

# THE PSALMS

## Praying the Psalms with Jesus

by

MICHAEL FALLON, MSC



Introductory Commentaries on the Bible by the same author.

Published by Chevalier Press, 1 Roma Avenue, Kensington NSW 2033 (02) 9662 7894

The Gospel according to Saint Matthew 1997<sup>1</sup>, 2005<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel according to Saint Mark 1997<sup>1</sup>, 2009<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel according to Saint Luke 1997<sup>1</sup>, 2007<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel according to Saint John 1998<sup>1</sup>, 2005<sup>2</sup>

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Wisdom of Ben Sira & Wisdom of Solomon, 2012

Nihil Obstat:

Imprimatur:

Date:

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National Library of Australia  
card number and ISBN

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Cover photo: King David, sculptured by Adamo Tadolini, at the base of the famous column of the Immaculate Conception located to the south-east of the Piazza di Spagna, in Rome

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Printed by Joy Stationery & Printing Co Pte Ltd Singapore. Phone: 65-6398-1668;

Fax: 65-6392-1668

## PREFACE

In 2005 I published *The Psalms: an introductory commentary* (Chevalier Press). Assisted by the nearly two thousand page commentary by Luis Alonso Schökel SJ (Italian translation *I Salmi*, Editioni Borla 1992), my aim was to discover and share the meaning the psalms had for those who composed them and for those who prayed them in Ancient Israel, whether in the temple cult or in their own personal and family prayer.

My aim here is different. I want to explore how Jesus would have prayed the psalms, based on what we know of his mind and heart from the New Testament. Necessarily this will involve an editing of the psalms, for there are sentiments in some of them that contradict what Jesus knew of God and of the kind of communion with God that we are invited to enjoy. After presenting a translation of the psalm that I hope Christians, in communion with Jesus, can pray today, I will indicate any verses that I have omitted, and then proceed to meditate on the psalm, keeping our focus on Jesus.

Before attempting this, we need, firstly, to be clear in our understanding that, while we rightly acknowledge that the authors of the psalms were inspired in their composing, and while we are open to what they reveal to us, the psalms were composed by human beings who prayed in specific contexts. Their understanding of God and of the human condition was necessarily limited. The psalms are full of insight, but also of oversight. They did not always see God as Jesus saw God. They did not grasp God's loving design for us the way Jesus knew it. There are statements in the psalms that Jesus could not have prayed. Attempts have been made to re-read these sections and give them an applied meaning that, with some manipulation, can be fitted in with the revelation given by Jesus, but this carries with it the danger of distorting the message intended by the psalmists. It seems to me better to acknowledge the human limits and glean from the psalms meanings and aspirations that help direct the flow of our Christian prayer. I want to establish this need in Chapter One, and then apply it as we go on to examine each of the psalms in turn.

In Chapter Two I want to look with you at Jesus, at his intimate communion with God in prayer, and at the words and actions that flowed from this communion. There is a danger that we are so overwhelmed by his divinity that his human response to God and to the human condition is distorted or even lost. The Council of Chalcedon insisted that Jesus' divinity did not distort his humanity. We need to be clear about this lest we distort his prayer-communion with his 'Father', and lest we continue to pray in ways that Jesus came to correct.

If we are going to hear Jesus praying the psalms we need to approach Jesus the way his first disciples approached him: aware of his intimate communion with the God he called 'Abba' ('my dear Father'), and of his astonishing compassion, his capacity to feel bewilderment and fear, his faith in God, his hope and his sharing with us a profound need to give and receive love.

- Christmas, 2017

## Chapter One

### The psalms are human documents

We have the assurance of hundreds of years of believers in Ancient Israel that the psalms are inspired, and Jews and Christians continue to find them inspiring. We will fail to appreciate their meaning or their value if we don't read them in the spirit in which they were composed, cherished, copied, handed on, and prayed in the temple, the synagogue and the church. They continue to reveal aspects of God to us, and something of ourselves in relation to God, to the world and to each other.

Pope Pius X in his Apostolic Constitution on the Psalter (Divino Afflatu, 1911), quotes from Saint Athanasius: "The Book of the Psalms is like a garden which contains the fruits of all the other books, grows a crop of song and so adds its own special fruit to the rest. It seems to me that for the person who recites them the psalms are like a mirror in which we may see ourselves and the movements of our heart and mind and then give voice to them."

Pope Pius goes on to quote from the Confessions of Saint Augustine (Book 9.4): "I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of your Church's singing. These sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart, so that my feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them." The Pope continues: "Who is not fired with love by the faithful portrait of Christ the Redeemer whose voice Saint Augustine heard in all the psalms, singing, sorrowing, rejoicing in hope, sighing in distress?"

In promulgating the new form of the Divine Office (1970), Pope Paul VI wrote: "Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of humankind joined to Christ himself. Each individual has his or her part in this prayer which is common to the one Body, and it thus becomes the voice of the Beloved Spouse of Christ, putting into words the wishes and desires of the whole Christian people and making intercession for the necessities common to all members of the human race. It obtains its unity from the heart of Christ himself. Our Redeemer, as he himself had entered into life through his prayer and sacrifice, wished that this should not cease throughout the ages in his Mystical Body, the Church, and so the official Prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father. Thus, when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his voice in us."

We can hear Jesus praying because: 'Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Hebrews 7:25). Did he not say: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name I will be there with them' (Matthew 18:20)?

It is precisely here that we encounter a serious problem. Before the psalms settled into a fixed form, they adapted, as one would expect of prayer, to changing circumstances. If, for example, a hymn was composed to celebrate a military victory of King Ahab in the ninth century BC, we should expect that those who were responsible for the liturgy at the time of King Josiah three centuries later would adapt the psalm to celebrate his victory.

Likewise a hymn composed to lament the exile of the inhabitants of Israel in the eighth century BC would be adapted and sung to bemoan the exile of the inhabitants of Judah at the beginning of the sixth century. It was typical of the writings of the Hebrew Bible to reshape the sacred text to give expression to the peoples' faith in the presence of the Living God in their present experience.

Then comes Jesus. The religious authorities had him crucified because he contradicted many of their ideas about God and about how we should live in relation to God and to each other – ideas we find expressed in the psalms. The problem is that by the time of Jesus the psalms had settled into a fixed text. While the disciples of Jesus carried on the tradition of seeing new meaning in the psalms in the light of their experience of Jesus: 'Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled' (Luke 24:44), they left the text intact, but attempted to bypass the difficulty by interpreting offending texts in an "allegorical" sense. The problem with this is that it was done at the expense of the meaning intended by the psalmist and understood by those praying the psalms.

When, for example, the psalm speaks out against 'enemies', those who composed the psalm, and those who prayed it, did not have in mind evil spirits who were warring against the soul. They were referring to identifiable enemies who, because they were Israel's enemies were assumed to be God's enemies. It was assumed that God hates them, and so should we. The psalms invite us to pray that God will destroy them. 'Sinners' are often treated in a similar way. They are to be avoided. Jesus' attitude and behaviour is in stark contrast. He tells us to love our enemies, because God loves them (see Matthew 5:44-48). We are not to hate sinners, for that would mean hating ourselves. We are to love sinners with God's love.

God is frequently portrayed as being angry and vengeful, images that were at home in ancient religious literature but not in Jesus' experience or teaching. In Jesus' well-known parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-31), the father is anything but angry with his wayward boy. He was longing for his return and when the boy does come home, the father welcomes him with love.

The psalmist looked forward to the coming of God's Messiah who would 'break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel' (Psalm 2:9). This contradicts everything we know of Jesus.

Why put ourselves through the torture of praying in this way while having to contradict our prayer? Jesus said that he 'came to seek and save what was lost' (Luke 19:10). He taught us not to condemn each other in our sin, but to embrace each other in love, and so attract each other out of our sin.

When we find sentiments in the psalms that do not reflect the spirit of Jesus, we need to recall the words of Jesus: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you' (Matthew 5:21-38). He was speaking in relation to the interpretation of the Ten Commandments, but his words apply just as importantly to the Psalms.

The point I am making here – that religious texts, even though inspired, are human documents – is fundamental to the study of any and every religious text.

God reveals God's Self to everyone. A person becomes aware of this when he or she has an insight into the Mystery, the Presence we call God. Whoever we are when we give expression to a religious insight, the expression comes from us. The words will be inspired to the extent that they come from a genuine communion with God and are sensitive to the movement of God's Spirit inspiring them. To the extent that this is true the words will reveal something of God and something of our relationship with God, with ourselves and with each other. We are assured by hundreds of years of praying the psalms that they are indeed inspired by God. At the same time they are still human expressions of religious insight, and they must be understood within the context of the situation in which the revelation was received.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission in a declaration entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) states: 'The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding' (page 94). 'God has not given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute' (page 113). 'Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language. Proper respect for inspired Scripture requires undertaking all the labours necessary to gain a thorough grasp of its meaning' (page 133).

Any revelation is received by a human being, who grasps it and expresses it according to circumstances of time and place and situation. The history of religious thought reveals that there are people of every religious persuasion who, rather than take the trouble to examine religious texts in their context, prefer, for reasons of security and power, to take the texts as coming directly from God. This seems to give the text a divine and unalterable aura. It might appear to offer more security, 'knowing' what God is revealing without having to take the trouble to check our thinking. Security, ease, and power can be very tempting. We would do well to listen to Jesus as he tells us: 'the truth will set you free' (John 8:43).

Some religious texts are such that they speak directly to the culture of the time. Sometimes they continue to speak meaningfully to generation after generation. This is surely true of the psalms. This tells us a lot about the value of the religious insights expressed in them, but we cannot simply ignore the historical context of the revelation, or the fact that God's self-revelation necessarily transcends the words in which it is expressed.

This is necessarily true of the writings of the New Testament as well. The Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament are the responses to Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James and the others. Christians continue to treat Jesus' words and actions found in the Gospels with the greatest respect for they offer a privileged window into the way Jesus' disciples came to see him. However, we believe that it is Jesus himself who reveals God. The written words of the Christian New Testament were treasured by the early Christians because they judged them to point in an authentic way to Jesus, the revelation of God. But nevertheless they were words written by people who, while in many ways transcending their culture, were still limited human beings with limited insight. God inspires limited human beings, for that is what we are.

Christianity is not a 'Religion of the Book'. It is a Religion of a Person, Jesus. We believe that Jesus is the perfect human expression of God's Word, God's Self-revelation. Jesus' words and actions, recorded in the Gospels, take us into the heart of Jesus, into his prayer-communion with God. His words and his deeds are a precious gift, for they give expression to his person, and to his intimate communion with God whom he addressed as 'Abba' ('My dear Father'; Mark 14:36). He encouraged his disciples to address God in the same intimate way (Matthew 6:9; Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15).

In Jesus' day it was thought that the male was the sole source of human life. The role of the female was to receive that life and nourish it. With such an understanding, when Jesus addressed God as the source of his life and mission, it was natural to speak of God as 'Father'. Today, with our more accurate understanding of the mutual contribution of the male and the female to human life, we can follow Jesus' example, but address God as 'Mother' as well as 'Father'.

Jesus experienced himself as God's 'Son'. Jesus felt that God knew him and that he knew God in an especially intimate way: 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27). This intimacy bore fruit in an extraordinary capacity to love, and it was his love that gave authority to his teaching and healing power to his ministry. Jesus wanted to share this intimacy, this love, with everyone. In John's Gospel we hear Jesus say: 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30). He wanted his disciples to experience this communion: 'May they be one, Father, as we are one' (John 17:11). 'May they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:21).

In praying the psalms in the liturgy we would do well to heed the following advice given by Father Marie-Eugène OCD who writes:

'Liturgical prayer, like every other prayer, is to be vivified by interior prayer. If the external movement that it imposes, the art that it cultivates, the sustained attention that it requires, should hinder or even destroy the contemplation that it is meant to serve, the devotion that it should stimulate, or the interior spirit that it wants to express, it would be mere external worship that God could not accept, according to the words of Scripture: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me' (Isaiah 29:13, quoted by Jesus in Mark 7:6). The beginner must learn to pray with the Church, to enter into the majestic beauty of her ceremonies, to penetrate their symbolism and delight in her liturgical texts. We must above all seek in liturgical prayer the movements of the soul of Christ in the Church, listening to the movements of his Spirit of Love, and so learn in the school of Jesus Christ our Master his daily intimate and silent prayer' (*I want to see God*, Christian Classics Inc 1986, page 191).

The point I wish to establish in this introductory chapter is that if we are to pray the psalms as disciples of Jesus, if we are to pray the psalms with him, we need to identify aspects of the psalms that do not fit with Jesus' prayer and ministry and edit them as best we can in the light of what we know of Jesus' mind and heart. Only then can the psalms be truly Christian prayer.

## Chapter Two

### Jesus' Prayer

Any religion includes a way of imagining and speaking about 'God'. As a basis for what I wish to say about the intimate prayer-communion between Jesus and God, I offer here a brief statement of what I mean when I use the word 'God'.

Nothing that we directly experience is self-explanatory. It exists, but it does not have in itself the explanation for its existence. We know that there must be an explanation, and this knowing is reinforced when our search for meaning is successful. Our search, however, is never fully satisfied because what we discover always requires a further search. Either there is an ultimate reason for what is, or there is not. Some choose to believe that reality has no ultimate meaning. Others, encouraged by the small successes we have in our search for meaning, believe that there exists a Reality that is not dependent on any other reality, but that has within itself a fully satisfying explanation for its existence. In other words they believe in 'God', a Reality that is the ultimate explanation for the existence of everything.

Fully comprehending this Reality is beyond our capacity. We know that if reality is ultimately meaningful, this Reality must exist, but we cannot define it. Any words we use to speak of this Reality can at best point us towards it. It remains mysterious. People have intuited the Presence of this mysterious Reality in nature: in a mountain shrouded in cloud, in a grove of trees, in a spring gushing from the earth, in the sun or moon, in thunder and lightning and in the night sky. There emerged in human consciousness an intuition that ultimately everything is inter-connected, that the spirit of the ocean and the spirit of the earth and the spirit of the sky are ultimately the one Spirit, the one Presence, the one Creator that accounts for the existence of everything and sustains everything in being. The notion of Monotheism was born.

A key conclusion from the above is that when we use words to speak of God we must do so only with the most profound humility. We must begin with the realisation that no words can comprehensively express a Reality that transcends our necessarily limited experience. We must begin also with the conviction that everyone has a contribution to make here: every thinker, every artist, every lover, every culture.

I am persuaded that it contradicts reason to think of God as the Being who controls what happens in our universe. On the human level we experience freedom: not absolute freedom, since none of us is an independent unit, but a level of freedom to choose in a limited but nevertheless real way. When I think of 'God' I think of a Presence that inspires and respects this freedom.

When I look at the universe, the same thinking applies. The evolutionary forces that we experience in the universe are not controlled by God. This has radical implications for any and every religion. It is Love that sustains the universe and Love does not control.

When, in God's name, we try to control, or fail to respect the other, we are out of communion with God. Our behaviour is incoherent. The God we speak of is a false God. This understanding of God leads to the conclusion that any religion that is based on the idea of a controlling and determining God, thereby resulting in a religion of control, is radically faulty.

5. As a Christian inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, and by many saintly Christians over the ages, I find that the word that, with all its limitations, best points us toward the truth about 'God' as revealed by Jesus is the word 'Love'. By 'Love' I mean the gift of self, with respect for the other. Where there is love, there we experience the Presence of God. The universe is an expression of the divine. It is love that radiates the divine. When we love we are in communion with the mysteriously present God, the Ultimate Reality that sustains in existence everything we experience.

#### Monotheism

To be truly monotheistic we cannot say that there is only one God, and that this God is ours alone. If there is only one God then everything and everybody has the one Source of its being. A true monotheist must see everyone as fundamentally and inherently sacred, however badly people may be behaving. People we consider our enemies are not God's enemies. Jesus makes this abundantly clear, and it flows from his understanding of God:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:43-48).

As already noted, we have learned, too, to see God as loving, not controlling, creation. God is constantly loving, constantly inspiring, constantly offering forgiveness, so that people will live to the full and help others to live to the full. When terrible things happen we do not ask why God allowed it, for we take seriously the freedom of our evolving universe, and God's gift to us of our own human freedom, even to act badly. We ask, rather, where God is in what is happening. And our answer is: where there is love, there is God.

We human beings experience, in however limited a way, freedom to choose to do good or to choose to do evil. God respects this freedom. From it flows much that we experience as evil, but from it flows everything of value. Every created being is a limited, imperfect, but real expression of the Self-giving God. Everything is fundamentally sacred, and so to be respected.

## Jesus' intimate prayer-communion with God

According to the Christian Scriptures, when those who knew and came to love Jesus heard him speak and witnessed his healing love they came to see that his words and actions flowed from the special intimacy he had with God. They recognised in Jesus something of their own yearning, something of their own consciousness of the presence to them of God. Jesus' words and actions were his, and they had a special power to reveal God. When the authors of the Gospels shared this in their writings, they were sharing memories, but also reflections on Jesus and the meaning Jesus gave to their lives. The fact that the community of Jesus' disciples treasured and copied and shared their words points to the Gospels as being inspired, but the words are the words of the Gospel writers, and cannot be understood without grasping the meaning their words had some thirty to sixty years after the death of Jesus.

The Gospel of John witnesses to the fact that misunderstanding the nature of the relationship between Jesus and God was already a factor in the debates of the last decade of the first century when the Gospel was composed. It is evident that Jews who did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah (this group is called 'the Jews' throughout the Gospel) were debating with the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The debate was about how Jesus' followers understood the relationship between Jesus and God.

In John chapter 5 we find an account of Jesus healing a man. Because the healing took place on the Sabbath we are told: 'The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath' (John 5:16). We are then given Jesus' response: 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (John 5:17). The text continues: 'For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God' (John 5:18).

That this is not how John understood Jesus' claim is clear from Jesus' response:

'Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (John 5:19-20).

It was from his intimate communion with God that Jesus experienced the call and the grace to share with others the revelation that he received from God:

'My teaching is not mine but his who sent me' (John 7:16-17).

'I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29).

'I declare to the world what I have heard from him' (John 8:26).

'I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence' (John 8:38).

'The word that you hear is not mine. It is from the Father who sent me' (John 14:24).

My aim in quoting from John's Gospel is to state that neither Jesus nor his followers thought of Jesus as another God who claimed equality with God. On the contrary, Jesus acknowledged that everything he is comes from God, including the words and deeds that flowed from his communion with the One who alone is God.

'Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (John 4:34).

'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (John 5:30).

'The deeds that the Father has given me to complete, the very deeds that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me' (John 5:36).

'I do nothing on my own. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29).

'It is the Father living in me who is doing this work' (John 14:10).

'Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (John 12:44-45).

Jesus' disciples came to see him as the perfect human expression (the 'incarnation') of God. The Gospel of John expresses this well in the Prologue. After stating that the whole of creation is an expression of God's Self-giving Word, John tells us that God's eternal Word found perfect human expression in Jesus:

'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:14-18).

When we speak of Jesus' divinity, we are speaking of his intimate communion with God. Everything he is, everything he says, everything he does, flows from this communion. Such was the intimacy of this communion that Jesus could say: 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30). Here again 'the Jews' misunderstood his claim. John writes:

'The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God" (John 10:31-33).

Jesus was never 'making himself God'. His claim is to be 'God's Son' (John 10:36). He enjoyed such intimate communion with God that he could say: 'The Father is in me and I am in the Father' (John 10:38; see also John 14:11). The Spirit of God filled his heart, his prayer, his life. He revealed God in the love that flowed from this communion, a love, as noted earlier, that gave authority to his words, and healing and liberating power to his relationships.

### The Divinity of Jesus and the Christian teaching of the Blessed Trinity

Jesus' disciples were astonished at Jesus' intimacy with God, and at the extraordinary love that poured out from Jesus' heart and brought healing to so many. They knew that this healing came from God through 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him' (Acts 2:22). Paul writes: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2Corinthians 5:19); 'God our Saviour poured out on us the Holy Spirit through Jesus the Messiah our Saviour' (Titus 3:6).

It was their experiences of the crucified Jesus as raised by God to life and mysteriously present among them that alerted them to a more profound dimension of Jesus' communion with God. They came to see that in raising Jesus to life, 'God has made this crucified Jesus both Lord (Κύριος, Kyrios) and Messiah (χριστός, Christos)' (Acts 2:36).

The Greek Κύριος translates the Hebrew Adonay, which was the word sounded when יהוה (YHWH) was found in the Hebrew text. It is the 'Name' (HaShem) revealed by God to Moses in the scene of the burning bush when God commissioned Moses to go to Egypt and be God's instrument in liberating the Hebrew slaves (see Exodus 3:15). In calling Jesus 'Κύριος' (Kyrios) Paul is witnessing to a Christian practice that goes right back to the beginnings of the Christian movement. Christian Jews never wavered from strict monotheism, but their experience of Jesus during his life and after his resurrection meant that their understanding of God expanded to include Jesus.

