

My Neighbor Said:

“How Should We Understand Psalm 22?”

This is a multipart question about how Psalm 22 relates to the crucifixion of Jesus. The first line of this psalm was quoted by Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34).

Were the psalms numbered at the time of Christ? Actually, they were numbered at least as early as 132 B.C., when the Septuagint version of the Old Testament was finished. (This is separate from the development of chapter and verse numbers in other books of the Bible.)

Quoting the first line of a psalm is a way to refer to the entire psalm. Given that the psalms were used extensively as songs during worship, we can legitimately presume that a brief summary line from a psalm would remind a person about the rest of the psalm. When you hear “We three kings of Orient are...” do you have any trouble remembering what those kings were doing? So it was in Jesus’s time.

Does Psalm 22 end on a positive note? Absolutely! The Psalmist is facing a bad situation (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”; Psalm 22:1) but knows that the Lord will deliver and vindicate him. This leads him to praise the Lord (Psalm 22:22–31).

Why do we not hear about this in church? One place where this might be covered would be in the homily at Mass. It may surprise some to learn that canon law defines what a homily should cover (*Code of Canon Law*, canon 767, para. 1). “The homily... should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass of the day” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, para. 65). The most natural time for a homily to address these aspects of Psalm 22, then, would be on Palm Sunday, when that psalm is always read. That’s a very full liturgy, however; you might be more likely to hear a homily on this psalm at daily Mass, on the Tuesday of Week 4 or Week 31 in Ordinary Time.

The Church places a positive duty on the faithful to “learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ by frequent reading of the divine scriptures. Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 133, quoting *Dei Verbum*, para. 25). This learning includes reading good Bible commentaries (such as those available in the St. Jerome Library at Holy Cross), coming together with others to study the Bible, and praying through the words of Scripture. Asking good questions is where this understanding of Scripture begins.

For further reading: [“Did the Father Forsake Jesus? How to Understand the Lord’s Cry From the Cross”](#) (Karlo Broussard); [“The Preaching of the Word of God,”](#) *Code of Canon Law*; [“The Homily,”](#) *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*; [“Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church,”](#) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Do you have questions about God, faith, life, the Church, or other related topics? Drop them into the Question Box next to the Parish Bulletin Board. We will answer them ASAP and post them in FlockNotes and on the Bulletin Board each week.