

## PSALM 123

A Song of Ascents.

<sup>1</sup> To you I lift up my eyes,  
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

<sup>2</sup> As the eyes of servants  
look to the hand of their master,  
as the eyes of a maid  
to the hand of her mistress,  
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,  
until he has mercy upon us.

<sup>3</sup> Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

<sup>4</sup> Our soul has had more than its fill  
of the scorn of those who are at ease,  
of the contempt of the proud.

In order to appreciate the beauty of this psalm, we have to get past the kind of imagery that is not only foreign to most of us, but offensive. The psalm is directed to God, but what conception of God is imagined? What human analogies are used? There is a master-servant and mistress-maid relationship, parallel to the God-people relationship. Is God like a master? Or is God more like a loving parent? Some analogies are clearly better than others!

But the psalm then makes a further analogy that is difficult to swallow. The prayer of the psalm is that God have mercy because what the psalmist and the people are experiencing more directly is contempt from the wealthy and powerful who rule them. By allowing them to be mistreated, is God, too, complicit in this mistreatment, just like the proud and powerful who are also masters and mistresses?

And yet, there is also a powerfully subversive thread in the psalm that overturns more traditional social models used as analogies for the God-human relationship. The prayer of the psalmist condemns the proud and those who live at ease, looking down and treating with contempt those they deem below them who are equally children of God. By showing mercy to them (and ultimately condemnation of those who rule by mistreating those “below” them) God will also vindicate and raise up the people challenging the status quo of human inequality built into their society.

Imagine everyone gathered in worship, both masters and servants, mistresses and maids, and having this psalm read and sung as part of worship. Who would feel uncomfortable if not judged by it and who would feel empowered to dream of something better for themselves?

Most of us here in Canada know little of master-servant, maid-mistress social arrangements. Yet, many of us do know what it's like to be treated with scorn and contempt by those who think they are better than us in some way. Many of us have known what it's like to be put down, criticized, rejected and judged because someone has imagined they are better than us or something about us and our identity is inferior. Psalm 123 is a psalm for the downtrodden. It overturns oppressive, traditional models of God that support the status quo of inequality which only serves those who benefit from society as it is. It encourages prayer and then action for change. All people are equally children of God. The God of the psalmist and the scriptures as a whole, sides with the downtrodden because God seeks to recreate a world where all are equally brothers, sisters and siblings who belong to God as we belong to each other. What do you think?

**PRAYER:** Have mercy on us, O God, have mercy on us. We have been downtrodden, but we have also been the cause of someone else feeling downtrodden in some way. We all participate in systems and perspectives that judge others as flawed in some way rather than seeking always to better understand who they are and the reasons they are as they are. And beyond the reasons, O God, there is the beautiful mystery of the diversity you have created. May we honour you by loving rather than condemning and treating others with humanity even if we don't always understand them or need to set limits and boundaries with them. In Jesus' name we pray; Amen.