The authors of the New Testament were not philosophers and they show no interest in attempting to explore the inner, necessarily mysterious, nature of God's Being. They speak of 'God'. They speak of God's 'Word': the expression of God's will to create – to share God's Self, God's Being with creatures. It is this divine Word that finds perfect human expression in the man Jesus (John 1:14). They speak of God's 'Spirit', when referring to the ways in which God's power and God's action are revealed in the world. John declares that in Jesus God 'gives the Spirit without reserve' (John 3:34).

The writers of the New Testament were fully aware that no words can comprehend God's Being. But their awareness of the special communion between Jesus and God finds expression in the Trinitarian Father, Son and Spirit. 'Father' picks up Jesus' intimacy in speaking of God. 'Son' speaks of Jesus in this intimate communion. 'Spirit' speaks of the love that flowed between God and Jesus. It is this 'Trinity' that Matthew has in mind in the conclusion of his Gospel, when the Risen and Exalted Jesus commissions his disciples:

'Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19).

It is expressed also in the traditional prayers: 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit' and 'In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit'.

The 'Trinity' of God, Jesus and the Spirit alerts us to the truth that we can understand creation only when we acknowledge the relationship of every creature to God who holds everything in existence, and God's Holy Spirit that energises everything and draws everything to find itself in participating in the Being of God. It does more: it opens the way to see God differently.

While never wavering from monotheism, and while knowing that we humans cannot comprehend God, we came to think of God as a Communion of Love. The words 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit' are perhaps best kept for the 'Trinity' we discussed in the previous paragraphs. If we are speaking of the inner nature of God words like 'Self-bestowing Source', 'Word' and 'Love-Communion' seem more appropriate. God is the Self-bestowing Source of everything that exists. God is the Word that is the perfect expression of this Source. God is the Love-Communion of the divine Source and the divine Word.

None of this claims to define God, but, thanks to Jesus, we know that God is Love-Communion, and that everything that exists does so because of God's Self-gift. As John says: God's 'Word is towards God' (John 1:1). There is a kind of gravity, the gravity of grace, drawing everything into communion with God. God's 'Let it be' (Genesis 1:3) flows from this divine communion, so that every created being participates in this love, this divine 'Spirit', and is drawn into this divine Love-Communion.

Christian monotheism is beautifully enriched by Christian teaching of the Trinity: a 'Trinity' understood firstly as God, Jesus and the Spirit of Love that flowed between them; a 'Trinity' understood secondly as daring to speak of God as the Origin of all, as the divine Word, and as the divine Spirit. Transcending creation, God is Love-Communion, and it is this Communion that is expressed in, and is experienced by, the cosmos: our amazing home and everything that makes up our universe. Christian faith opens us to welcome God's gift of God's Self in love, in the threefold giving that is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), the gift of the Divine Word made flesh and dwelling amongst us (John 1:14), the gift of union with the Origin of all, who is Originating Love (1 John 4:8,16).

Jesus' disciples began by getting to know Jesus. He was clearly a human being, but there was something quite special about him: his healing love. Gradually they came to see that this amazing love came from his special communion with God, whom he addressed as 'Abba' ('Father'). Knowing God as 'Father', Jesus knew himself as God's 'Son'. We believe that there is only one God, the God whom Jesus addressed as 'Father', and this God is revealed in Jesus, his 'Son', and most intimately in Jesus' prayer, in the communion of love he enjoyed with his 'Father', the communion of love we speak of as the 'Holy Spirit'.

The New Testament uses the word 'God' nearly twelve hundred times. The reference is to the One Jesus addressed as 'God' and 'Father' (John 20:17). However, it was not long before the Christian community embraced the practice of including Jesus when they spoke of 'God'. We find this in a letter written in the opening years of the second century to the Christian community in Ephesus by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch: 'Our God, even Jesus the Christ, was borne in the womb by Mary according to the dispensation of God, of the seed of David and of the Holy Ghost' (Ephesians 18). And in his letter to the Christian community in Rome he writes: 'Suffer me to copy the passion of my God' (Romans, 6). It is possible that an example of this practice is found in the Prologue to John's Gospel, composed in the last decade of the first century. Some early manuscripts read: 'No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:18). Other manuscripts include the word 'God' and read: 'It is God the only Son'.

The early Christian practice of calling Jesus 'God' witnesses to the fact that they were not content to admire the human Jesus, while failing to see him as the revelation of God: failing to listen to or watch God being revealed in and through him. The essence of Christianity is that in listening to Jesus and watching him, and in experiencing something of the intimacy of his prayer-communion, we are truly being drawn into communion with God. When we Christians say that Jesus is God, or say that Mary is the mother of God, this is a shorthand way of drawing attention to the truths I have tried to open up in the last few paragraphs. Jesus is not another God. He is fully human, but in such an extraordinary purity that it is God, the one God in whom Jesus and Christians believe, who is revealed in and through him.

Christians speak of Jesus as having two natures. The word 'nature' is a scientific term born of observation. We come to know something's 'nature' by observing what it does. When his disciples watched Jesus and listened to him his humanity was obvious. He showed them what we human beings can be at our best. But they saw more than this: they came to see that what Jesus was saying and doing was revealing God as God is revealed in a human being. That is Jesus' divine nature. He invites everyone to share this nature with him. He wants us to share the intimate communion that he has with God, so that we, too, will speak God's words and be instruments to each other of God's life-giving love.

When we say that 'Jesus is God' and that 'the Holy Spirit is God', and that 'Mary is the mother of God', we want to say something very beautiful about God and about Jesus. In no way do we intend to say that God is not One. Jesus' claim is to be 'the Son of God' in the sense that God is the source of his life and of everything he says and does.

Jesus' followers were amazed at the purity and beauty of Jesus' love. Because of Jesus' teaching and actions, they came to see that God, the one God who is the source of all and who holds everything and everyone in existence, is Self-bestowing Love and that the human Jesus was totally caught up in this divine love. It was God who healed through Jesus. It was God who loved through Jesus. It was God who forgave through Jesus. Jesus and the God he called 'Father' were one in a complete communion. It is their mutual love that is spoken of as 'The Holy Spirit'. It was God's will that Jesus share this Spirit of love with his disciples, and ultimately with every person on earth.

Paul ends his Second Letter to the Christian community in Corinth with the prayer: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you' (2 Corinthians 13:13-14). It was largely their experience of sharing in this love that explains the growth of Christian communities and that attracted people to find in the Christian community a way of life that satisfied their search for meaning. As Paul wrote in his Letter to the Christian community in Rome: 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). And to the community in Philippi he wrote: 'If there is any appeal in Christ, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and one mind' (Philippians 2:1-2).

We cannot see the Transcendent God, but we believe that in watching the human Jesus we are watching how God wishes to reveal God's Self in human form. Jesus says: 'Whoever sees me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). When we speak of God's 'Word', we are speaking of God achieving God's will through creating, forgiving and embracing in love. We Christians see Jesus as expressing this in a fully beautiful human way.

Christianity preserves the Transcendence of the One God. We also believe that this One God is constantly active in history, and Jesus helps us to see and feel what this loving presence and action is like. He enables us to find human words to direct us to better ways of thinking of God. He is a constant corrective to our tendency to misunderstand God by imposing on God our limited concepts and customary habits of thinking.

God is a Communion in Love. It follows that the whole of creation exists because it is a finite participation in the very being of God. Everything is an expression (a limited, imperfect, but real expression) of God. Everything belongs, because everything is held in existence by, and gives expression to, the One God.

Never is our teaching concerning God intended to compromise Jesus' belief and our belief in the truth we share with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters and others that there is one God. Seeing Jesus as the Word of God in human form reminds us to listen to all the ways God speaks to us. Watching Jesus inspired by God reminds us to wonder at the way God breathes in each of us, embracing us in love and drawing us into full listening (full obedience) to God who is breathing in us and drawing us all into Love-Communion. The God revealed by Jesus is a God of all-embracing, all-encompassing, Love.

#### Note on addressing or referring to God

Seven hundred and fifty-five times the Hebrew text addresses God, or refers to God, by the 'sacred name' (HaShem) יהוה (יהוה), revealed to Moses in the scene of the burning bush. From the burning bush God revealed God's Self to Moses as being determined to free those enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 3:7-8). God assured Moses: 'I will be (Hebrew אֲהִיָּה; ehyeh) with you' (Exodus 3:12). Moses wanted to know God's name but had to be content with knowing that God is the One who will be with him:

'You will say to the Israelites, "I WILL BE [אֲהִיָּה; ehyeh], has sent me to you ... יהוה [יהוה], the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you". This is my name forever' (Exodus 3:14-15).

Whenever the psalmists writes יהוה the scene of the burning bush is meant to come to mind. This offers us the image of a God who is determined to liberate us from slavery, indeed from anything that stops us living in intimate communion with God. This enables us to live in a rich and truthful relationship with creation, especially with the people who inhabit our lives.



## Calling on God

It is important to note that YHWH is not sounded when it is written in the text. This is out of deference to the Jewish practice of not naming God. Instead of YHWH, 'Adonai (Lord) is substituted. Because of the substitution of the word 'Lord' in sounding the text, the Greek translated YHWH using Kyrios, hence the English 'Lord'. I have chosen to use 'GOD' (in UPPER CASE). When GOD is being addressed, I have sometimes replaced GOD with YOU (in UPPER CASE).

'Adonai, besides substituting for YHWH when the text is spoken, is also found 38 times in the written text. When this happens I have translated it as God\* (with an asterisk).

'God' translates the Hebrew word for God (usually 'Elohim).

Whatever translation we use for Hebrew YHWH, we should keep in mind that the word YHWH points to the mystery of a God who is infinitely beyond all our human titles, but who nevertheless is intimately close to us.

### Heading 1. Praying Psalm X with Jesus

This covers most of the psalms. The idea is to pray the psalms in Jesus' company, listening to him pray them, and joining him in prayer. Sometimes there are verses that Jesus cannot pray because they involve an admission of sin. However, we can pray them in his presence. Such verses are placed in brackets. See, for example, Psalm 7 verses 3-5. If the whole psalm is a penitential one it is introduced with '**Praying Psalm X in Jesus' Company**.' See Psalm 39. Sometimes there are verses that Jesus cannot pray because the image of God presented is not the way Jesus experienced or revealed God. These verses have been omitted. If Jesus cannot pray such verses with us, they do not pass as Christian prayer. We listen as Jesus says: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you' (Matthew 5:21-22).

### Heading 2. Reflecting On Psalm X in Jesus' company

Since we are not attempting to make the sentiments of these psalms part of our own prayer, I saw no need to omit any verses and have presented them in Calibri Regular font, not in **Palatino Bold**. See Psalms 18, 37, 45 and 49. This heading also introduces psalms that are in the form of a prayer, but are basically a presentation of the Israelite version of the history of Israel, more legend than history. See Psalm 44. Others are prayers but not ones Jesus could pray. See Psalm 68.

## Praying Psalm 1 with Jesus

**<sup>1</sup>Blessed and happy are you who do not follow those with no place in their hearts for God, who do not linger in the way of sinners, or sit and scoff with cynics.**

**<sup>2</sup>Find your delight in the law of GOD. Meditate on it night and day.**

**<sup>3</sup>If you do this, you will be like a tree planted by running water, bearing fruit in season, its leaves always green, its yield always abundant. All that you do will prosper.**

**<sup>4</sup>Not so for those whose hearts are closed to God. They are like chaff scattered by the wind.**

**<sup>5</sup>It will go ill with them at the judgment. They will have no place among the just.**

**<sup>6</sup>GOD looks with love on the way of the just. The way of sinners leads only to destruction.**

1. As we saw earlier (see page 11) Jesus found 'delight' (verse 2) in listening to every word that came to him from God. The first example of this given us in the gospels is at his baptism in the Jordan. From what we know of Jesus we can assume that in his boyhood, youth and early manhood he experienced a profound communion with God, but something very special happened at his baptism: he was overwhelmed by God's love. The Gospel writers speak of God's Spirit descending upon him as he heard God say to him: 'You are my Son. I love you. I delight in you' (Mark 1:11). Jesus retired into the desert to 'meditate' on the significance of this experience, and from the desert he entered into his public ministry. If people were to live to the full they needed to experience the love that Jesus experienced at his baptism. They needed to hear God say to them: 'You are my son/my daughter. I love you. I delight in you'.

We see Jesus seeking solitude to be alone with God, and he invites us to do the same: 'to meditate on God's law day and night'. It was here that he found nourishment for his soul. He wants everyone to know the beauty and peace of living in communion with God's constant gift of God's Self to them in love. He shared his Spirit with all who were open to receive it, and in doing so he shared his faith, his hope, his love, and his joy. This is the 'way of the righteous'.

2. From his communion with God Jesus knew God's love for everyone, including sinners. We hear him say this, and in scene after scene we watch him giving expression to this love. To a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water from a well, he promised 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). All she had to do was open her heart to 'the gift of God' (John 4:10), and she would be 'like a tree that is planted by streams of water, yielding its fruit in season and its leaves never wither. All that she would do would prosper'.

Jesus did not only challenge us to welcome 'the gift of God', he invites us to 'Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-29). Experiencing his love we experience God's love, and it is in knowing God's love that we can find the courage to dare to live.

3. When he finds us 'lingering in the way of sinners' he reaches out to us, offering us the love we need to break with sin and enjoy the kind of communion with God that he himself knows. Having our hearts closed to God we are going nowhere, unstable, driven, at the mercy of every whim and every change. We live in turmoil and our lives, like chaff, are sterile. We are on a path that 'leads to destruction'. Jesus' message is an urgent one. What we choose to do matters. Jesus pleads with us: 'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it' (Matthew 7:13). Everything Jesus said or did was to draw people away from this path.

4. He experienced the 'scoffing' of those who thought they knew God but had not learned humility or the healing power of gentle loving. They accused Jesus of healing through the power of an evil spirit (see Matthew 12:24), and they continued to scoff at him as he was dying on the cross (Matthew 27:40-42). When he experienced the self-righteous looking down on others, he challenged them to change. When a woman who had a bad reputation in the town approached Jesus and in tears anointed Jesus' feet, those at table with him scoffed at her and at Jesus' loving response to her. He challenged them to stop judging and to see beyond her reputation to her love (Luke 7:36-50).

5. There is no exact English equivalent to the opening word of this psalm (Hebrew אֲשֶׁר־יֵי, ashre; Greek Μακαριος, Makarios). It speaks of a special kind of happiness - a happiness that comes from being blessed. It speaks of a special blessing - a blessing that brings happiness with it. It is the expression used in the beatitudes in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. There is an element of excitement in it, such that one could translate 'Oh the bliss of'. I have chosen to translate: 'Blessed and happy'.

6. For the reasons given on page 16, I translate the divine name יהוה here by **GOD**.

Let us join Jesus in this prayer as he encourages us to keep a place for God in our hearts, and to meditate with him on God's loving choice of us. God wants us to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10), and he wants us to 'bear much fruit' (John 15:5). Jesus invites us: 'Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me' (John 15:4).

## Praying excerpts from Psalm 2 with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>My people, why do you resist my Anointed One?

<sup>6</sup>It is I who have established him on Zion, my holy mountain.

<sup>7</sup>This is what GOD said to me:

'You are my son, today I have begotten you.

<sup>8</sup>Ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,  
the ends of the earth for your possession.'

<sup>10</sup>Come to your senses, take heed.

<sup>11</sup>Serve GOD, pay God your homage,

<sup>12</sup>Blessed and happy are all who take refuge in God..

Omitted verses

<sup>2</sup>The kings of the earth put themselves on a war footing,  
and the rulers take counsel together against GOD,  
and God's anointed one, saying,

<sup>3</sup>'Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast off their yoke.'

<sup>4</sup>God who sits enthroned in the heavens is mocking them.

<sup>5</sup>God confronts them in anger, and in fury strikes them with terror.

<sup>9</sup>You will break them with a sceptre of iron,  
and dash them to pieces like a clay pot.'

<sup>11</sup>Serve GOD with fear, with trembling kiss God's feet,

<sup>12</sup>or God will be angry and you will perish in the way,  
for God's wrath is quickly kindled.

1. Recognising Jesus as the promised Messiah, 'God's anointed', was central to Paul's enlightenment on the Damascus road. In his Letters he refers to Jesus as 'Christ' (the Greek translation of Messiah) nearly four hundred times. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Peter's acknowledgment of Jesus as the Messiah is presented as the turning point of Jesus' ministry (Matthew 16:13-19; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21). In Acts 4:25-27 Luke has the Jerusalem community praying to God, and quoting from Psalm 2: 'It is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.'

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.' Jesus himself, however, is portrayed as being wary of the title, and for reasons that are apparent in this psalm. Jesus heralded the coming of God's reign of love (Mark 1:15), but, as he said to Pilate: 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36).

2. Clearly the psalmist sees the enemies of Israel as God's enemies. The Messiah is going to break his enemies 'with a sceptre of iron, and dash them to pieces like a clay pot' (verse 9). Clearly Jesus does not share this view. The psalmist pictures God as reacting to Israel's enemies with 'anger' for daring to oppose God's Messiah. He thinks of God as 'in fury striking Israel's enemies with terror' (verse 5). He challenges the enemies of Israel to worship Israel's God: 'trembling pay him your homage, lest God's anger flare up, and you perish' (verse 12). Here, too, Jesus' image of God is very different from the image of an angry God as portrayed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, including, as here, in the psalms.

Eight different words are used in the Hebrew Scriptures to bring out different nuances of God's anger, but the most general image is that of 'breathing fire'. Psalm 2 is a good example. The word for anger in verse five is 'ap, which also means 'nostrils'. In the same verse we find ḥarôn, 'glowing' ('on fire'). 'ap is used again in verse twelve where we also find the associated verb 'ānap, 'to snort with anger'.

Sometimes, as in Psalm 2, God's anger is portrayed as being directed against those who would oppose God's chosen people, but mostly it is portrayed as being directed against the people of Israel for being unfaithful to the covenant. This is a common theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures: 'You would not listen to me, says GOD, and so you have provoked me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm' (Jeremiah 25:7).

It is essential to examine the religious context in which this talk of divine anger occurs. It is true that we can find in the Hebrew Bible a growing sense of personal responsibility, but it is always within the context of an assumption that God controls what happens on earth. If a person dies, they considered that it must be as a result of God's decision. Earthquakes, storms, famine, destruction, sickness, winning or losing battles, in fact any and every event was a matter of divine decision. It is a logical step from such a view that negative experiences happen because God is punishing, angry at some human infidelity, personal, familial or tribal.

Past horrors are used by the prophets to warn that they will be repeated (by God) if the people do not repent. When Israel was defeated in battle, it was concluded that God had chosen the foreign army to be his instrument in punishing his people:

'I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that is called by my name, and how can you possibly avoid punishment? You will not go unpunished, for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth, says the Mighty GOD' (Jeremiah 25:29).

At the same time, there is a special place in God's heart for God's chosen people and Love is always ready to forgive:

'Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I will rise; when I sit in darkness, GOD will be a light to me. I must bear GOD's indignation, because I have sinned against him, until he takes my side and executes judgment for me. He will bring me out to the light; I will see his vindication. Then my enemy will see, and shame will cover her who said to me, 'Where is your God?' My eyes will see her downfall; now she will be trodden down like the mire of the streets ... The nations will see and be ashamed of all their might ... Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea' (Micah 7:8-10, 16, 18-19).

The appropriate human response to divine anger is fear (verse 11). The people of the covenant should fear and not sin, for sin will not go unpunished. Questions were asked:

'O God, will one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation' (Numbers 16:22)?

God's anger was recognised as problematic, but the reality was obvious to all.

Isaiah portrays God as reluctant to express anger:

'I do not want to be forever accusing, nor always angry, or the spirit would fail under my onslaught, the souls that I myself have made' (Isaiah 57:16).

While speaking of God's anger, Jeremiah recognises that punishment is essentially something which we bring upon ourselves:

'Your own wickedness is punishing you, your own apostasies are rebuking you. Consider carefully how evil and bitter it is for you to abandon GOD' (Jeremiah 2:19).

The insight that God loves the world and does not control the world brings about a radical shift in our thinking about God. God is the creator and so the ultimate cause of everything that is. God, however, has chosen to give us freedom (limited but real), and to respect it. This means accepting the consequences of our use of freedom, for good and ill. Knowing this, we look for scientific explanations of natural disasters and we look for human action or inaction to explain many of the awful things that occur. When we think of God we are not looking for the proximate cause of these negative experiences.

We no longer think of God as the one who decides the victor in war, and when cities are devastated, when large populations die of hunger, when natural disasters wreak havoc, we no longer think that God is arranging this to punish sinners. Jesus revealed God as Love. If we wish to see where God is active in the often random accidents as well as in the brutal violence that afflict our world, we look for the presence of Love in the midst of human tragedy. Where we find Love, there we find God.

Already in the Hebrew Scriptures God is portrayed as a God of love, and it is divine compassion and mercy that transcend everything else: GOD is essentially one who is 'slow to anger' (Exodus 34:6). This expression belongs to Israel's 'creed' (see Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). In Psalm 89 we read: 'I will punish their sins ... but I will never withdraw my love from them or fail in my faithfulness' (Psalm 89:93).

