small room of radiance with psalms in it. The psalms grow up

> silently by themselves without effort like plants in this light which is favourable to them. The plants hold themselves up on stems that have a single consistency, that of mercy or, rather, great mercy. *Magna misericordia*. In the formlessness of night and silence a word then pronounces itself: Mercy.[5]

Reflect on moments in your life when you have been particularly conscious of the mercy of God towards you, perhaps expressed through other people. Be thankful for those times, and reflect on how they may have changed your direction.

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us.

Make this your prayer all through this day as your eyes wait in loving patience upon the Lord your God, 'until he has mercy upon you'.