Thanks to Jesus we have come to see that God is Love – only Self-bestowing Love. Jesus is clear in his judgment of what sin is and what its effects are. He is clear, too, in his warnings of the effects of our refusal of the grace of repentance. This shows in Jesus' just anger and passionate concern to break through the apathy and hypocrisy that surrounded him. But he insists that God's initiative, God's will, is always loving. It is not God whom we must fear.

'Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. Even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows' (Luke 12:6-7). Rather, we must fear our capacity to ruin our lives and the lives of others by hardening our hearts against grace. Everything that God does expresses God's love, and divine love is offered to all unconditionally.

When we read of divine anger, we are not to read it in the context of divine punishment. Rather we are to think of what we do to ourselves and to others when we reject God's grace. We are to think of God as opposing evil, as determined to bring about justice. If we are going to speak of punishment as 'divine' we are highlighting the relationship of the 'punishment' to God. We are not saying that God punishes. Rather we are acknowledging two important truths: that God is the author of the order which sin violates; and that God uses even the evil effects brought about by sin to draw us to repentance.

But God does this only through Love. God is constantly inspiring us to act against injustice. If we fail to listen, the good that God wishes to be done through us remains undone, for God respects our freedom. Others will have to respond. The language of divine anger reminds us that what we do really matters and that to receive divine pardon a change in human behaviour is required.

'If pity is shown to the wicked without their learning what saving justice is, they will continue to act wrongly in the land and they will not see the majesty of GOD' (Isaiah 26:10).

To speak of divine anger is to speak of God's passionate concern for justice. God's initiative is always to put things right. It is to speak of the terrible things that we bring upon ourselves and others when we reject God's inspiration and act against the truth. This terrible situation (this 'anger') is 'of God' in the sense that it is related to God and is the result of our failure to welcome God's grace and live in God's Love. Talk of divine anger reminds us that God hates sin, and that we should hate sin as that which cuts us off from God, the source of life and of all that is good.

The expression 'anger/wrath of God' is found in the Christian Scriptures in Paul (Colossians 3:6; Romans 1:18; 5:9; 12:19; Ephesians 5:6), and in the Book of Revelation (14:19; 15:1; 15:7; 16:1; 19:15). It is not speaking of a 'feeling' experienced by God. Rather it is a technical term for the situation in which we place ourselves when we obstinately reject God's love. The key point is that evil has evil effects. It matters what we do and we cannot pretend that we can do evil and not suffer the consequences.

Through sin, as Jesus reminds us in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), we leave our Father's home and find ourselves feeding the pigs. None of this is God's choice. The Father awaits us with tremendous Love. The God of Jesus utterly respects human freedom even when we choose to abuse it. God, however, is not a victim of our wrong choices, nor is God a bystander. God constantly pours into our hearts the love that will bring about reconciliation, justice and peace, provided we welcome God's grace and have the courage to follow God's inspiration.

3. The psalmist calls us to 'Serve GOD with fear, pay God your homage' (verse 11). It is important to read 'fear of GOD' in the context of the Hebrew understanding of God's 'anger'. As the Hebrew understanding of God was refined, so was their understanding of fear in relation to God. The Book of Proverbs explains that 'the fear of GOD is hatred of evil' (Proverbs 8:13), and equates it with knowing God: 'The fear of GOD is the beginning of wisdom; knowledge of the Holy One is insight' (Proverbs 9:10). 'The fear of GOD is a fountain of life' (Proverbs 14:27). Isaiah speaks of the fear of GOD as one of the gifts of the Spirit (Isaiah 11:3) and he writes: 'The fear of GOD is Zion's treasure' (Isaiah 33:6). In a person who is striving to know and do God's will it is the opposite of pride and self-reliance.

'Fear of God' is the experience of knowing the Holy One: knowing that God is transcendent and awesome. In this sense it is better translated 'fear from (given as a gift by) GOD'. The Greek Septuagint usually translates the Hebrew 'Fear of GOD' literally, but in three texts (Proverbs 1:7; Isaiah 11:2 and Isaiah 33:6) it uses *eusebeia*, the Greek word for 'religion'. Basic to religion is the realisation that God is God and we are creatures, totally dependent upon God. All we have is gift, and if we reject the gift we reject life. This should lead to fear – not fear of God, who is love, but a profound sense of awe accompanied by fear of our capacity to misuse our freedom and lose the communion with God in which life ultimately consists. Over and above a sense of awe in God's presence and a profound humility before God, it includes a hatred of sin and a real fear of one's capacity to turn from grace and lose one's way. Since the expression in English lends itself all too readily to misunderstanding, I will substitute 'revere' followed by 'fear' in brackets when it appears in the psalms.

4. Jesus' love for Jerusalem ('Zion') is apparent. Luke writes (19:41-44): 'As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

At the same time there was nothing narrowly nationalistic about Jesus' teaching. The temple was meant to be 'a house of prayer for all the nations' (Mark 11:17). As he said to the Samaritan woman: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain [Mount Gerizim in Samaria] nor in Jerusalem ... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him' (John 4:21-23).

5. Jesus does identify as God's 'Son'. The Gospel writers focus on this as summing up Jesus' experience at his baptism, for it was this overwhelming experience of being loved by God as a Son that impelled him to go to the desert, and from there to enter his public ministry.

He wanted everyone to know God as 'Father', to hear God say to them as God said to Jesus: 'You are my son/daughter. I love you. I delight in you' (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). This experience is echoed in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35; 2 Peter 1:17). It was an experience that was renewed each 'today' of Jesus' life.

Luke has Paul preaching in the synagogue: 'We bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us their children, by raising Jesus; as it is written in the second psalm, "You are my son, today I have begotten you" (Acts 13:33; see Hebrews 1:5; 5:5). Jesus would have been at home with the following from the Book of Lamentations (3:22-26).

'The covenant love of GOD is not all past,  
God's mercies are not exhausted;  
every morning they are renewed;  
great is your faithfulness.

"GOD is my portion", says my soul, "and so I will hope in God."

GOD is good to those who wait for God,  
to the soul that searches for God.

It is good to wait in silence for GOD to save.'

6. Jesus was always pleading with people not to worry, but to entrust themselves to God's care (see Matthew 6:25-34). At the Last Supper Jesus pleaded with his disciples: 'Trust in God still and trust in me' (John 14:1). Trusting in this way we would share Jesus' joy (John 15:11). In the final words of the psalm: we would be 'blessed and happy'.

7. Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfilment of the promises made by God to Israel. He is God's yes to us, too. Let us listen to God's words about him, and to his sharing with us God's loving design. Let us share Jesus' joy, the joy that comes from placing our trust in God.

## Praying Psalm 3 with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>O GOD, how daunting the forces massed against me!

<sup>2</sup>They jeer at me: 'God will not save you!'

<sup>3</sup>But you, O GOD, are my shield, my glory.

You hold my head high.

<sup>4</sup>When I call you answer me

from your holy mountain.

<sup>5</sup>I rest easy at night and rise in the morning,  
sustained by your protection.

<sup>6</sup>I am not afraid of those ranged against me.

<sup>7</sup>Rise up, O GOD, and rescue me.

<sup>8</sup>Saving help is from YOU.

Your blessing is for your people,  
for You are our Saviour.

Omitted

<sup>7</sup>You strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.

1. Because Jesus reached out to the suffering in healing love on the Sabbath 'The Pharisees conspired with the Herodians against him to destroy him' (Mark 3:6). They accused Jesus of 'having an unclean spirit' (Mark 3:30). Even the people of Nazareth, Jesus' hometown 'took offense at him' (Mark 6:3). The Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus by seeking his opinion about paying taxes to the emperor (Mark 12:13-17).

This opposition came to a head two days before the Passover: 'The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him' (Mark 14:1-2). Jesus shared a final meal with his disciples, and then went to the Mount of Olives to pray. His disciples were with him, but could not support him in his grief.

He seems to have felt that he had failed the mission given him by God. So little had changed. The Jewish leadership was still caught up in observing the letter of the law and in safeguarding their power in the community. They were still blind to God's compassion, still imposing impossible burdens on the people. The crowd were still as fickle as crowds can be when ruled by fear. Jesus' disciples were not yet ready to carry on his mission. He told them: 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and keep awake' (Mark 14:34). Then he went off to be alone with God. He pleaded for more time. But then he found a profound peace, determined to carry on his mission, come what may. He determined to keep revealing a God of love, to keep loving the lonely and the broken, to keep confronting those who oppressed them.

In fact there was no relief. He was taken captive and condemned to death by the Jewish court. They wanted him crucified so they took him to Pilate who finally acceded to their demands and 'after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified' (Mark 15:15).

'Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him' (Mark 15:29-32).

Jesus' response to the mockery was to plead with God to forgive them: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). He cried out to God: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' (Mark 15:34), but he never lost faith in his Father's love, and he handed over his life to God with the words: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews assures us:

'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.' (Hebrews 5:7)

God took Jesus from the cross into his embrace. God will do the same for us, for God is, indeed, 'our Saviour' (verse 8).

2. When the cross weighs heavily upon us we can hear Jesus praying Psalm 3, and join him in recognising that, whatever we are suffering, God is, indeed, our 'shield', our 'protection', our 'saviour'. Like Jesus in his agony, we can plead with God to rescue us, and listen to Jesus praying for this with us. It is natural to experience fear, but, strengthened by the love poured into our hearts from the heart of the Risen Jesus, we can pray: 'I am not afraid'.

## Praying Psalm 4 with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**Answer me when I call, O God,  
defender of my just cause.  
You opened up an escape for me.  
Be gracious to me. Hear my prayer.**

<sup>2</sup>**How long, proud fools, will you insult me?  
How long will you love what is false and chase after lies?**

<sup>3</sup>**GOD has set me apart, for I am faithful.  
I belong to GOD, who always hears my call.**

<sup>4</sup>**Tremble with fear and stop your sinning.  
Commune in your heart and be silent.**

<sup>5</sup>**Worship with integrity,  
trusting always in GOD.**

<sup>6</sup>**Many ask themselves:  
'Who is going to enjoy a good life,  
if the light of your face, O GOD,  
does not shine upon us?'**

<sup>7</sup>**You give my heart more joy than all their grain and wine.**

<sup>8</sup>**I sleep secure at night.  
For you, O GOD, are watching over me.  
I place my trust in you.**

1. We can hear the outpouring of Jesus' heart in this psalm, pleading with God to answer his call, to respond with love to his prayer. He longed to see 'the face of God' and 'placed all his trust in God.' John speaks of Jesus as being 'in the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18). From this intimate communion Jesus could say: 'The Father knows me and I know the Father ... The Father loves me' (John 10:15, 17).

At his baptism in the Jordan Luke tells us that Jesus was praying. In response to his prayer 'heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him' (Luke 3:21). In his opening chapter Mark focuses on the power of Jesus' love to bring healing. He goes on: 'In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he was praying' (Mark 1:35). Understandably everyone wanted Jesus to stay, but in his prayer he discerned that God wanted him to move on 'to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do' (Mark 1:38). His preaching flowed from his prayer, as did his healing. John puts it this way: 'He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure' (John 3:34).

Luke writes: 'the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray' (Luke 5:15-16). Before choosing the Twelve 'Jesus went out to the mountain to pray and he spent the whole night in prayer to God' (Luke 6:12). On another occasion 'Jesus was praying alone, with only his disciples near him' (Luke 9:18). He turned to them and asked what he meant to them. With great love Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah promised to Israel by God. Jesus then 'took with him Peter, John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray' (Luke 9:28). Something of the intimacy of his prayer shone from his countenance. In the words of Psalm 4 'the light of God's face shone upon him.'

On another occasion 'Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will"' (Luke 10:21). Jesus' disciples came to realise that the secret of Jesus' life and ministry was in his prayer. They wanted him to teach them how to pray as he prayed (Luke 11:1).

Picking up the symbolism of God's gift of manna to the Israelites on their wilderness journey, and in words that echo Jesus' gift of himself at the Last Supper, the Gospel writers portray Jesus as feeding the people. After dismissing the crowd, 'Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came he was there alone' (Matthew 14:23).

Jesus' prayer issued from his 'heart' and so ranged through all the moods of the human heart. At the Last Supper, with a broken heart, he said to his companions: 'You will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone.' He went straight on to add: 'Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me' (John 16:32). We have already reflected on Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross (see page 28).

In his agony and in his ecstasy and in the ups and downs of his daily life and ministry, Jesus remained 'faithful'. He knew the 'gladness of heart' of being in communion with God in whose love he 'placed all his trust'. He invites us, in the words of Psalm 4: 'Put your trust in God'.

2. The second stanza calls to mind Jesus' heartfelt plea for the scribes and Pharisees to practise 'humility', and to learn 'justice, mercy and faith' (Matthew 23).

In his Confessions (IX.4), Augustine tells how praying Psalm 4 affected him:

'When I read the fourth Psalm, how it moved me: 'When I called on you, listen to me, O God and grant redress. In time of trouble you have brought me relief. Have pity on me now and hear my prayer' ...

I quivered with fear, yet at the same time, I was aglow with hope, rejoicing in your mercy, my Father ... when I read the message of your Holy Spirit: 'How long will you be slow of heart? How long will you love vanity, and seek after lies?' ... For so long I had loved vanity, and followed a lie. How I wish that my cries could have been heard by those who still set their hearts on vanity and follow lies! ...

I read on: "Be angry, and stop sinning." This moved me deeply, my God, because by now I had learned to be angry with myself for my past, so that in the future I might sin no more. It was right that I should be angry in this way, for ... those who try to find joy in things outside themselves easily vanish away into emptiness. They waste themselves on the temporal pleasures of the visible world. Their minds are starved and they nibble at empty shadows. How I wish that they would tire of going hungry, and cry: 'Who will show us any good?' And we would answer: 'The light of your countenance, O Lord, is lifted up upon us'. For we are not the Light which enlightens every person, but we are enlightened by you, that we, who were formerly darkness, may be light in you.

How I wish that they could see the Eternal Light within us. Having tasted it myself, I gnashed my teeth that I could not show it to them. Their hearts looked out through their eyes on the world outside, away from you as they cried: 'Who will show us any good?' But there, where I was angry with myself in my inmost heart, where I had been stung with remorse, where I had put to death my old self and offered it in 'sacrifice', where I had first resolved to renew my life and had 'placed my hope in you', it was there that you had begun to make me love you and had 'put gladness in my heart'. It was my eyes that read these words but my soul that knew their meaning. They brought a cry to my lips and I wished no longer for the manifold riches of this earth, things on which I should waste time, only to be myself wasted by time; whereas in your eternal simplicity I possess true 'corn, and wine, and oil'.

When I read the next verse a loud cry broke from my heart: 'In peace I will lie down and sleep!' For who will stand against us when the saying of Scripture comes true: 'Death is swallowed up in victory?' For you do not change and in you we find the rest which banishes all labour. For there is no other beside you, and we need not struggle for other things which are not what you are, for 'You only, Lord, make me dwell in hope'. These things I read, and there was fire in my heart ... I had snarled blindly and bitterly against the Scriptures, which are sweet with the honey of heaven and radiant with your light. And now I felt sick at heart over those who hate them.'

Let us join Jesus in praying this psalm.

## Praying Psalm 5 with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>O GOD, listen to my words, give heed to my groaning.

<sup>2</sup>Attend to the sound of my cry, my King and my God.

O GOD, it is to you I pray.

<sup>3</sup>In the morning hear my voice.

In the morning I plead my case, watching and waiting.

<sup>4</sup>You are not one who wills evil.

<sup>7</sup>Thanks to your great love, I have access to your house.

I bow down toward your holy temple,  
filled with awe in your presence.

<sup>8</sup>In your justice, O GOD, guide me. Make clear your way before me.

<sup>9</sup>There is no truth in those who accuse me.

Inside they are only empty caverns.

Their throats are wide-open graves; all honey their speech.

<sup>11</sup>Let all who take refuge in you sing for joy.

Spread over them your protection,  
that they may exult in you, when they call on your name.

<sup>12</sup>You bless the just, O GOD; you cover them from above.

You surround them with the shield of your love.

Omitted

<sup>4</sup>The person who does evil is not your guest.

<sup>5</sup>The boastful will not stand before you; you detest those who do evil.

<sup>6</sup>You destroy those who lie. You abhor the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

[Verse 10 is omitted from the Church's liturgy.]

<sup>10</sup>Make them suffer the consequences of their sin, O God;  
bring to nothing their plotting.

Because of their many transgressions cast them out,  
for they rebel against you.

1. This psalm is an appeal to God by a person who is unjustly accused. He does not protest his innocence, but entrusts himself to God's justice. We might recall Peter's words about Jesus: 'When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly' (1 Peter 2:23).

2. The first line in verse 4 reminds us that it is not God 'who wills evil'. God loves us into life and gives us the gift of freedom - not absolute freedom, for we are not independent, but real (though necessarily limited) freedom. Evil happens when we use our freedom to choose to reject God's love.

3. The rest of stanza 2 (verses 4-6) is based on an image of God that Jesus knew was wrong. A deeper appreciation of God's respect for human freedom, and a deeper awareness that God is love, lead us to realise that it is not God who 'destroys those who lie'. We bring destruction upon ourselves when we do not live according to the truth. Significant, too, is the fact that Jesus ate with sinners. No wonder those brought up on the sentiments of these verses were shocked at his behaviour: 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them' (Luke 15:2).

Jesus is just as insistent that it matters how we behave and that we are judged according to what we do (see his parable on God's ultimate judgment, Matthew 25:31-46). However, it is important to realise that it is not God who punishes. Punishment is self-inflicted. It is not God who 'casts the sinner out'. It is the sinner who obstinately refuses to welcome the grace offered by God. Nothing we do can change God's loving. We can, however, reject God's offer of life. God's love is unconditionally offered. It is received conditional upon our welcoming it, for love does not force entry into our lives.

4. Verse 10 is so contrary to the teaching and practice of Jesus that the Christian Church omits it from its liturgy. We do 'suffer the consequences of our sin'. It matters how we behave and we cannot pretend that our actions do not have consequences. But Jesus knew that it is not God who 'casts us out'. God is Love, and God does not change when we choose not to welcome love.

5. When Jesus was falsely accused before the Jewish council 'he was silent' (Matthew 26:63). It was the same when he stood before Pilate (see John 19:9). He did not allow the false accusations to distract him from communion with God. When we are falsely accused we are encouraged by Jesus' words: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you' (Matthew 5:10-12).

Let us join Jesus in praying this psalm.



## Praying Psalm 6 with Jesus

**<sup>1</sup>O GOD, rebuke me, but not in anger;  
discipline me, but not in wrath!**

**<sup>2</sup>Be gracious to me, O GOD, for I am languishing.  
Heal me, for I am shaking with terror.**

**<sup>3</sup>My whole being is racked with pain,  
but you, O GOD – how long?**

**<sup>4</sup>Turn to me, O GOD, hold back my life from the grave.  
In your covenant love save me.**

**<sup>6</sup>I am exhausted with my groaning.  
All night long I drench my pillow with tears,  
I soak my couch with weeping.**

**<sup>7</sup>My eyes waste away with grief.  
My life is ebbing away. Everything is against me.**

**<sup>8</sup>Depart from me, all you who do evil.  
GOD has heard my weeping.**

**<sup>9</sup>GOD hears my pleading and welcomes my prayer.**

**<sup>10</sup>My enemies fall back, struck with terror,  
foiled and suddenly confounded.**

Omitted

**<sup>4</sup>For in the realm of death no one calls on you;  
in Sheol who can give you praise?**

1. See pages 20-23 for a reflection on God's 'anger' as we find it expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

2. The psalmist is grievously ill. His physical pain is accompanied by inner anguish and fear of death. He is feeling vulnerable before his enemies. Seeing his suffering as God's punishment for his sins, he turns to GOD and pleads for forgiveness so that he will not die. When we think of Jesus praying this psalm we must keep in mind two factors. The first is that Jesus himself was sinless. The second is that he identified with us who sin. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes:

'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin' (Hebrews 4:15).

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks again of Jesus' sinlessness (see 7:26; 9:14). It is asserted also in other New Testament writings:

'In him there is no falsehood' (John 7:18).

'Which of you convicts me of sin?' (John 8:46).

'You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin' (1 John 3:5).

'You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot' (1 Peter 1:18-19).

'He committed no sin; no guilt was found on his lips' (1 Peter 2:22).

'Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18).

What sets Jesus apart – and it is an extraordinary and wonderful truth – is that while being human he did not sin. He was tested, as we are. He had to struggle, as we do. He succeeded in the struggle because he heroically and steadfastly clung to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4). He did not sin, not because his humanity was of a different kind to ours, but because he refused to act from anything less than his humanity – something that we, sadly, find ourselves doing under the stresses of life. He remained loving, even when circumstances tempted him to act otherwise. He remained prayerful, believing, gentle and truthful. While giving expression in his life to God's being and to God's love and fidelity, he showed us how it is possible to respond to God in a fully human way, despite pressures to the contrary. He can therefore 'sympathise with our weaknesses', for he experienced them. However he showed that, with faith, hope and love, we do not have to act out of them. It is possible to be human and not sin.

Sin has the effect of desensitising us. Being sinless, Jesus' heart remained sensitive to the horror of sin. Knowing our human condition from personal experience, his heart goes out to us who have been tested and have failed. He knows the price that sin demands of us. He knows that repentance will not be easy for us.

Paul writes to the community in Corinth:

‘For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Paul is appealing to the Corinthians to ‘be reconciled with God’. The authority with which Paul makes his appeal is the authority of Christ whom God ‘made sin’ in the sense that he shared with us the consequences of the human condition. In Romans 8:3 Paul dares to speak of Jesus’ ‘sinful flesh’. Like us, Jesus was a victim of sin, for it was sin that crucified him. Jesus experienced alienation from God (‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’, Matthew 27:46). He knew what it means to share our weaknesses, our temptations, our disappointments, our suffering and our dying. He embraced us in our sin, he took our part, he stood beside us, he ate and drank with us. Yet in all this he remained sinless. He refused to stop loving. He refused to be distracted. He refused to seek substitutes. He did not give in to temptation. He kept believing in God and he kept believing in people. He kept loving, unto death. That is why he can appeal to us, knowing that we know that he understands our condition and that he has shown us that there is another way to be human. We do not have to sin. Through his love and the gift of his Spirit we, like him, can be filled with the righteousness that God is offering us.

To dare to believe that God wishes us to be filled with ‘the righteousness of God’, we needed to be loved convincingly by one who, in God’s name, embraced us in our sin. Though himself innocent of sin, Jesus embraced sinners and was condemned to death by people who accused him of being one. Because he bore our condition without sinning, and because he loved us so intimately as to share with us the communion of love which he experienced in the Spirit, we can believe that, in union with him we are invited to share his righteousness. This is the message of the cross. This is the gospel preached by Paul.

3. Setting aside the aspect of sin, the lyrical power of the pleading in Psalm 6 recalls the description of Jesus’ prayer by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews:

‘In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered’ (Hebrews 5:7-8).

In the Gospel of John we hear Jesus say: ‘My soul is troubled’ (John 12:27). The Synoptic Gospels develop this theme in their description of Jesus’ struggle in the olive grove on the evening of his passion and death. He pleaded with his friends: ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and stay awake with me’ (Matthew 26:38). He pleaded with God: ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want’ (Matthew 26:39).

From the cross Jesus cried: ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ (Matthew 27:46). But he never lost faith in his God’s love: ‘Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit’ (Luke 23:46).

4. Psalm 6 was composed at a time when it was presumed that physical death was the end of life. Jesus knew otherwise. As he said to the Sadducees: ‘God is God not of the dead, but of the living’ (Matthew 22:32). Verse 5 (‘For in death there is no remembrance of you. In the Realm of the Dead who can give you praise?’) is omitted from the psalm as prayed by Jesus or his disciple

5. We cannot avoid the effects of our sin. Jesus revealed a God who does not hold back love from a sinner. Love, however, cannot impose itself. God respects our freedom, and if we obstinately reject grace, we cannot avoid the consequences of this rejection. Of those who fail to love, Jesus says: ‘I will declare to them, I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers’ (Matthew 7:23 = Luke 13:27). Jesus is not rejecting anyone. Rather, he is warning us that it matters how we live, and that what we do has consequences. God respects our freedom, and constantly pours grace upon us that we may turn away from sin. If we are obstinate in rejecting God’s love we, too, will ‘fall back, struck with terror’ (verse 10).

## Praying Psalm 7 with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>O GOD, in you I take refuge; save me from those who pursue me,

<sup>2</sup>lest like a lion they tear me to pieces,  
and drag me off with no one to save me.

[<sup>3</sup>O GOD, if I have done this, if there is crime on my hands,  
<sup>4</sup>if I have repaid with harm one who has come to me in peace  
or taken advantage of one who has attacked me without cause,  
<sup>5</sup>then let the enemy pursue and overtake me,  
let them trample my life to the ground, and lay my entrails in the dust.]

<sup>6</sup>Rise up, O GOD, stir yourself against the fury of my enemies;  
awake, O my God, and pronounce in my favour  
in the judgment to which I am summoned.

<sup>7</sup>An assembly of nations gathers around you.  
Take your seat above them on high,

<sup>8</sup>O judge of the nations. Declare me innocent, O GOD.

<sup>9</sup>Uphold the just, you who test mind and heart.

<sup>10</sup>My shield is God, who saves the upright of heart,

<sup>11</sup>who pronounces a judgment that is just.

<sup>14</sup>Look at them! They conceive evil.

They are pregnant with malice, and give birth to lies.

<sup>15</sup>They made a pit, dug it deep, but fell into the trap they made.

<sup>16</sup>Their wicked deeds recoil upon themselves.

On their own heads fall their cruel blows.

<sup>17</sup>I celebrate GOD's justice and sing in praise: 'GOD Most High.'

Omitted

<sup>11</sup>God gives a verdict of condemnation every day.

<sup>12</sup>If they do not change their ways, God will whet the sword;  
God will bend the bow, straight to the target;

<sup>13</sup>God is preparing for them deadly weapons, arrows barbed with fire.

1. Mark and Matthew encourage us to hear Jesus praying the first stanza (Psalm 7:1-2) from the cross, by directing us to Psalm 22 which begins: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It goes on to portray those responsible for Jesus' death as rejoicing to see him humiliated. He had claimed an intimate relationship with God. They mocked him: 'Commit your cause to GOD. Let God rescue the one in whom God delights!' (22:8). We are invited to hear Jesus pray:

'It was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help ... all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd ... Come to my aid; save me from the lion's mouth' (Psalm 22:9-11, 14-15, 21).

2. The second stanza (verses 3-5) is not one that the innocent Jesus could pray (see pages 33-34 on Jesus' innocence).

3. Likewise Jesus could not pray the third Stanza (verse 6). Jesus does not appeal to God's anger (see our reflection on God's anger on pages 21-24). On the contrary he prays: 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). With the author of the third lamentation, Jesus knew that 'the covenant love of God never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness' (Lamentation 3:22-23).

4. To say that God is just (verse 11) is to say that God always acts according to God's nature, and Jesus knew that it is God's nature to be merciful. Mercy focuses, not on God's response to our behaviour, but on God's initiative, which is always loving. Of the innocent Jesus, Peter says: 'When he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly' (1 Peter 2:23).

5. God's merciful love embraces all of creation. Love cannot impose itself. If we close ourselves off from this love, we are responsible for the consequences of rejecting love, as the sixth stanza states (verses 14-16).

As we pray this psalm let us join Jesus in his agony, as he was dragged before the Jewish Council, as he was stripped and scourged at Pilate's command, as thorns were driven in mockery into his head, and as he was dying, nailed to the cross. Let us join Jesus in crying out to God when we are unjustly accused, and let us join Jesus as he continues to 'celebrate God's justice', and 'sing God's praise' (verse 17).

## Praying Psalm 8 with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>O GOD of the universe,  
all your creation proclaims how wonderful you are.

<sup>2</sup>I want to worship you  
with the worship of infants and babes at the breast.  
They gaze with wonder  
at the star-studded heavens.  
Their wonder reduces to silence  
the enemy and the rebel.

<sup>3</sup>When I look at your heavens,  
the work of your hands,  
the moon and the stars  
that you have set in place,

<sup>4</sup>what are we, mortal human beings,  
that you are mindful of us, that you care for us?

<sup>5</sup>You have made us a little lower than gods.  
You have crowned us with glory and honour.

<sup>6</sup>To us you have entrusted the earth.  
You have made us responsible for all you have made:

<sup>7</sup>sheep and oxen,  
wild beasts of the plain,

<sup>8</sup>birds of the air,  
and fish that make their way through the waters.

<sup>9</sup>O GOD of the universe,  
all your creation proclaims how wonderful you are.

1. The intricacy and delicacy of the created world, especially the beauty of the night sky (verses 1-3) moves the psalmist to a profound sense of awe at the majesty and power of the Creator. We can picture Jesus praying this psalm during his sojourn in the wilderness after his baptism experience (see Mark 1:12), and regularly during his prayer: 'while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he was praying' (Mark 1:35). Often 'he would withdraw to deserted places and pray' (Luke 5:15-16). 'Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came he was there alone' (Matthew 14:23).

2. Jesus shared with the psalmist the joy of watching children delight in the wonder of God's creation (verse 2). He responded to God as to a 'Father', and he told us that to be part of the reign of God's love we must do the same. We have to become like little children, recognising our total dependence on God and opening our hearts to welcome God's love. On one occasion we are told: 'Jesus called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like this little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:2-3). On another occasion, when Jesus' disciples tried to stop little children 'troubling' Jesus, he said to them: 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs' (Matthew 19:14).

Matthew records the occasion when Jesus 'entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying there' (Matthew 21:12). He goes on to tell that 'the blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he cured them' (Matthew 21:14). It was the children who responded with delight, and in his response Jesus quotes from Psalm 8: 'Out of the mouths of infants you have prepared praise' (Matthew 21:16). On another occasion 'Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, and said: 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth because you have revealed these things to infants' (Luke 10:21).

3. The psalmist goes on to reflect on his own insignificance and utter dependence on God. He asks himself: Who am I? What does it mean to be a human being? He does not attempt to answer this fundamental question by looking at us human beings and at what we do. Rather he looks at what God has done and is doing for us. We are all too aware of what we do and fail to do. The only way to find out who we really are is to look at our relationships, and primarily at our relationship with God. How God treats us shows us who we are and why God keeps us in mind and cares for us.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, we might reflect on the ways in which we have experienced God keeping us in mind and caring for us. Each of us has special experiences that we treasure because, sometimes even in our pain, we have known that God was looking after us. It is by reflecting on these moments that we come to a deep awareness of who we really are as persons treasured by and precious to God. We reflect on our place in creation. We have been given the whole of creation to continue the task of bringing order out of chaos and forming the world into a paradise where human beings can live with dignity and where all living things, indeed the whole of the created universe, can be intelligently governed (verses 6-8). This is not a right, but a privilege given to us for which we are responsible. We are to live, as Saint Paul invites us, 'for the praise of God's glory'(Ephesians 1:14).

## Praying Psalm 9 with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>O GOD, with a full and grateful heart

I proclaim your wonderful deeds.

<sup>2</sup>In festive jubilation, I celebrate you,  
singing your name to music, O Most High.

<sup>3</sup>As my enemies are turned back, they stumble and perish before you.

<sup>4</sup>From your throne, O just judge, you pass judgment in my favour.

<sup>7</sup>GOD sits enthroned forever, issuing judgment.

<sup>8</sup>Justly you judge the world and govern the nations.

<sup>9</sup>You are a stronghold for the oppressed.

You strengthen them in times of trouble.

<sup>10</sup>Those who know you put their trust in you.

You never forsake those who seek you.

<sup>11</sup>Sing praises to GOD who dwells in Zion, declare his deeds to the people.

<sup>12</sup>God never neglects the cry of the afflicted.

<sup>13</sup>Pour your grace over me, O GOD. Look how oppressed I am.

You are the one who draws me back from the gates of death,

<sup>14</sup>that I may recount your praises at the gates of Zion,  
and celebrate your deliverance.

<sup>18</sup>The needy will not always be forgotten,

nor the hope of the poor be in vain.

Omitted

<sup>5</sup>You have chastised the nations, you have destroyed the wicked,  
blotting out their name forever.

<sup>6</sup>The enemy is destroyed, memory of them has perished.  
You razed to the ground their cities.

<sup>15</sup>The nations have fallen into the pit they dug;  
in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.

<sup>16</sup>YHWH is revealed by executing judgment,  
and the wicked are snared by what they themselves have done.

<sup>17</sup>The wicked will depart to Sheol, the nations that forget God.

<sup>19</sup>Rise up, YHWH! Do not allow the insolence of mortal human beings.  
In your presence let the nations be judged.

<sup>20</sup>Strike them with terror, YHWH;  
let the nations know that they are but mortal.

Remembering the ways in which God has demonstrated his power and love for his people in the past, the psalmist is moved to gratitude (verses 1-2). By bringing about the defeat of Israel's enemies, God has revealed himself as a just judge who 'does not forsake those who seek you' (verse 10), and 'does not forget the cry of the afflicted' (verse 12). The psalmist prays that God will act again now against those who are causing his suffering (verse thirteen). Though the needy appear to be forgotten, and the hope of the poor appears to be frustrated, the psalmist reiterates his faith in God as a just judge.

1. Jesus, too, was confident in God's justice: 'Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?' (Luke 18:7). Jesus understood his mission as being God's instrument in establishing God's justice:

'Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,  
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.

I will put my Spirit upon him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.  
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,  
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.

He will not break a bruised reed  
or quench a smoldering wick  
until he brings justice to victory.

In his name the Gentiles will hope' (Matthew 12:18-21 = Isaiah 42:1-4).

As Jesus says: 'As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (John 5:30). 2. Talk of God exercising justice by destroying enemies is foreign to Jesus (see pages 26-27). Tragically, it is possible for us to destroy ourselves by being obstinately determined in our rejection of Love. It is not God who destroys. It is not God who punishes. God is Love and we have the whole of Jesus' life and ministry to convince us of that.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us thank God who is 'a stronghold for the oppressed, and strengthens them in times of trouble' (verse 9).

## Praying Psalm 10 (9:22-39) with Jesus

- <sup>1</sup>Why, O GOD, do you stand far off?  
Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?
- <sup>2</sup>The wicked in their arrogance hound the poor,  
but they are tangled in their own intrigues.
- <sup>3</sup>The wicked boast of their ambition,  
the greedy are full of self-adulation.
- <sup>4</sup>They do not care about GOD:  
‘There is no god to whom I must give an account!’  
What schemes they devise!  
How twisted their lives!
- <sup>5</sup>They have no concern for your judgments.  
They defy all who disagree with them.
- <sup>6</sup>They think in their heart: ‘I will never be shaken,  
nothing will get in my way!’
- <sup>7</sup>From their mouths come deceit and fraud;  
their speech is full of malice and lies.
- <sup>8</sup>They wait in ambush to murder the innocent  
under cover of secrecy.
- Stealthily they watch for the helpless.
- <sup>9</sup>They lurk in secret like a lion in its den,  
that they may seize the poor and drag them away.
- <sup>10</sup>The innocent, weighed down with oppression,  
cannot withstand the violence of the wicked.
- <sup>11</sup>They think: ‘God has forgotten.  
God has hidden from us and will never notice.’
- <sup>12</sup>Rise up, O GOD, please do something.  
Do not forget the oppressed.
- <sup>13</sup>Why should the wicked spurn you, God,  
and say in their hearts, ‘He will not call us to account’?
- <sup>14</sup>You are the helper of the orphan.

- <sup>17</sup>O GOD, you hear the longing of the poor;  
you listen to them and strengthen their hearts.
- <sup>18</sup>Protect the rights of the orphan and the oppressed.  
Never again may they sow terror,  
mortal human beings made from the earth.

Omitted

- <sup>14</sup>But you do see! Indeed, you observe trouble and grief,  
that you may repay those responsible.  
You make it your business to take note of evil.
- <sup>15</sup>Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoers;  
so that if anyone seeks them out, they will not be found.
- <sup>16</sup>YHWH is king forever and ever;  
the nations will disappear from the land.

Psalm 9 and Psalm 10 belong together. This is clear from the acrostic structure. The first letter in each line of the first stanza of Psalm 9 (verses 1-2) begins with ’ālep [א], the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first letter of each line of the second stanza (verses 3-4) begins with bēṭ [ב], the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on through the whole of Psalm 9, ending with kap [כ]. Psalm 10 continues from the next letter, lāmed [ל], and ends with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, taw [ת]. Though Psalm 10 continues the alphabetical structure from Psalm 9, there is a striking change of tone, which may account for its being given a separate number in the Hebrew Bible. In the Greek Septuagint Version Psalms 9 and 10 are kept together and considered one psalm. Psalm 10 is numbered Psalm 9:22-39. This numbering was taken up in the Latin Versions and so found its way into the Christian liturgy, in the Missal, the Lectionary and the early Church commentaries. The following psalm is numbered 11 in the Hebrew Bible (and in most modern bibles), whereas in liturgical texts it is numbered 10. We will be following the Hebrew numbering. If you are looking for a text from the liturgy you will need to go to the numbering in brackets.

1. The opening verse of Psalm 10 (‘Why, O GOD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?’) is echoed on the lips of Jesus as he cried out from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ (Matthew 27:46). His heart was torn, too, for others who felt abandoned, who ‘think in their heart: God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never notice’ (verse 11). ‘When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’ (Matthew 9:36). Though he knew the feeling of being abandoned, he knew that God could not ‘stand far off’.

When faced with the suffering of others his heart could not hold back his love. When a leper said to him: 'If you want to you could heal me', Jesus' immediate response was: 'Of course I want to'. He embraced the leper and Love issued in healing (see Mark 1:40-45). When a woman who had a bad reputation in the town approached him at a meal and burst into tears, Jesus responded to her love and assured her and those at table that 'her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven, or she could not experience such great love' (Luke 7:47). A man with a severe mental disorder was banished from his village, but found acceptance and peace with Jesus (see Mark 5:1-20). We can imagine the amazement and joy of the parents who had just witnessed their twelve year old daughter dying, when Jesus came to their home, took their daughter's hand, lifted her up and gave her to them (Mark 5:40-43).

2. Verse 2 ('The wicked in their arrogance hound the poor') picks up a key element in Jesus' ministry. He said: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!' (Luke 12:49). He was speaking of the fire of God's love, but a fire that was determined to challenge and to purify the minds and hearts of those who were oppressing the poor. With tears in his eyes and an aching heart he challenged the religious leaders, who 'tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them' (Matthew 23:4).

3. Again and again Jesus spoke of the folly of arrogance, the importance of humility. When Jesus thought of God he knew in every fibre of his being that he was totally dependent upon God. Like a child he looked to God for everything, and experienced the joy that comes with total trust in God's care. He was 'gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29). He wanted everyone to know this trust and to experience this joy, the joy of the humble, for 'The humble will be lifted up' (Matthew 23:12).

4. Rather than pray with the psalmist for God to 'break the arm of the wicked and the evildoers' (verse 15), Jesus never stopped hoping that Love would bring about their conversion. As he was about to die he prayed: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us name the forces of oppression of which we are aware, and commit ourselves to respond to the grace coming from the Heart of Jesus to do what we can to oppose these forces, and to care for the oppressed, the marginalised and the afflicted.

## Praying Psalm 11 (10) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>In GOD I take refuge; how can you say to me:  
'Flee like a bird. Flee to the mountains?'

<sup>2</sup>Those with no regard for God are bracing their bow.  
They are fitting their arrows to the string;  
they shoot at the upright from the shadows.

<sup>3</sup>When foundations are destroyed, what can the just do?

<sup>4</sup>GOD dwells in the holy temple,  
GOD, whose throne is in heaven,  
whose eyes look down on the world,  
whose gaze is on the people on the earth.

<sup>7</sup>GOD is just and loves justice.  
The upright will behold God's face.

Omitted

<sup>5</sup>YHWH tests the faithful and the wicked,  
and hates the lover of violence.

<sup>6</sup>God will cause coals of fire and sulphur to rain down on the wicked;  
a scorching wind will be their lot.

1. The psalmist's life is under threat. People are telling him to flee for his life (verse 1). In advising him to flee to the mountains they are ignoring the deepest longings of his heart, which take him, not to the mountains, but to GOD. Jesus knew this longing. At the Last Supper he prayed: 'Father, glorify me in your presence' (John 17:5), and from the cross he prayed: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46). Jesus knew that we do not go to God alone. He wanted his disciples to share his longing and his intimate communion with his Father. At the Last Supper he told his disciples: 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer' (Luke 22:15), and at that meal he promised to be with them whenever they gathered to remember him and to carry on his mission. He prayed: 'Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory' (John 17:24). Paul shared this longing, for the love of his companions: 'God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus' (Philippians 1:8); and to share Jesus' communion with God: 'I long to depart and be with Christ (Philippians 1:23).

2. Israel is founded upon faith in God, who 'loves justice' (verse 7). The psalmist deplores the behaviour of those who have no regard for God, and who oppress the poor (verse 2). When the ruthless destroy the foundation of justice (verse 3), where can those who are faithful to the covenant go to find redress? Praying this psalm as disciples of Jesus we are reminded that 'the foundation is Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 3:11). As disciples of Jesus, our lives will be judged by how we respond to him and to his revelation. Peter assures us that it will be Jesus himself who will be our judge: 'Jesus of Nazareth commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead' (Acts 10:42). Having sworn that he did not know Jesus (see John 18:25-27), Peter experienced Jesus' judgment. All Jesus asked of him was love (see John 21:15-17).

3. God's 'gaze is on the people of the earth' (verse 4). We are invited to return that gaze by gazing on Jesus: 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father' (John 14:9). We are invited to 'look on the one whom we have pierced' (John 19:37). With Stephen we are invited to gaze into heaven and see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God! (Acts 7:56). As Paul says: 'We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen' (2 Corinthians 4:18). 'Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him' (Rev. 1:7).

4. Psalm 11 is prayed in the Church's liturgy (where it is numbered as Psalm 10; see page 43). We find it in the Lectionary in the Office of Readings for the Common of a Martyr, and in the Prayer of the Church for Evening Prayer Monday Week 1. It is surprising to find verses 5 and 6 included ('God tests the faithful and the wicked, and hates the lover of violence and will cause coals of fire and sulphur to rain down on the wicked; a scorching wind will be their lot'). They express sentiments that are at home in the psalmist's limited understanding of God, but they run counter to all that Jesus represents and teaches. If they are not part of Jesus' prayer, why are Jesus' disciples praying them? Jesus does warn us of hell (see Matthew 5:22-30; 10:28; 18:9 and 23:15,33), but it is not divine punishment. As the Catholic Catechism (1994) states (n. 1033): 'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever *by our own free choice*. This state of definitive *self-exclusion* from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell".'

5. The psalmist is confident that those who live a good life will experience God's presence and vindication. They will 'behold God's face' (verse 7). It is for this that Jesus longed, and he wanted it for everyone: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Matthew 5:8). In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9). He writes: 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). 'We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God' (Romans 5:2). 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us enjoy Love's gazing, as we long to 'behold God's face' (verse 7).

## Praying Psalm 12 (11) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>Give us your saving help, O GOD,  
for no one respects the covenant.  
Sincerity has disappeared from the human race.

<sup>2</sup>People utter lies to each other.  
They speak from hearts that are false.

<sup>4</sup>They say, 'With our tongues we will always prevail.  
We can say whatever we like. Who is our master?'

<sup>5</sup>'Because of violence against the poor,  
because the needy groan', says GOD,  
'I will now rise up.  
I will keep them safe as they give their testimony.'

<sup>6</sup>GOD's words are pure,  
like silver refined in a furnace.

<sup>7</sup>It is you, O GOD, who will take us into your care.  
It is you who protect us from those who do evil.

<sup>8</sup>See how the wicked prowl on every side,  
while the worthless are highly prized.

Omitted

<sup>3</sup>May YHWH destroy all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts.

1. Anyone who bewails the corruption of language in the private and public arenas will know what the psalmist is saying. Words are meant for communication of truth in the collaborative task and privilege of building a better world. The psalmist is especially concerned with the powerful who have control over the means of communication, and are able to use judicial processes for their own personal or corporate advantage. When they use words to deceive, the 'poor and needy' (verse 5) are the first victims, but the whole social fabric suffers decay. We are reminded of the lament of the Isaiah School in Judah after the return from exile: 'Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter' (Isaiah 59:14).



God's word is 'pure' (verse 6). As Jesus said of God: 'Your word is truth' (John 17:17). So it is with the words of Jesus. He taught his disciples: 'All you need say is "Yes" if you mean yes, "No" if you mean no' (Matthew 5:37). If they are to be 'salt for the earth' they must not lose their taste. If they are to be 'light for the world' they must not hide their light under a tub (Matthew 4:13-16). 'What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops' (Matthew 10:27). As John says: 'grace and truth came through Jesus the Messiah' (John 1:17). Only 'the truth will make you free' (John 8:32).

Jesus spoke out against hypocrisy. When we give alms, we must not do it to show off our generosity (see Matthew 6:2-4). When we pray we must not do it to impress others (Matthew 6:5-6). Similarly when we fast (Matthew 6:16-18). Jesus is not impressed by those who cry 'Lord', but fail to do the will of his Father (Matthew 7:21-23). He challenged the Pharisees and scribes: 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:7-8 = Isaiah 29:13). What we say matters. It 'proceeds from the heart' (Matthew 15:18). If the heart is pure, our words will be pure.

It is never good to sin, for sin can turn us away from God's gift of God's Spirit. But Jesus saw his mission as welcoming sinners, as loving us out of our sin. The gospels are full of stories of sinners being healed and welcomed. God responds to our cry for mercy. The problem lies in our failure to admit our sin. 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 John 1:8). Like those mentioned in the psalm we can 'utter lies to each other and speak with flattering lips and a false heart' (verse 2). It is the heart that matters. When the heart is false we lock ourselves away from love. When the heart is sensitive to the truth we will be ready to welcome God's offer of forgiving Love. Did not Jesus say that his mission was 'to call sinners (Matthew 9:13)?

In Jesus' parable of the two sons (Luke 15:11-32), the younger son, who is clearly a sinner, knows that his only hope is to return home. He is surprised by the welcome and enjoys the celebration. The older son thinks of himself as loyal and dependable, but his unwillingness to acknowledge his brother raises doubts. We hope he responds to his father's invitation and joins in the celebrations, but his attitude leaves us wondering.

Paul understood Jesus' teaching on the importance of sincerity in our speech. He writes to the community in Corinth who are accusing him of saying one thing and doing another: 'Do you really think that when I am making my plans, my motives are ordinary human ones, and that I say Yes, yes, and No, no, at the same time? ... The Son of God, the Messiah Jesus whom we proclaimed among you, was never Yes and No: with him it was always Yes, and however many the promises God made, the Yes to them all is in him' (2 Corinthians 1:18-20). In his farewell letter to the Gentile churches in the east, he writes: 'Speak (perhaps better 'Do') the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15). If we take love as our guide when it comes to making decisions, we can deceive ourselves.

Paul spoke out against those 'who suppress the truth' (Romans 1:18). 'Love rejoices in the truth' (1 Corinthians 13:6). 'Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another' (Ephesians 4:25).

As we join Jesus in praying this psalm, let us heed the words of John and pray that in all we do and say we will be 'pure as God is pure' (1 John 3:3). Let us pray that we will not 'grieve the Holy Spirit of God' (Ephesians 4:30), but with Jesus 'speak the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15), confident that 'God will care for us and protect us from the evil that surrounds us' (verse 7).

## Praying Psalm 13 (12) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>O GOD, will you again remember me?

How long will you hide your face from me?

<sup>2</sup>How long must my soul be stricken with grief?

I carry sorrow in my heart day and night.

How long will my enemies prevail over me?

<sup>3</sup>Look at me, O GOD; answer me!

Shed your light on me, or I will die.

<sup>4</sup>Do not let my enemy say, 'I have prevailed.'

Do not let my foes rejoice to see me fall.

<sup>5</sup>As for me, I trust in your covenant love;

my heart rejoices in your saving help.

<sup>6</sup>I will sing to you, O GOD,

because of the good you have bestowed on me.

1. This is an urgent plea to God from a trusting and grateful heart. The Psalmist has been suffering for a long time. For a long time God has seemed absent. He holds to his faith, sustained by remembrance of past graces. He is pleading not to die. Human beings may be blind and deaf to our suffering. But not God! The psalmist continues to trust that God will support him through his sufferings and will come and rescue him. The Letter to the Hebrews writes of Jesus: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7).

2. The psalmist prays: 'Give light to my eyes' (verse 3). God is the source of life, and gives light to more than our eyes:

'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Luke 1:78-79).

'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world' (John 1:9).

'With the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you' (Ephesians 1:18).

'Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you' (Ephesians 5:14).

3. 'I will sleep the sleep of death' (verse 3). The resurrection of Jesus confirms our belief that death is not 'a sleep from which there is no awakening' (Jeremiah 51:39).

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory' (Isaiah 25:8). 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' (Hosea 13:14). The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

As we join Jesus in praying this psalm may our prayer, like that of the psalmist, issue in trust, joy, praise and thanksgiving. Whatever our suffering, let us pray to share Jesus' faith in God's 'covenant love' and 'saving help' (verse 5). Let us 'sing to God because of the good God continues to bestow on us' (verse 6).

## Praying Psalm 14 (13) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>Fools tell themselves 'There is no God.'

They are corrupt. They perpetrate dreadful deeds.

None of them does good.

<sup>2</sup>GOD looks down on the human race

to see if there is anyone who is wise,

anyone who seeks after God.

<sup>3</sup>They have all gone astray,

they are all depraved.

There is no one who seeks God, no, not one.

<sup>4</sup>Do they know nothing, these evildoers?

They devour my people like so much bread.

They never pray.

<sup>5</sup>Well, then, you will cringe with fear,

for God's cause is with the just.

<sup>6</sup>You may have the power to thwart the plans of the poor,

but know that GOD is their refuge.

<sup>7</sup>O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!

When GOD restores the fortunes of the people,

then Jacob will be glad. Israel will rejoice.

This psalm appears again in the Psalter as Psalm 53. Where Psalm 14 has 'YHWH', Psalm 53 has 'God'. Perhaps Psalm 53 was composed in the northern kingdom and Psalm 14 is an adaptation made for the temple in Jerusalem. Verses 5-6 are somewhat different. Psalm 53 reads: 'Well then, they will be in great terror, in terror such as has not been. For God will scatter the bones of the ungodly. They will be put to shame, for God has rejected them.'

Psalm 14 is an impassioned reflection on the folly and corruption of those who do not acknowledge God, and a statement of faith that God is on the side of the oppressed. If we fail to acknowledge the true God we will create our own. In this case it is untrammelled power exercised by those who show no concern for the poor.

1. In his opening statement, ('Fools say in their hearts "There is no God"'), the psalmist is not concerned with theoretical atheism, but with the folly of an attitude that denies the relevance of God to human affairs. Jesus' problem was a different one. People believed in God and in God's relevance, but not in the God that Jesus' knew. This is a central theme in the Gospel of John, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 21:24). John takes us to the heart of Jesus' revelation of God by having Jesus begin his public ministry at a wedding feast (John 2:1-11). Jesus, the 'bridegroom' (Matthew 9:15), reveals God as 'Love' (1 John 4:8). For Jesus, the foundation of true religion is the recognition that life is meant to be a celebration of this Love.

The next scene stands in sharp contrast: Jesus is clearing the temple; and for the rest of Jesus' ministry we are being challenged to decide between the wedding banquet and a system of religious control. If we imagine grace as a stream flowing from the heart of God into creation, we seem to want to dam the stream to make it available when we want it. We build canals to divert the water to where we want it to be. We seem to want to control the divine.

The significance of Jesus' clearing of the temple is brought out in the following scene when Nicodemus, 'a leader of the Jews' (John 3:1), comes to Jesus by night. Something about Jesus attracts him, but he is bewildered, lost without the security of the system which he has been trained to lead. Jesus speaks of grace as a wind that rises unexpectedly. We have to stop trying to control grace. We have to learn to be open to its surprise, and let it 'blow where it wills' (John 3:8).

The Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim had been destroyed by the Jews, but the Samaritans continued to worship there. The Jews insisted that worship could be offered only in Jerusalem (John 4:20). Their God was too small. For Jesus what matters is sincerity of heart, 'worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth' (John 4:23). Jesus promised the Samaritan woman, not a religious system that would give her security, but 'a spring of water gushing up from within to eternal life' (John 4:14).

Then there is the 'god' of magic, the 'god' of signs, the 'god' of superstition. An underground stream fed into the pool at Beth-Zatha. Sometimes, apparently at random, the water in the pool would bubble up. The story went around that this was God's doing and that the first person to get into the pool when this happened would be cured. In desperation crowds of sick people gathered at the pool hoping for healing. Jesus met a man there who had been sick for thirty-eight years (John 5:5), and asked him a penetrating question: 'Do you want to be made well?' (John 5:6). Do you really want God's healing love in your life? The man is healed, not because he chanced to get to the pool first, but because he encountered God's offer of healing love through Jesus.

On the eighth day of the New Year Festival, the day of Rejoicing in the Torah, everyone was gathering at the temple. There is nothing wrong with celebrating, but Jesus' disciples had come to know a better way, a way that nourished their longing for communion with God. John has Jesus crying out: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink' (John 7:37-38). Jesus goes on to repeat what he said to the Samaritan woman: 'Out of your heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38).

Jesus had to confront another major misunderstanding concerning God and God's relationship with us. He met a man who had been blind since birth. Even Jesus' disciples were not yet free from the traditional teaching, which was that blindness was divine punishment, if not for the man's sins, then for the sins of his parents (John 9:1-3). Jesus rejects this false image of God. The man is enlightened through his communion with Jesus and through his belonging, through baptism, to the community of Jesus' disciples (John 9:7). Enjoying communion with Jesus' disciples is surely a good thing, so long as it nurtures communion with God, and so long as the community does not fall into the trap of trying to control grace, or control the community. Jesus goes on to liken himself to the gate of a sheepfold: 'Whoever enters by me will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:9-10). True religion is about living in communion with God.

John concludes his narrative of Jesus' public ministry in a scene where Jesus frees his friend Lazarus from death and gives him life (John 11). As Paul came to see, not even death can separate us from God's life-giving love (1 Corinthians 15:26). 'Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus, the Messiah' (1 Corinthians 15:57).

In his mock trial before the Jewish Council, they have a lot to say about God, but we know that it is Jesus who is in communion with God (Matthew 26:57-68). Watching the superstitious Pilate, we know that Pilate is correct in claiming to have power 'to release Jesus or to crucify him' (John 19:10). But we know which of the two men is really free.

The behaviour of the religious leaders (see, for example, Matthew 9:3, 34; 12:14; 15:1-9; 23; 26:3-4, 65-68; 27:41) is proof of their distorted understanding of God, and so of religion. Genuine religion is about being in love-communion with God. Walter Kasper reminds us:

'Whenever something new arises, whenever life is awakened and reality reaches ecstatically beyond itself, in all seeking and striving, in every ferment and birth, and even more in the beauty of creation, something of the being and activity of God's Spirit is manifested' (*The God of Jesus Christ*, page 227).

Denis Edwards writes: 'God gives to creatures themselves the capacity for the new. Because of God's creative and redeeming presence to creatures, they can become something they were not. When matter comes to life on earth, when life becomes self-conscious and personal, this occurs through God enabling creation to transcend itself and become something new. Above all when one of us in the human and creaturely community, Jesus of Nazareth, is so radically open to God, so one with God, that we rightly see him as God-with-us, then we can say that in this person creation transcends itself into God' (*How God Acts*, 158).

Jesus revealed God as Self-giving Love. Creation is an explosion of this Self-giving. We become what we are called to be to the extent that we love, that is, to the extent that we 'participate in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). It was because of Jesus' intimate communion with God that 'the power of God was with Jesus to heal' (Luke 5:17). People's minds and hearts were healed as they came to know, through Jesus, who God really is, and the life that was possible for them when they welcomed Love.

2. Psalm 14 is a prolonged lament at the corruption pervading society when people fail to be in communion with Love. Paul quotes this psalm in chapter 3 of Romans:

'There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who is faithful to the covenant, there is not even one' (Romans 3:10-12).

He goes on to expand the picture from other psalms (Romans 3:13-18):

'Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive' (from Psalm 5:9). 'The venom of vipers is under their lips' (from Psalm 140:3). 'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness' (from Psalm 10:7). 'Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths; and the way of peace they have not known' (from Isaiah 59:7-8). 'There is no fear of God before their eyes' (from Psalm 36:1).

3. The psalmist has God looking in vain for someone who is truly wise, someone, that is, who genuinely seeks after God (verse 2). If we wish to become wise, we must seek after God, for God, and God alone, is the source of wisdom. It is this truth that lies behind Jesus' invitation: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-29).

4. Jesus' ministry is proof of his conviction that, despite the power of the oppressors to 'thwart the plans of the poor, God is their refuge' (verse 6). He declares: 'Blessed and happy are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20). Even though the poor are excluded, reviled and defamed because of their attachment to Jesus, they should leap for joy, for it is they who are enjoying communion with God, not their oppressors (Luke 6:22-23).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us pray for a share in his wisdom. Let us learn from him to seek God 'with all our heart and mind, all our longing and strength' (Mark 12:30). Let us share his pain at people's failure to know their need of God, and the consequent folly of their lives, built on oppression and greed. We also pray to respond to grace and work against oppression and do what we can to be a 'refuge for the poor' (verse 6).

## Praying Psalm 15 (14) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**GOD, who can be a guest in your tent?  
Who may live on your holy mountain?**

<sup>2</sup>**Those who lives with integrity;  
who do what is right;  
who speak the truth with courage;**

<sup>3</sup>**who do not spread slander;  
or abuse friends; or cast a slur against a neighbour;**

<sup>4</sup>**who honour those who live their faith in GOD;**

**who stand by their word, whatever the cost;**

<sup>5</sup>**who lend without seeking interest;**

**who refuse to accept a bribe to condemn the innocent.**

**Such are the just. They stand firm for ever.**

Omitted

<sup>3</sup>who despises those not approved by God

The psalmist is seeking to be close to God and is reflecting on the way we must live if we want to enjoy this closeness. Psalm 15 is modelled on the decalogue (see Exodus 20:1-17) in that it recognises the primary place of our relationship with God as the context within which we should relate to our neighbour, while also recognising that our relationship with our neighbour is the test of the truth of our relationship with God.

1. We can listen to Jesus as he calls us to a special kind of perfection: the perfection we see in God as revealed by Jesus. Love is the key to being 'perfect as God is perfect' (Matthew 5:48): 'Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' (Luke 6:35).

2. Before highlighting behaviour that we must shun, the psalmist focuses on two key elements of a blameless life. The first is 'doing what is right' (verse 2), or, as Jesus says: 'doing the will of God' (Matthew 7:21): 'hungering and thirsting for justice' (Matthew 5:6). The second is 'speaking the truth from the heart' (verse 2; see the reflection on Psalm 12, pages 47-49).

3. Psalm 15 takes us into the area of moral virtues, defined by the Catholic Catechism (n. 1804) as 'firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life.' One way of clarifying what we mean by a virtue is to recall a situation where we have acquired a bad habit that we are attempting to break. Our tendency to behave in a certain way is so habitual that given the right set of circumstances the behaviour that we are trying to change is triggered and almost automatically we slip into it again. Acting against the habit can be very difficult indeed. When we manage to resist we are taking a step to breaking the habit, but we have not yet acquired the contrary virtue. We speak of a virtue only when the bad habit has lost its hold on us and our morally good response flows almost automatically, and we experience 'ease, self-mastery and joy in leading a morally good life.'

4. The list of behaviours that we must strive to act against if we are to 'walk blamelessly' and enjoy communion with God begins with 'slander' (verse 3). Jesus lists slander among the evils that have their source in the heart (see Matthew 15:19). Paul includes slander among the vices that he condemns (see 2 Corinthians 12:20; Colossians 3:8; Ephesians 4:31; 1 Timothy 6:4). Peter, too, condemns those who maliciously set out to harm others by speaking evil of them (1 Peter 2:1; 2 Peter 2:10, 12).

5. Jesus' teaching disagrees with the psalmist for whom a blameless life includes 'despising those not approved by God' (verse 4). In the first place it is not for us to judge (see Matthew 7:1). Secondly, Jesus teaches us to hate sin, but not the sinner. He teaches us, rather, to love sinners, for love offers sinners the space to change. We see a beautiful example of this in his words to the woman taken in adultery: 'I do not condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again' (John 8:11).

6. The psalmist calls us to 'honour those who revere ['fear'] GOD' (verse 4). He is not speaking of those who are afraid of God. Jesus tells us not to be afraid of the one he calls 'Abba!' (see Matthew 10:31). Rather, he is speaking of those who have a profound sense of the sacred, and who revere God, mysteriously present in their lives and in their world. See the reflection on Psalm 2:11, page 24.

7. Concerning oaths (verse 4), Jesus has this to say: 'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You will not swear falsely, but carry out the oaths you have sworn." But I say to you: Do not swear at all ... Let your word be "Yes" if you mean yes, or "No" if you mean no' (Matthew 5:33-37). It would appear that some of Jesus' contemporaries thought that one had to be truthful only when one backed up one's statement with an oath. For Jesus we should always 'speak the truth from the heart' (verse 2). Paul teaches us to 'speak the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus let us hear him say: 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me' (Revelation 3:20). Let us welcome him and allow him to gaze into our hearts, as we pray that his loving gaze will purify us from all that is unworthy of such a 'guest' (verse 1).

## Praying Psalm 16 (15) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>Protect me, O GOD. I turn to you for help.

<sup>2</sup>You are my greatest good.

<sup>3</sup>You have put into my heart a marvellous love  
for the faithful who dwell in the land.

<sup>4</sup>Those who run after strange gods  
multiply their sorrows.

<sup>5</sup>You, O GOD, are my chosen portion and my cup.  
It is you yourself who are my prize.

<sup>6</sup>The lot marked out for me is my delight.  
Welcome indeed the heritage that is mine.

<sup>7</sup>I thank you for all your blessings.  
It is you who give me counsel.  
Even at night you direct my heart.

<sup>8</sup>O GOD, I keep you always before me.  
With you at my side I will not waver.

<sup>9</sup>Therefore my heart is glad.  
A profound joy wells up within me.  
Even my flesh rests secure,  
for in You I place my trust.

<sup>10</sup>You do not abandon me to death.  
You do not let your faithful see the grave.

<sup>11</sup>You show me the path to life.  
Your presence fills me with joy.

This is an exquisitely beautiful psalm, a lyrical expression of an intense religious experience, and a declaration of exclusive loyalty to God. Other people enjoy the benefits of their inheritance. The psalmist, seemingly a Levite, delights in the fact that his inheritance is God. His intimate communion with God more than satisfies his heart, and nothing can distract him from this.

1. Jesus' disciples came to see that they were attracted to Jesus because of the intimacy of his communion with God, 'his greatest good' (verse 2). This communion radiated from him and embraced them. Jesus' public ministry began with his baptism in the Jordan where he was filled with God's Spirit, and experienced God saying to him: 'You are my Son. I love you. I delight in you' (Mark 1:11). Jesus retired into the desert to 'meditate' on the significance of this experience, and from the desert he entered into his public ministry. If people were to live to the full they needed to experience the love that Jesus experienced at his baptism. They needed to hear God say to them: 'You are my son/my daughter. I love you. I delight in you'. God 'put into Jesus' heart 'a marvellous love for *all* who dwell in the land' (verse 3).

For a reflection on Jesus' prayer see Psalm 4, page 28. Let us spend time with Jesus now, pondering the intimacy of his communion with the God he called 'Abba' ('my dear Father').

Some of Jesus' disciples witnessed something of Jesus' baptismal experience when he invited them to climb a mountain and be with him in prayer. They experienced God saying to them: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him' (Matthew 17:5). On another occasion Jesus declared: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27). Jesus is using the word 'know' in its rich biblical sense. It is not knowing about. Rather it is a knowledge that comes from intimate communion.

Even in the agony of Gethsemane, Jesus never doubted that God was his 'Abba' (Mark 14:36), and from a deep sense of being abandoned as he writhed in agony on the cross, he could still speak of God as 'My God, my God' (Mark 15:34). He never lost faith in his Father's love, and, dying, he handed over his life to God with the words: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46).

In his Gospel the Beloved Disciple wants to share with us what he learned, especially as he lay on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper (John 13:25; 21:20), and as he stood with Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross and watched how Jesus died (John 19:25-27, 37). His focus is on Jesus' divinity, that is, on the intimacy of Jesus' communion with God. Jesus speaks of this intimate communion when he says: 'The Father knows me and I know the Father ... The Father loves me' (John 10:15, 17). 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30); 'The Father is in me and I am in the Father' (John 10:38; John 14:10, 11). 'I love the Father' (John 14:31). 'I came from the Father ... and I am going to the Father' (John 16:28). 'I am not alone; the Father is with me' (John 16:32).

2. It was from his intimate communion with God that Jesus experienced the call and the grace to share with others his experience of God, so that we, too, would experience Love. His mission was to include us in the communion he has with God: 'I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you' (John 14:20). 'If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home in you' (John 14:23). 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love' (John 15:9). 'As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17:21). 'I revealed you to them, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26).

From God's eternal embrace, Jesus continues to 'give God's Spirit without measure' (John 3:34). As he promised: 'When I am lifted up, I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32), and so to his Father.

In his commentary on this psalm Origen writes:

The portion (heritage) of Christ is the Father, and also the people whom the Father gives to him ... The person who has renounced everything of this world can say: 'The LORD is my portion of the inheritance for ever'. The LORD makes himself bread, giving us his teaching and strengthening the heart of whoever eats of it. He makes himself a chalice in the measure in which we contemplate the truth, and he gives the joy of knowledge to whoever drinks from it with love. The true vine offers us the cup and whoever drinks says with gratitude: 'He has filled my heart with joy'.

3. The psalmist has a special love for those who are 'consecrated' to God (verse 3), who are faithful to the covenant. Jesus reveals God's love for everyone, but he does experience a special delight in the presence of those who welcome his revelation of Love (see Luke 10:21-22).

4. In praying this psalm we are challenged to look at the 'idols' (verse 4) that we build in our personal and social lives. What idols are there in the culture to which we belong?

5. The psalmist feels himself more vulnerable at night to irrational feelings that well up inside him (verse 7). He has learned to place his trust in God, confident that these feelings reveal the mysterious influence and inspiration of God in his life.

6. In verse 10 the Greek Septuagint replaces 'Pit' (the hole where the body is buried) with 'corruption'. Hence the application of this verse to Jesus in the New Testament (see Acts 2:24-32 and 13:34-39). Jesus was buried (he saw the Pit), but he was raised to life and hence did not experience 'corruption'.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus let us withdraw into the silence of our heart, believing that it is there that God, the Risen Jesus, and the Spirit of Love that flows between them, have chosen to make their home. Let us allow Jesus to draw us into the intimate communion he enjoys with his Father, for this is what God wants for us. This is our birthright, our inheritance. It is in this communion that we find ourselves and 'live to the full' (John 10:10).

## Praying Psalm 17 (16) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>O GOD, hear my appeal for justice.

Attend to my cry. Listen to my plea. My lips are free of deception.

<sup>2</sup>Let my judgment come from you, for you can see that I am upright.

<sup>3</sup>You scrutinize my heart. You probe it by night.

You will find in me no wickedness.

<sup>4</sup>There is no error in what I have said about how people are behaving.

Following the instructions from your lips I have remained vigilant.

<sup>5</sup>Even on steep paths I have kept my footing.

Keeping to your way, I have not strayed.

<sup>6</sup>I call upon you, my God; attend to me, hear my voice.

<sup>7</sup>Show me your wonderful love, you who save those who trust you.

<sup>8</sup>Guard me as the pupil of your eye. Hide me in the shade of your wings

<sup>9</sup>from the wicked who attack me, and hunt me down to take my life.

<sup>10</sup>They lack all feeling. Their speech is arrogant.

<sup>11</sup>They track me down and hem me in.

They fix their eyes on me, determined to strike me to the ground.

<sup>12</sup>They are like lions eager for prey, like young lions lurking in ambush.

<sup>14</sup>Ensure that those you protect are saved from starving.

May their children be satisfied.

May they have more than enough for their little ones.

<sup>15</sup>As for me, I have been righteous. I will behold your face.

When I awake, I will see you. That is all I want.

Omitted

<sup>13</sup>Rise up, YHWH, confront them, overthrow them!

With your sword snatch me away from the wicked.

<sup>14</sup>Kill them, YHWH. Kill them with your own hand.

Let them not share the heritage of the living.

This is an appeal to GOD from a person who is suffering injustice. He asserts his innocence throughout and asks God to protect him (verses 8-9) by wiping out his enemies (verse 13-14). He is praying at night (verse 3) and concludes with a confident assertion that in the morning (verse 15), God will intervene in his favour.

1. From the beginning of their account of Jesus' public ministry, the Gospels make the point that loving carries with it a cost. Mark concludes his first chapter (1:40-45) with a scene in which a man who has a virulent skin complaint (we don't have enough detail to offer a clear diagnosis) comes to Jesus and says: 'If you want to you can make me clean'. Jesus' immediate response is: 'Of course I want to'. Then Jesus embraces him and tells him to go and get a clearance from the priests to return to the community. Mark adds: 'Jesus had to stay outside in places where nobody lives'. The price for embracing the leper was that Jesus had to submit to the law till it was clear that he had not contacted the disease.

On another occasion, Jesus healed a man in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Mark records the reaction of the religious leaders: 'The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him' (Mark 3:6). On another Sabbath, Jesus healed a man at the pool of Beth-zatha. John writes: 'The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath' (John 5:16).

Jesus visited Nazareth and was asked to speak at the synagogue. At first they were 'amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth' (Luke 4:22). But when he challenged them by speaking of God's favouring Sidon and Syria 'they were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff' (Luke 4:28-29). When Jesus' Love brought healing, he was accused of acting with demonic power (see Matthew 12:24).

At his trial before the Jewish Council Jesus was falsely accused, condemned to death and ridiculed: 'they spat in his face and struck him' (Matthew 26:67). They accused him to Pilate: 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king' (Luke 23:2). Jesus knew what it was like to suffer injustice.

2. The psalmist claims to be innocent. We reflected on Jesus' innocence when we prayed Psalm 6 with him (see pages 33-34). When we are falsely accused we can join him in praying this psalm. He warned us that this would happen: 'Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master". If they persecuted me, they will persecute you' (John 15:20). When the accusations have no basis we can find strength in knowing this and in Jesus' words: 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account' (Matthew 5:11). It is harder when there is some basis for the accusations, but our behaviour is taken out of context and distorted, and we are being accused of motivation that is not true.

3. We can join the psalmist and Jesus in praying: 'Guard me as the pupil of your eye; hide me in the shade of your wings' (verse 8). God was thought of as invisibly present on the throne of the ark of the covenant in the inner sanctuary of the temple. The throne (the 'cover' or 'mercy-seat') was protected by cherubim whose wings arched over it. To be hidden in the shade of GOD's wings is to find refuge in intimate communion with God in the sanctuary. The image of God protecting his people with outstretched wings, as of an eagle, may also be present here:

'As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, GOD alone guided him' (Deuteronomy 32:11).

4. From the cross Jesus prayed: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). It is understandable that, with his limited view of God, the psalmist would give expression in his prayer to verses 13-14. Jesus could not pray this way, neither should we.

5. It is good to hear the psalmist rise above his own personal problems to pray for others who are being oppressed: 'Fill the stomachs of those you protect. May their children be satisfied. May they have more than enough for their little ones' (verse 14). We are reminded of Jesus' words to those who arrested him: 'If you are looking for me, let these men go' (John 18:8).

6. The psalmist is confident that he can sleep in peace and when he awakens to face trial, God will reveal himself and make sure that justice is done (verse 15). Experiencing justice, the psalmist will behold the 'likeness' of GOD. Verse fifteen has an even deeper meaning for us who hope to share in the risen glory of Jesus when we awake from the sleep of death.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us hear Jesus say: 'Trust in God still and trust in me' (John 14:1). When we are unjustly accused, let us pray with Jesus: 'Hide me in the shade of your wings' (verse 8). Let us pray with confidence: 'I will behold your face. When I awake I will see you' (verse 15). And let us add: 'That is all I want'. Saint Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) expresses this beautifully:

'Let nothing trouble you.

Let nothing frighten you.

Everything passes.

God never changes.

Patience obtains all.

Whoever has God wants for nothing.

God alone is enough' (Poem 9).



## Reflecting on Psalm 18 (17) in Jesus' Company

<sup>1</sup>I love you, O GOD, my strength,  
<sup>2</sup>my rock, my fortress, my Saviour,  
 my God, my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold.  
<sup>3</sup>I praise you. I call upon you,  
 and I am rescued from my enemies.

<sup>4</sup>The waves of Death overwhelmed me;  
 the torrents of destruction struck me down;  
<sup>5</sup>the cords of the Underworld entangled me;  
 the nets of Death held me trapped.

<sup>6</sup>I called upon you, O GOD, I cried out for help,  
 and my cry pierced through to your presence.

<sup>7</sup>Then the earth reeled and trembled;  
 the mountains were shaken to their foundations,  
 they shuddered at your terrible anger.

<sup>8</sup>Smoke issued from your nostrils,  
 a scorching fire from your mouth; and fiery rocks erupted.

<sup>9</sup>God, you tore open the heavens, and came down;  
 a black cloud under your feet.

<sup>10</sup>You rode on the back of a cherub  
 and came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.

<sup>11</sup>You made darkness your covering,  
 wrapped in a canopy of thick black stormclouds.

<sup>12</sup>Lightning announced God's presence, with hailstones and flashes of fire.

<sup>13</sup>GOD thundered in the heavens,  
 the voice of the Most High resounded.

<sup>14</sup>You shot your arrows, and scattered them,  
 causing terror by the crashing of the lightning.

<sup>15</sup>Then the bottom of the ocean was revealed,  
 and the foundations of the world laid bare  
 at your rebuke, O GOD, at the fire issuing from your nostrils.

<sup>16</sup>You reached down from on high and held me.

<sup>17</sup>You rescued me from powerful enemies,  
 from those who were too strong for me.

<sup>18</sup>They came against me on a disastrous day,  
 but GOD sustained me,

<sup>19</sup>opened for me an escape,  
 rescued me because God took pleasure in me.

<sup>20</sup>O GOD, you rewarded me because I was just;  
 repaid me because my actions were pure,

<sup>21</sup>because I have kept your ways,  
 and have not repudiated my God;

<sup>22</sup>because I have kept before my eyes all your judgments,  
 and I have not set aside your statutes.

<sup>23</sup>I kept blameless before God, and I guarded myself against all guilt.

<sup>24</sup>O GOD, you recompensed me for being just,  
 for keeping my actions pure in your sight.

<sup>25</sup>With the faithful you show your covenant love;  
 with the blameless you show yourself blameless;

<sup>26</sup>with the pure you show yourself pure;  
 with the crooked you show yourself astute.

<sup>27</sup>You give your saving help to the humble,  
 and you humble those who are proud.

<sup>28</sup>It is you, O GOD, who light my lamp.  
 It is you who illumine my darkness.

<sup>29</sup>With you I can leap into the fray,  
 with my God I can scale any wall.

<sup>30</sup>O God, your way is perfect. Your word is true.  
 You are a shield for all who take refuge in GOD.

<sup>31</sup>Who is God apart from You? Who is the rock if not our God?

<sup>32</sup>You gird me with strength. You guide me to achieve my goal.

<sup>33</sup>You make my feet like those of a deer. You set me secure on the heights.

<sup>34</sup>You train my hands for war and my arms to bend the heavy bow.  
<sup>35</sup>You have given me your saving shield,  
 your right hand has supported me, you have assisted me in every way.

<sup>36</sup>You have widened the path for my steps,  
 and I have kept my footing.

<sup>37</sup>I pursued the enemy and overtook them;  
 and did not turn back until they were annihilated.

<sup>38</sup>I struck them down, so that they were not able to rise.  
 They fell under my feet.

<sup>39</sup>For you girded me with strength for the battle;  
 you made my assailants fall down before me.

<sup>40</sup>You put my enemies to flight,  
 and reduced to silence my adversaries.

<sup>41</sup>They cried for help, but there was no one to save them;  
 they cried to GOD, but there was no answer.

<sup>42</sup>You crushed them fine as dust before the wind;  
 You trod them down like dirt in the streets.

<sup>43</sup>You rescued me from the wrangling of my people.

You made me head of the nations. A foreign people took me as their lord,  
<sup>44</sup>because of my fame they submitted to me.  
 Foreigners came cringing to me,  
<sup>45</sup>foreigners lost heart, and came trembling out of their strongholds.

<sup>46</sup>GOD lives! Blessed be my rock! Be exalted, my God and Saviour!

<sup>47</sup>God, you avenged me and subdued peoples under me,  
<sup>48</sup>you rescued me from my enemy,  
 you exalted me above my adversaries and rescued me from their violence.

<sup>49</sup>For this I will extol you, O GOD, among the nations,  
 and sing praises to your name.

<sup>50</sup>You show love to your anointed.  
 You reveal your love for David  
 and for his descendants for ever.

The psalm celebrates God's commitment to the Davidic dynasty (see verse 50). The imagery is taken from the battlefield, and from nature. Earthquake, volcanic eruption, violent storms, thunder and lightning, speak of the power of God's intervention to rescue the king, and, for the psalmist, witness to the explosion of God's anger against the king's enemies (see verses 7-15; for a reflection on 'anger' see pages 21-24). While the poetry is especially striking, much of the psalm would not have found a place in Jesus' prayer. Apart from a few verses, Jesus' image of God is very different, as is his understanding of the role of God's Messiah.

The only verses from Psalm 18 that the Church includes in the Lectionary are verses 1-3, 46 and 50. These verses are prayed on the 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A, and are repeated on the 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B. The whole psalm is prayed in the Office of Readings over two days, Wednesday and Thursday Week 1.

I have reproduced the psalm in full, so as not to weaken its power. We need to make allowances for the image of God as a Warrior Lord.

1. Verse 1 is especially significant. When the psalmist writes: 'I love you', he uses the Hebrew word *raham*. It is a particularly tender word for love, related to the word for a 'womb', and so picking up the love a mother has for the child in her womb. *raham* is found only 4 times in the psalms. On the other three times (Psalms 102:13, 103:13 and 116:5) it refers to the tenderness of God's motherly love for us. In the whole Bible, only here in Psalm 18 do we find it used of our love for God. It fits nicely with Jesus relating to God as his *Abba*, and we are invited to join Jesus in this. As noted on page 7, with what we know of the woman's role in conception, today we can address God also as our *Imma* (Mother).

2. Jesus invites us to see God as 'my strength, my rock, my fortress, my Saviour, my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold (verse 2), and to cry out to God in our need (verse 6, 16). God's Love will set us free (verse 19).

3. Verse 27 is an exhortation to be humble. Jesus invites us: 'Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-29). There is a connection here with Jesus' call for us to become like little children (see page 45). To be humble is to know that all we are and all we have is gift. It is to know the joy of being dependent, knowing that the One on whom we ultimately depend is God, our Loving Father/Mother. The only hope for the proud is to learn humility (see Matthew 23:12). Paul exhorts us: 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience' (Colossians 3:12).

4. Verse 28 is picked up beautifully in the mantra prayed by a Hindu mystic, Yogananda, as he was dying. Speaking of his body as God's temple, and knowing his inability to minister to himself, he prays to the Risen Jesus: 'In this your temple, with your own hands, light the lamp of your love. Turn my darkness into light. Turn my darkness into light.' Perhaps we could make this mantra our own as we pray this psalm with Jesus.

5. Jesus, like the psalmist, knows that 'God's way is perfect', and that 'God's word is purest gold' (verse 30). Let us ask to know and follow God's way, and let us pray with the prophet Samuel: 'Speak, O GOD, your servant is listening' (1 Samuel 3:10).

6. We share Jesus' faith in the only true God (verse 31) – the God of the burning bush, the God who brought the people of Israel out of slavery and led them to the Promised Land. It is God's Love that liberates from all that holds us in slavery, for God, as Jesus said, wants everyone to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10). Jesus' mission was to set the world ablaze with the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit (see Luke 12:49). Pray that God's Loving Spirit will purify us, mind, heart and body. Jesus called his disciples to be with him and to go out on mission (Mark 3:14). As we are with Jesus in praying this psalm, let us pray to know the gift we are given to go out as missionaries of God's Love.

## Praying Psalm 19 (18) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>The heavens proclaim the glory of God,  
displaying the magnificence of God's creation.

<sup>2</sup>Day unto day takes up the story;  
night unto night makes known the message.

<sup>3</sup>Without a word, without a sound, without a voice being heard,  
<sup>4</sup>their announcement goes out through all the earth,  
their proclamation to the utmost bounds of the world.

<sup>5</sup>In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun.  
It comes forth like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,  
like an athlete eager to run the race.

<sup>6</sup>It rises in one extremity of the heavens,  
and its course runs to the other.  
Nothing escapes its burning heat.

<sup>7</sup>GOD's law is perfect; it revives the soul.  
GOD's decrees are sure; they make wise the simple.  
<sup>8</sup>GOD's precepts are right; they delight the heart.  
GOD's commandment is clear; it enlightens the eyes.

<sup>9</sup>The awe inspired by GOD is pure and enduring.  
GOD's judgments are true and all of them just.  
<sup>10</sup>More precious are they than gold, than the finest gold;  
sweeter are they than honey dripping from a comb.

<sup>11</sup>Your servant is enlightened by them.  
In keeping them there is great reward.

<sup>12</sup>Who is so sensitive as to observe hidden sins?  
Forgive me mine, O my God.

<sup>13</sup>Keep my pride in check; break its grip upon me.  
Then I will be blameless, innocent of grave sin.

<sup>14</sup>Let the words of my mouth and the reflections of my heart  
be acceptable to You, my GOD, my rock.

1. The Psalmist contemplates the heavens and listens to their silent message. Nature is inviting us to join in its cosmic hymn of praise (verses 1-4). Paul quotes this psalm to speak of the wonderful way in which the Gospel message is spreading the knowledge of God's redeeming love throughout the world: 'Have they not heard? Indeed they have; for 'their announcement goes out through all the earth, and their proclamation to the utmost bounds of the world' (Romans 10:18).

The psalmist then focuses on the sun (verses 4-6). Like a bridegroom after a night of love, the sun comes forth to run its course with joy. It is inviting us to do the same. Jesus is the bridegroom, warming our hearts with his Love. 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us' (Luke 1:78). 'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world' (John 1:9).

2. To complement the message of the heavens, God gives us the clear instruction of the Torah to guide us as to the course we are to run with joy and love (verses 7-10). Jesus loved to do his Father's will (see texts page 11). He urges us to share this love with him. Only God can educate us and refine our conscience so that we become more sensitive to the inadvertent ways in which we fail to do God's will. Only God can scrutinise the hidden depths of our psyche and awaken us to the subtle ways in which we distort our lives and the lives of others by our misdirected desires and impure intentions. Only God can liberate us from our pride and folly and our slavery to wilful sin. So we plead with God to deliver us from all that deafens us to God's voice and all that hardens our hearts against following God's will (verses 12-13).

3. We know that Jesus was innocent of sin (see the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 38-39). We need to pray these verses, and to have Jesus by our side as we pray them, for we are called to let Christ live in us and share with us his innocence. We are to 'be perfect as our Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). This is possible if we open our hearts to welcome the Spirit of Love that Jesus shared with his Father. This Spirit will purify our minds and hearts till we can say with Saint Paul: 'I live, no longer I. It is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:19-20).

4. On the expression 'fear of God' (verse 9) see the reflection on Psalm 2:11, page 23, including the reason for using the English 'revere' in place of 'fear.'

## Praying Psalm 20 (19) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**In time of trouble may GOD respond to your plea.  
May the God of Jacob protect you.**

<sup>2</sup>**From the sanctuary may God send you help,  
giving you support from Zion.**

<sup>3</sup>**May God recall your many offerings,  
and look with favour upon your sacrifices.**

<sup>4</sup>**May God grant you the desire of your heart,  
and fulfill every one of your plans.**

<sup>5</sup>**May we shout for joy over your deliverance.  
May we raise our standards in triumph.**

**"GOD will fulfil all your petitions."**

<sup>6</sup>**Now I know that GOD's anointed will be victorious.  
The Holy One will grant him deliverance,  
giving strength to his victorious right arm.**

<sup>7</sup>**Some boast of chariots and horses, but we invoke GOD.**

<sup>8</sup>**They will waver and fall, but we will stand firm.**

<sup>9</sup>**Give victory to the king, O GOD.  
Answer us when we cry out to you.**

1. It would appear that Jerusalem is under siege. Those living in the city have assembled in the temple to plead with God to come to the aid of the king and the army. Praying this psalm with Jesus, we are reminded of the immense sadness that filled his heart when he saw the destruction toward which his city was hurtling: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you refused! So be it! Your house will be left to you' (Luke 13:34-35). 'As Jesus came in sight of the city he shed tears over it and said, "If only you had understood the message of peace! But, alas, it is hidden from your eyes! Yes, a time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications all round you, when they will encircle you and hem you in on every side; they will dash you and the children inside your walls to the ground; they will leave not one stone standing on another within you – and all because you did not recognise your opportunity when God offered it!"' (Luke 19:41-44).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us: 'Jesus' power to save is utterly certain, since he is living for ever to intercede for all who come to God through him' (Hebrews 7:25). As we pray with the psalmist for people and places that are suffering a 'time of trouble' (verse 1), Jesus is praying with us.

2. On the subject of 'offerings' and 'sacrifices' (verse 3), Paul reminds us: 'I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Romans 12:1). To sacrifice is to 'make holy'. It is God who makes holy by drawing us into communion. Our part is to be sensitive to this gravity of grace drawing us, and to yield to it, such that our 'plans' (verse 4) are only to allow God's will to be achieved through us.

3. The desire of Jesus' heart (verse 4) is to 'be in the Father's presence' (John 17:5). God granted him this for ever in the Resurrection. Jesus' desire is also for us: 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17:21). Let us pray for this: that everyone will yield to Jesus as he draws us to himself and so to communion with God.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, he encourages us to get in touch with the deepest desires of our heart. Listen to Jesus praying to his Father to grant these desires, 'so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26).

4. The final line in verse 5 ('Our God will fulfil all your petitions') is an oracle, assuring us of God's response to our prayer. Did not Jesus say: 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you' (Matthew 7:7). 'If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven' (Matthew 18:19). 'I will do whatever you ask in my name' (John 14:13). God does not over-ride human freedom, so we may not see God's response. But we must believe that God is responding with Love. It is for us to trust, and to join our love to that of Jesus, remembering that 'love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Corinthians 13:7).

## Praying Psalm 21 (20) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**O GOD, the king rejoices in your power.**

**He celebrates your victory.**

<sup>2</sup>**You have given him his heart's desire.**

**You have not refused his prayer.**

<sup>3</sup>**You came to meet him, blessing him with success.**

**You have placed on his head a golden crown.**

<sup>4</sup>**He asked you for life. You gave it to him,**

**length of days forever and ever.**

<sup>5</sup>**His glory is great, thanks to your help;**

**you have bestowed on him honour and majesty.**

<sup>6</sup>**You pour out an abundance of blessings upon him.**

**You have filled him with joy in your presence.**

<sup>7</sup>**The king trusts in GOD.**

**Through the covenant love of the Most High he will not waver.**

<sup>13</sup>**Rise up, GOD, in your power.**

**To the sound of instruments we will sing of your mighty Love.**

[Verses eight to twelve are omitted from the Church's liturgy.]

<sup>8</sup>Your left hand will deal with your enemies;

your right hand will deal with your foes.

<sup>9</sup>You will make them like a fiery furnace

when suddenly you appear, YHWH.

[God's anger will devour them, the fire will consume them.]

<sup>10</sup>Destroy their offspring from the earth,

their children from among the human race.

<sup>11</sup>All they do is plan evil against you,

they devise intrigues, but they will not succeed.

<sup>12</sup>For you will put them to flight;

you will pick them off with your bows.

In Psalm 20 the people prayed that God would give victory to the king. Here they thank God for answering their prayer. It is God's power that has brought victory (verse 1). It is God who has granted the king his heart's desire (verse 2). Let us join Jesus in giving thanks for God's abundant blessings.

#### 1. For the gift of life (verse 4).

We thank God first of all for Jesus, for his life here on earth, and for the life he now enjoys in the eternal embrace of his Father.

'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again' (Romans 6:9).

'I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever' (Revelation 1:17-18).

We thank God for the life we enjoy because of our communion with Jesus.

'The Father, who is the source of life, has made the Son the source of life' (John 5:26).

'God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has eternal life' (1 John 5:11).

#### 2. For the gift of a share in God's glory, God's radiant beauty (verse 5).

We thank God for the beauty radiating on the face and in the heart of Jesus.

'Father, glorify me in your own presence' (John 17:5).

'We see Jesus now crowned with glory and honour because of how he submitted to death' (Hebrews 2:9).

We thank God 'because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). This Spirit of Love purifies and transforms us till we can pray with Saint Paul: 'I live, no longer I, it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19). We thank God for sharing Jesus' beauty with us, and for choosing us to reveal Jesus' beauty to others.

'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

#### 3. For the gift of joy (verse 6).

We thank God for the joy Jesus experiences and for our sharing in his joy.

'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete' (John 15:11).

'You have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (John 16:22).

'I am coming to you, Father, and I speak these things to share my joy with them to the full' (John 17:13).

4. Verse 7 is the central verse of the psalm. The king can remain steadfast because of God's fidelity to God's kindness, God's covenant love. In the company of the Risen Jesus we can pray this psalm, reflecting on God's fidelity that reaches beyond death.

'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also' (John 14:2-3).

'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us' (Romans 8:18).

'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12).

'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

5. Verses eight to twelve are omitted from the Church's liturgy. Jesus could not pray them; neither should we. We are to oppose evil in ourselves and in others, but Jesus taught us to distinguish between the sin and the sinner, and he insisted on a very different attitude to one's enemies.

'You have heard that it was said, "You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"' (Matthew 5:43-48).

## Praying Psalm 22 (21) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

How far from saving me, the words I groan!

<sup>2</sup>I call all day, my God, but you do not answer.

All night long I call, and I cannot rest.

<sup>3</sup>You dwell in the holy temple, you, the praise of Israel.

<sup>4</sup>In you our ancestors trusted; *they* trusted, and you rescued *them*.

<sup>5</sup>To you they cried, and *they* escaped;

they trusted in you, and never in vain.

<sup>6</sup>But here am I, more worm than human, scorned and despised.

<sup>7</sup>All who see me deride me, they toss their heads and sneer:

<sup>8</sup>He relied on GOD, let God save him!

Let God come to his aid if God loves him so much.'

<sup>9</sup>Yet it was you who took me from the womb;

you entrusted me to my mother's breasts.

<sup>10</sup>Placed on your lap from my birth,

from my mother's womb You have been my God.

<sup>11</sup>Come close to me. Trouble is near and I have no one to help me!

<sup>12</sup>A pack of bulls encircles me, fierce bulls of Bashan close in on me;

<sup>13</sup>for me they open wide their jaws, like ravenous, roaring lions.

<sup>14</sup>I am poured out like water; all my bones are out of joint.

My heart is like wax, melting within my breast.

<sup>15</sup>My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaw.

You lay me in the dust of death.

<sup>16</sup>Dogs hunt me; a gang of villains closes me in.

They tear at my hands and feet, determined to take my life.

<sup>17</sup>I can count all my bones. They glare at me and gloat.

<sup>18</sup>They divide up my clothes, and cast lots for my robe.

<sup>19</sup>But you, O GOD, do not leave me.

O my strength, come quickly to my aid.

<sup>20</sup>Rescue me from the sword, my life from the mauling of the dogs!

<sup>21</sup>Save me from the lion's jaws, from the horns of the wild bulls,

<sup>22</sup>and I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters;

in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

.....

<sup>23</sup>Let your praise ring out, you who revere GOD!

Give glory to God, all you children of Jacob!

Stand in awe, all you children of Israel!

<sup>24</sup>For God did not despise or scorn the condition of this wretch.

God's love remained fixed on me, hearing my cry.

<sup>25</sup>Yours, O God, is my praise in the great congregation.

My vows I will pay before your faithful.

<sup>26</sup>The poor eat and are satisfied.

Those who seek GOD utter praise. May they never lose heart.

<sup>27</sup>All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to GOD.

All the families of nations will worship GOD

<sup>28</sup>who rules over the nations.

<sup>29</sup>To God, indeed, will bow, all who go down to the dust.

And I, too, with all my being, if God preserves me.

<sup>30</sup>My descendants will worship;

future generations will be told about God (the Lord),

<sup>31</sup>and will proclaim God's justice to a people yet unborn:

'Look what God has done!'

People are mocking the psalmist, who is calling on God but seemingly in vain. He remembers what God did in reply to the cry of his ancestors. He remembers, too, his own earlier experiences of intimacy with God. Desperate, he describes his situation, and pleads with God, promising to acknowledge God's response in the public assembly. The psalm takes a sudden turn in verse twenty-three, which begins a prolonged hymn of thankful praise. Has his prayer been answered? Or is this a profound act of faith that God who hears the cry of the poor has heard his cry, and so God's response is certain?

Psalm 22 has special significance for disciples of Jesus. Mark has the dying Jesus 'cry out with a loud voice' the opening line of Psalm 22. Mark's Gospel, like all the writings of the New Testament, is in Greek. He gives us Jesus' cry in Aramaic, Jesus' native tongue: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani", and goes on to give the Greek translation: 'which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"' (Mark 15:34).

We know from the First Letter of Peter (5:13) that Peter had a special relationship with Mark, and ancient tradition sees Peter as the authority behind Mark's Gospel. Peter is not mentioned among the group that stood by the cross as Jesus was dying, but we know he followed Jesus 'at a distance' (Luke 22:54) to the high priest's house. He was surely among Jesus' acquaintances who 'stood at a distance' watching Jesus die (Luke 23:49). Did Peter hear Jesus cry out verse 1 of Psalm 22?



"The Crucified and Risen Christ" by Lyn Constable Maxwell, 1994,  
All Saints Pastoral Centre, London Colney.

Or was it verse 10 ('My God is You') that he heard? The Hebrew for verse 10 is 'Eli' ('my God') 'atta ('You'). In the account of Jesus' death we are told that 'some of the bystanders heard Jesus' cry and said: Listen, he is calling for Elijah' (Mark 15:35). If we move the spacing slightly 'Eli 'atta' sounds the same as 'Elia ta' ('Elijah, come!'). Did Jesus cry: "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani" or 'Eli' 'atta', and was misunderstood by the bystanders? Either way we are led to Psalm 22. Either Jesus was praying this psalm, or it was judged to be the best prayer to convey the sentiments of the dying Jesus.

The cry is answered only by God's silence: 'How far from saving me, the words I groan! I call all day, my God, but you do not answer, all night long I call and cannot rest' (verses 1-2). Notice the repetition of 'my God'. Though the feeling is of being forsaken, a trusting intimacy persists.

The psalmist recalls the ancient traditions of his people: 'In you our ancestors trusted; *they* trusted, and you rescued *them*. To you they cried, and *they* escaped; *they* trusted in you, and *they* did not trust you in vain' (verses 4-5). We think of God's words to Moses when he appeared to him in the burning bush: 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians' (Exodus 3:7-8). God heard their cry, and this is echoed in the songs that rise up to God from the sanctuary, celebrating God's saving action in Israel's history (verse 3). Why is God not hearing his cry?

The psalmist is 'scorned and despised. All who see me jeer at me, they toss their heads and sneer: 'He relied on GOD; let GOD save him! Let God come to his aid if God loves him so much' (verses 6-8). So it is for Jesus: 'Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads ... 'He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to' (Matthew 27:39,43).

The psalmist recalls the intimacy he knew in his childhood: 'It was you who took me from the womb. You entrusted me to my mother's breasts. Placed on your lap from my birth, since my mother bore me you have been my God' (verses 9-10). Listen to Jesus as he makes this psalm his own.

The memory of the many experiences of intimacy issues in a desperate cry: 'Do not stand far off. Trouble is near and I have no one to assist me!' (verse 11). The psalmist likens his enemies to a 'pack of bulls', and to 'ravenous, roaring lions' (verse 12-13). He is terrified by their ferocity: 'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, melting within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaw' (verses 14-15).

In his pain he seems to see God, now close, but in the circle of his enemies: 'You lay me in the dust of death' (verse 15). This is the God who brought him forth from the womb (verse 9). This is his most excruciating pain.

The enemies of the psalmist 'tear at my hands and my feet' (verse 16). Jesus is nailed to the cross (John 19:18; 20:25). In our prayer we 'look on the one we have pierced' (John 19:37).



The psalmist is stripped naked: 'they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my robe they cast lots' (verse 18). So it is with Jesus: 'When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it." John goes on to quote this psalm: 'This was to fulfill what the scripture says, "They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots"' (John 19:23-24).

The psalmist utters a final plea to God, promising that if God comes to his aid, he will witness to God's love in the congregation: 'GOD, do not stand aside! O my strength, come quickly to my aid! Rescue me from the sword, my life from the clutches of the dog! Save me from the lion's jaw, from the horns of the wild bull. Then I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you (verses 19-22).



It is here that the psalm takes a sudden turn. The psalm which began 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (verse 1), now explodes in wave after wave of praise. Either the psalmist's prayer has been answered, or we are witnessing a profound act of faith in God who always hears the cry of the poor. Mark has pointed us to Psalm 22 with this, too, in mind, for the crucifying of Jesus is not the final word. We hear Jesus say: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46), and know that God has taken him for ever into God's loving embrace.

The first wave of praise comes from the psalmist surrounded by his community: 'You who fear GOD, sing out your praise! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify God; stand in awe of God, all you offspring of Israel! For God did not despise or scorn the condition of this wretch; God did not hide God's face from me, but heard me when I cried. You, my God, are the theme of my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who revere [fear] you. The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek GOD will praise God. May they never lose heart' (verses 23-26).

For an understanding of the expression 'fear' in relation to God, see the reflection on Psalm 2:11, page 23.

The second wave of praise rises up from 'the nations': 'All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to GOD; and all the families of the nations will worship before him. For dominion belongs to GOD, who rules over the nations'(verses 27-28).

The third wave of praise is from the dead: 'To God will the ashes in the tomb bow down; before God will bow all who go down to the dust. And I, too, with all my being, if God preserves me' (verse 29). This is extraordinary when we remember that in Ancient Israel physical death was thought to bring human life to an end.

Finally, praise of God who gives life will go on generation after generation: 'My descendants will serve God; future generations will be told about GOD, and proclaim God's justice to a people yet unborn, saying: 'This is what God has done!' (verse 30-31).

We have been praying this psalm thinking of Jesus. He was unjustly crucified, but he continued to trust in God's love and to reach out to others in love, as he had always done. We join the centurion 'who stood facing Jesus. Seeing how Jesus died, he said, "Truly, this man was God's Son" (Mark 15:39).

Let us pray this psalm thinking also of ourselves and of our world. Let us ask Jesus for a share in his faith, his trust and his love, confident that God does hear the cry of the poor, as we renew our faith in God's will. The failure of the authorities to heed God's inspiration meant that Jesus was crucified. His cry did not mean he was saved from crucifixion. But, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7). Jesus' prayer was heard, for God embraced him from the cross and took him to the goal of all our lives: eternal communion with God in the risen life.

Let us listen to Peter as he offers us the following reflections on suffering:

'It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth'[Isaiah 53:9]. When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly' (1 Peter 2:19-23).

'Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name' (1 Peter 4:13-16).

## Praying Psalm 23 (22) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>You, O GOD, are my shepherd. You are all I need.

<sup>2</sup>In green pastures I rest with you.

You lead me to tranquil waters

<sup>3</sup>to revive my drooping spirit.

You guide me along the right path.

You are true to your name.

<sup>4</sup>Though I should walk in death's dark valley

I fear no evil, for you are with me.

Your rod and your staff give me comfort.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a banquet for me

in the presence of my foes.

You anoint my head with perfumed oil;

my cup is overflowing.

<sup>6</sup>Surely your goodness and covenant love will accompany me  
all the days of my life.

I will dwell in GOD's house my whole life long.

### Part One. Exodus journey (23:1-4)

We are on a journey. God, like a shepherd, is looking after us, guiding us to pasture, and to the oasis where we can slake our thirst and find rest. When darkness falls and we cannot see, we listen for the familiar sound of the shepherd's staff as it strikes the firm earth and the rocks, and when we are straying we feel the familiar touch of the rod, directing us along the right path. With such care we are confident that we will not stray or lag behind. We are being led and protected by the Shepherd. We trust that we will want for nothing. We are on the right path and with a God who is faithful.

1. We pray this psalm with Jesus, the 'Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep' (John 10:11). He knows us, and we know him (John 10:14). Jesus wants us 'to be with him' (Mark 3:14), and he wants to be with us. Jesus wants us to journey with him, and he wants to journey with us, even when, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we are turning our back on our calling (Luke 24:13-15). He knows what our life can be like when we are left without a shepherd: 'When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matthew 9:36).

Peter reminds us: 'You were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls' (1 Peter 2:25). 'When the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away' (1 Peter 5:4).

And the Book of Revelation: 'The Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes' (Revelation 7:17).

2. If we thirst for God with our whole being, it is our whole being that will be nourished (verse 3). Let us listen to Jesus: 'Drink of the water that I will give you and you will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). 'Let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart (Jesus' heart and the disciple's heart) will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38).

### Part Two. Entrance into the Promised Land (23:5-6)

3. We experience ourselves as fugitives, banished from the community, but welcomed by God into the protection and hospitality of God's tent. In God's home we enjoy the comfort of a banquet, like the disciples who, having reached Emmaus, invited Jesus to stay with them (Luke 24:29). They shared a meal with him, a Eucharistic meal, the meal that Jesus promised to share with his disciples whenever we gather to remember him (Luke 22:19-20).

George Herbert

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
 guilty of dust and sin.  
 But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
 from my first entrance in,  
 drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
 if I lack'd anything.  
 "A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";  
 Love said, "You will be he."  
 "I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,  
 I cannot look on thee."  
 Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
 "Who made the eyes but I?"  
 "Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame  
 go where it doth deserve."  
 "And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"  
 "My dear, then I will serve."  
 "You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."  
 So I did sit and eat.

4. The meal we share now holds a promise, for Jesus calls us to enjoy with him eternal communion: 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also' (John 14:2-3).

5. Jesus prayed to his Father that 'the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26). For now the wedding banquet is in our hearts, and in the heart of the community of Jesus' disciples. We hear Jesus say to us: 'Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (Revelation 3:20).

6. We are with Jesus. We are nourished by him. He calls us to continue his mission (Mark 3:14). As we leave God's tent to continue our journey to the Promised Land, we are pursued by enemies, but God gives us his own Goodness and covenant love as escort. God will be present with us on the journey to the sanctuary which awaits us.

## Praying Psalm 24 (23) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**The earth is yours, O GOD, and all its creatures,  
 the world and all its peoples.**

<sup>2</sup>**It is you who set the land on the seas,  
 and anchored it in the deep.**

<sup>3</sup>**Who is fit to climb GOD's mountain,  
 and stand in the GOD's holy place?**

<sup>4</sup>**Those who act with integrity, from hearts that are pure,  
 whose longing is for the real God, not idols, who do not live a lie.**

<sup>5</sup>**These will receive blessing from GOD,  
 and justice from the God who saves.**

<sup>6</sup>**Such is the company of those who seek you;  
 who seek your face, O God of Jacob.**

<sup>7</sup>*You, gates, reach to heaven, open high and wide.  
 Make way for the king of glory.*

<sup>8</sup>*Who is the king of glory?*

**The GOD of power and might, the conqueror of chaos.**

<sup>9</sup>*You, gates, reach to heaven, open high and wide.  
 Make way for the king of glory.*

<sup>10</sup>*Who is the king of glory?*

**The Mighty GOD, your glorious king.**

1. This psalm is part of a liturgical celebration of victory, or of the enthronement of Israel's God in the New Year Festival (verses 7-10). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of him as the priest-king who ascended into the sanctuary of heaven: 'We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever' (Hebrews 6:19-20).

God, the Creator of the universe, has chosen Zion for his dwelling. The city must be worthy of God's presence and its inhabitants must have 'clean hands and pure heart': their behaviour should be in accordance with God's will, and their hearts should be set on the Living God. They must not allow their longing to lose its focus and turn to 'idols' (verse 4).

2. Praying this psalm with Jesus and as his disciples we are reminded that living as Christians with 'clean hands and pure heart', is not something we can acquire by our own efforts. It is not a triumph of personal endeavour. Let us listen to Paul as he insists on this. We begin our reflections with what is possibly his first letter, written to the Christian communities in Galatia, and composed possibly as early as 48AD. If so, it is the oldest document in the New Testament. To live a virtuous life self-discipline is necessary, but, as Paul will state clearly when he speaks of virtues, these are the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22), not achievements of the self. Paul came to see that we should let go our ego and let the Spirit of Christ fill our hearts and direct our lives. We are called and graced to let 'Christ live in us' (Galatians 2:19). As Christians we are to 'clothe ourselves with Christ' (Galatians 3:27); 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 13:14). For Christians virtue is before all else a grace. We are to 'behave in a manner worthy of the vocation to which you have been called' (1 Thessalonians 2:12), and we do this by living 'in Christ' (an expression used by Paul eighty-five times).

We are graced to be able to say with Paul: 'It is no longer I who live; it is Christ who lives in me. The life I live now in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). Fundamental to our living a moral life as disciples of Jesus is our sharing Jesus' faith (Galatians 2:16; 3:22). Jesus revealed God as love. He gave us an example of what it means to welcome God's love and live by it, but he did more than that – and this takes us to the essential foundation of Christian morality. Jesus continues to give his disciples a share in his faith in God and in his love. We can live a moral life because: 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, "Abba (Father)!"' (Galatians 4:6).

In Galatians 5:19-21 Paul has a list of vices. It is important to note that he follows this list, not with a list of virtues that we might acquire by our own efforts, but with examples of what he calls 'the fruit of the Spirit': 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23). We are not surprised to find that the first fruit of the Spirit is 'love'. As he wrote earlier in the letter: 'the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). He is speaking of something more than the spontaneous feeling that develops with one's spouse or family. He is speaking of something more than passionate desire, or the affection experienced between friends. He is speaking of the recognition one has of the value of another person in the light of what God has revealed in Christ. He is speaking of the decision to give one's life for others the way Christ gave his life for us. 'Love', as used here by Paul, speaks of faithful commitment to God and to people whatever feelings circumstances may cause to arise within us. However, love is not something that we can choose to do of ourselves. Love comes from God, and is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus through his Spirit.

Paul ends his list of virtues with 'self-control'. This is not control by the self. Rather, it is the control that we experience when we open ourselves to Jesus and to the gift of his Spirit. It is allowing ourselves to be directed by him. It is being, like Paul, a 'slave of Christ' (Galatians 1:10). It is to 'live by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:16), to be 'led by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:18).

If we do this, then the Spirit will cause these fruits to grow in our lives. Rather than our struggling to obey a law etched on stone, we are to open our hearts and minds to the call of the Spirit, and allow Christ to live in us (Galatians 2:20). Christian morality is a morality of love, the love revealed by Jesus on the cross. It is not an achievement of the self. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not possible without faith, but it is possible with it, and it is here that Paul places his emphasis. More and more we are to allow Jesus' Spirit to penetrate every aspect of our lives. To 'belong to Christ' (Galatians 3:29) demands that we die to our selfishness (Galatians 5:24) and give our lives in love for others.

As Jesus' disciples we rely, not on our own moral strength, but on the love of the Risen Christ to whom we look to purify our loving. We are called and graced to be holy. Holiness is what the Spirit does in our lives: we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth' (2 Thessalonians 2:13). Holiness is before all else a matter of love, and it is this love that we are to give and receive in the bosom of the Christian community.

In his First Letter to the community in Corinth (53AD), Paul reflects on the love of God as seen in Jesus: 'Love never stops caring. Love acts always in a kind way. Love does not act out of jealousy or envy. Love does not boast or behave arrogantly. Love does not behave indecently or insist on its own way. Love does not give way to irritation or brood over wrongs. Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). Paul uses verbs throughout. He is not listing various qualities that pertain to love. In true Semitic style he is telling us what love does.

'Love acts always in a kind way'. Kindness is listed by Paul as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Whatever gifts of grace we may or may not have been given by the Spirit, the more excellent way is the way of love, which can be recognised by the kindness with which we treat others: 'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you' (Ephesians 4:32). Through the gift of love we share in 'the kindness (the 'covenant love') of God' (Romans 2:4). This is how Jesus knew God: 'While he was still far off, his father saw his son and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him' (Luke 15:20). It is this same compassionate and persistent love that Jesus himself manifested in the way he lived and in the way he died. It is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus pierced on the cross (John 19:34). This is the gift of the Spirit, the fountain of living water which flows from Jesus' breast and wells up in our own (John 7:38).

'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone'. Love is about having space in one's heart, space for people, space to hold problems, disappointments and pain, as well as joys, hopes and dreams. The crucified and risen Jesus has space in his heart for all the members of the Corinthian community 'together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours' (1 Corinthians 1:2). He has space in his heart for the whole human race for which he offered his life (1 Corinthians 1:13).

In his Letter to the community in Colossae (54AD), Paul writes: ‘You must live your whole life according to the Christ you have received – Jesus the Lord. You must be rooted in him, built on him’ (Colossians 2:6-7). He goes on to speak, not of virtues that they should acquire (as one might find in the Stoic manuals of the day), but of the qualities of Christ that they have been clothed in: ‘As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and long suffering. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him’ (Colossians 3:12-17).

Paul is not suggesting that we model ourselves on Christ ‘from the outside’. It is not a matter of our becoming like Christ – certainly not by virtue of our own striving. Rather, we are to allow the life of Christ to bear fruit in our lives. Verse fourteen speaks of ‘love’ and verse fifteen of ‘peace’. Both of these are listed as fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22. It is in love that ‘we have come to fullness in him’ (Colossians 2:10). It is love that informs all the other virtues, giving them that special quality that identifies them as Christian. It is in experiencing our love (the outer garment that people first see) that others come to experience, through us, the love of Christ.

Through the gift of peace, we experience the ‘fullness’ of the risen Christ and the harmony of all the various energies of our mind, heart and body. Furthermore, this personal ‘peace’ is not something individual. It comes through belonging to ‘his body, the church’ (Colossians 1:18). It is a gift mediated through the community and which, in turn, builds the community.

In his Second Letter to the Christian community in Corinth (55AD) Paul teaches that living a moral life as a Christian is possible because ‘If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Judgment of value for the Greeks rested on reason. Paul is clearly appealing to something that transcends reason. His key criterion is not conformity to human nature. He appeals to the Corinthians to ‘examine yourselves to make sure you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you acknowledge that Jesus Christ is in you’ (2 Corinthians 13:5). Salvation, for Paul, comes through an act of God’s gracious love. It is seen in Jesus and the invitation God gives through Jesus for us to live by the same divine Spirit that inspired and gave life to Jesus. Morality for Paul is the fruit of this saving love. It is impossible without this love. Paul does not argue for the logic of his positions, or attempt to demonstrate that they are inherently consistent. He does not present Christian moral conduct as something to be lived by anyone who might choose to do so. Paul invites people to faith, he invites them into the Christian community, he shows what is possible for a Christian. For himself he prays, not for greater rationality or more determined effort, but that ‘the power of Christ may stay over me’ (2 Corinthians 12:9).

In his Letter to the Romans (57AD) Paul exhorts the Christians, not to be more self disciplined, but to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Romans 13:14). Morality is the fruit of God’s liberating love: it is Christ living in us. It is impossible to live a moral life free from sin without this gift, even with the law. The gift of ‘being alive to God in Christ Jesus’ (Romans 6:11) is, however, offered to all, without distinction, Jew and Gentile alike. Paul invites people to faith. He invites people into the Christian community. He invites us to belong to Christ and to experience his indwelling Spirit. He shows what fruit can come from such a union, fruit that without such a union is quite impossible. For Paul, living with ‘clean hands and a pure heart’ (verse 4) is possible because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

To the community in Philippi (62AD) Paul writes: ‘If there is any appeal in Christ, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition. Do not strive after or seek to find your value in things that are worthless, but in humility regard others above yourselves, so that everyone is not focused on themselves, but each is looking to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 2:1-5).

This goes beyond the training Paul received as a Jew, or the Stoic philosophy that he learned in Tarsus. It is a new basis for moral living, possible because of the gift of Jesus’ mind, heart and Spirit. The ‘compassion’ he is speaking of is ‘the compassion of Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 1:8). The righteousness that Paul lives is ‘not a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith’ (Philippians 3:9).

Sharing in Jesus’ communion with God, the Christian shares in Jesus’ faith, and it is this communion that is the basis of living a Christian life. Paul continues: ‘Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever inspires reverence, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever attracts to love, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, give consideration to these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you’ (Philippians 4:8-9).

To live a Christian life we need to open ourselves to receive the power of God into our lives. Only this love, as lived by Jesus, can bring healing and meaning to the human condition. There is a place for indicating the reasonableness of Christian morality, but in the final analysis the appeal is to Jesus’ promise to share his Spirit with us. There will always be a sense of sacred mystery about human life and human behaviour. One aim of education will be knowledge, as the Greek moralists said. But more important than knowledge of ‘human nature’ will be knowledge of Jesus and what he reveals to us about who God is and who we are called and graced to be.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus let us welcome the gift of his Spirit into our hearts. Sharing in his communion with God will purify our hearts. The fruit of his Spirit will be seen in our moral behaviour (‘clean hands’) as we are ‘clothed in Christ’, till we can say with Paul” ‘I live no longer I. It is Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:19).

## Praying Psalm 25 with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>All my longing is for you, O GOD. In you I trust.

<sup>2</sup>Do not let my enemies gloat over me. Do not fail me.

<sup>3</sup>Those who hope in you will not be disappointed.

Disgrace is for those who are wantonly unfaithful.

<sup>4</sup>O GOD, show me how to live. Teach me your way.

<sup>5</sup>Direct me to your truth, and guide me.

For you are God my saviour, my constant hope.

<sup>6</sup>O GOD, be mindful of your tender compassion,

your covenant love since ancient times.

[<sup>7</sup>Remember me, not the sins of my youth

or the ways I have been unfaithful.]

<sup>8</sup>Good and upright is GOD, guiding those who stray.

<sup>9</sup>God leads the poor, guiding them along the right path.

<sup>10</sup>YOUR paths are covenant love and faithfulness

for those who keep your covenant.

[<sup>11</sup>Pardon my guilt, for it is great.]

<sup>12</sup>For those conscious of God's awesome presence,

GOD will reveal the path to choose.

<sup>13</sup>They will live a full life, and their heirs will inherit the land.

<sup>14</sup>GOD counsels the faithful, instructing them through the covenant.

<sup>15</sup>My eyes are fixed on GOD, who will free me from the trap.

<sup>16</sup>Turn to me and be gracious, for I am lonely and afflicted.

<sup>17</sup>Relieve the troubles of my heart. Free me from my distress.

<sup>18</sup>Observe my affliction and my pain. [Forgive all my sins.]

<sup>19</sup>See how many are my foes. How violent is their hatred towards me.

<sup>20</sup>Rescue me and preserve my life. Do not let me be put to shame.

In you I take refuge.

<sup>21</sup>May integrity and uprightness preserve me,

for in you, O God, I hope.

<sup>22</sup>Rescue Israel from every danger.

1. The psalmist has a beautiful relationship with God ('All my longing is for you, my God, in you I trust', verse 1). He keeps his gaze 'fixed on God' (verse 15), and knows God's 'tender compassion and covenant love' (verse 6). As we pray the psalm with Jesus we ask him to share his faith with us, and pour his Spirit into our hearts that we may know and be drawn into his intimate communion with God.

2. The psalmist is the object of violent hatred (verse 19). He is feeling 'lonely and afflicted' (verse 16), and pleads with God to 'observe my affliction and pain' (verse 18), 'relieve the troubles of my heart' and 'free me from distress' (verse 17). We reflected on the opposition and hatred suffered by Jesus when praying Psalm 3 (pages 25-26). When we feel overburdened, Jesus asks us to come to him 'for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your soul' (Matthew 11:28-29).

3. The psalmist looks to God and is earnest in wanting to learn and do God's will (verses 4-5, 8-10, 12). He wants to be taught 'God's way' (verse 4). He wants God to direct him to God's truth and guide him (verse 5). This is a key theme of the psalm (see verses 8-12). The psalm highlights the covenant (verses 10 and 14) which is founded on God's covenant love, and to which we should respond with reverence (verses 12 and 14), trust (verse 2) and hope (verses 3, 5 and 21). For an understanding of the Hebrew phrase 'fear of God' see the reflection on Psalm 2:11, page 23.

Jesus often spoke of his delight in doing his Father's will (see quotes on page 11), and could say: 'The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:29). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him challenging and encouraging us to do the same. This is the only way to be part of God's reign of Love (Matthew 7:21).

4. The psalmist is aware of his sinfulness. He humbly seeks pardon, confident in God's merciful love. He appeals to God for forgiveness. We join the psalmist in praying: 'Remember me, not the sins of my youth, or the ways I have been unfaithful' (verse 7); 'Pardon my guilt, for it is great' (verse 11); 'Forgive my sins' (verse 18). Jesus is silent when these words appear in the psalm, for he was innocent of sin (see the reflection on Psalm 6 (pages 38-39). I have included these verses, but have put them in brackets. We need to pray them, and it is good to pray them in the silent company of Jesus who said that his mission was 'to call sinners to repentance' (Luke 5:32).

## Praying Psalm 26 (25) with Jesus

- <sup>1</sup>Pass judgment on me, O GOD, for I am living an honest life  
I trust in YOU, O GOD, without wavering. Put me to the test.
- <sup>2</sup>Probe my feelings. Purify my heart.
- <sup>3</sup>Your covenant love is ever before my eyes.  
I walk boldly in your faithfulness.
- <sup>6</sup>I wash my hands, and take my place, O GOD, around your altar.  
<sup>7</sup>I sing a song of thanksgiving, and recount your wondrous deeds.  
<sup>8</sup>I love your dwelling place, O GOD, the home where your glory abides.
- <sup>10</sup>In one hand the bloodthirsty have evil plots;  
the other is full of bribes.
- <sup>11</sup>I live an honest life. Rescue me and be gracious to me.
- <sup>12</sup>I continue to walk in an upright way.  
In the great congregation I will bless YOU, O GOD.

Omitted

- <sup>4</sup>I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;  
<sup>5</sup>I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.

<sup>9</sup>Do not sweep me away with sinners, nor my life with the bloodthirsty.

These verses do not have a place in the prayer of Jesus' disciples. The God Jesus knows does not 'sweep sinners away' (verse 9). His attitude towards sinners is very different from the psalmist. He sees his mission as 'sitting with sinners' (contrast verses 4-5), offering us the Love that alone can bring about repentance and open up for us the communion with him, and so with God, that we are yearning for. We need Jesus to convince us of this.

\* \* \* \* \*

This is an innocent person's appeal to God's judgment. The psalmist recognizes that cult (verses 6-8) and ethical behaviour must go hand in hand. He contrasts his behaviour with that of evildoers and pleads not to be judged along with them (verses 4-5, which echo Psalm 1, and verses 9-10). He asks God to test him and, where necessary, purify him (verse 2), and prays that God will help him remain innocent (verse 11). It is important to notice that while his conscience assures him that he is free of serious sin, the basis of his confidence is not his own innocence but God's faithfulness (verse 3), God's graciousness (verse 11). It is his trust in God that enables him to act morally and not waver (verse 1).

1. Some of the sentiments of the psalm could be part of Jesus' prayer. Jesus 'keeps God's covenant love before his eyes, and walks in God's faithfulness' (verse 3). He sings 'songs of thanksgiving and recounts God's wondrous deeds' (verse 7). He 'loves the house in which God dwells, the place where God's glory abides' (verse 8). Other parts we can pray in Jesus' company, as when we pray to God: 'Test me. Probe my feelings. Purify my heart' (verses 1-2).

2. Paul expresses some of the sentiments of this psalm:

'With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me' (1 Corinthians 4:3-4).

'This is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God – and all the more toward you' (2 Corinthians 1:12).

3. Praying verses 6-8 and 12 as Christians we think of baptism which cleanses us from sin and through which we are welcomed to join the assembly at the table of the Lord.

## Praying Psalm 27 with Jesus

- <sup>1</sup>**GOD is my light and my salvation; whom will I fear?  
GOD is the stronghold of my life; before whom will I shrink?**
- <sup>2</sup>**When evildoers attack to devour me,  
it is they, my adversaries and foes, who stumble and fall.**
- <sup>3</sup>**Though an army encamp against me, my heart will not fear.  
Though I have to engage in battle, even then I will trust.**
- <sup>4</sup>**One thing I ask of you, O GOD, for this I long:  
to live in your house all the days of my life,  
to behold your beauty while at prayer in your temple.**
- <sup>5</sup>**You hide me there in the hour of danger.  
There, set on a rock, concealed under the cover of your tent,**
- <sup>6</sup>**I offer sacrifices with shouts of joy, to the sound of music,  
praising GOD in song.**
- <sup>7</sup>**Hear me, O GOD, when I cry to you, be gracious and answer me!**
- <sup>8</sup>**Your voice within me says, "Come, seek my face!"  
It is your face that my heart seeks.**
- <sup>9</sup>**Do not hide from me. Do not turn your servant away.  
Do not reject me, for it is you who uphold me.**
- Do not cast me off. Do not forsake me, O God my saviour!**
- <sup>10</sup>**Even if my father and mother were to forsake me,  
I know you would welcome me.**
- <sup>11</sup>**Teach me your way, O GOD, lead me on a safe path.  
My enemies are waiting in ambush.**
- <sup>12</sup>**Do not give me up to their will.  
False witnesses have risen against me, breathing out violence.**
- <sup>13</sup>**I believe that I will see the goodness of GOD in the land of the living.**
- <sup>14</sup>**Hope in GOD. Be strong. Be brave.  
Put your trust in GOD.**

1. The psalmist finds himself assailed by evildoers determined to destroy him (verse 2). His 'enemies are waiting in ambush' (verse 11). 'False witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence' (verse 12). We reflected on the opposition suffered by Jesus when praying Psalm 3 (pages 25-26). Jesus warned his disciples to expect similar opposition.

2. The psalmist is endeavouring to counter his fears (verses 1 and 3) by recalling his special relationship with God, 'my light and my salvation ... the stronghold of my life' (verse 1), 'my help ... my Saviour' (verse 9), to whom he turns, confident of being welcomed: 'Even if my father and mother forsake me, GOD will welcome me' (verse 10). We reflected on Jesus' intimate communion with God when praying Psalm 16 (pages 72-73), an intimacy we are invited to share.

3. As we pray this psalm with Jesus, we share his faith that God is our light, and that this light comes to us especially through Jesus. In the Prologue to his Gospel, John writes: 'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world' (John 1:9). Jesus' mission is 'to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1:79). As Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, Matthew writes: 'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned' (Matthew 4:16). Jesus came 'as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness' (John 12:46).

Jesus calls us to be 'light for the world' (Matthew 5:14). Paul was enlightened by Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3). He was called 'to be a light for the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth' (Acts 13:47). He challenges the community in Rome: 'Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light' (Romans 13:12). He speaks of 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Corinthians 4:4). 'God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:4).

4. It is a psalm of deep trust: 'I will continue to trust' (verse 3); 'I will lift up my head' (verse 6); 'I believe' (verse 13). 'Hope in GOD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; hope in GOD!' (verse 14). Throughout his life, culminating in his agony and crucifixion, Jesus turned to his Father, resolving to do his will, come what may (Luke 22:41-44), and entrusting himself into his Father's hands (Luke 23:46). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7). Jesus invites us to the same trust, a gift from his heart to ours: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me' (John 14:1). 'Take courage; I have conquered the world' (John 16:33). Paul encourages the community in Corinth to 'keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love' (1 Corinthians 16:13-14). 'If God is for us, who is against us?' (Romans 8:31).



5. In his prayer the psalmist experiences an invitation from God to 'Come, seek my face' (verse 8). His response is an especially beautiful one: 'It is your face that my heart seeks' (verse 8). He wants to dwell all his life in God's presence: 'One thing I ask of GOD, this is what I seek: to live in the house of GOD all the days of my life, to behold God's beauty, to admire God's temple. For God will hide me and shelter me in the hour of danger; God will conceal me under the cover of the tent; and set me high on a rock' (verses 4-5).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we recall the scene of the Transfiguration, when 'his face shone like the sun' (Matthew 17:2). The Book of Revelation, speaking of the Glorified Jesus writes: 'In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force' (Revelation 1:16). We are invited to share the psalmist's longing, and that of Jesus. Likewise Paul: 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12). Gaze upon him as he gazes upon us.

The mission given us by Jesus is to reach out to all in love, in the hope that the Love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) will alert them to their deepest longing, a longing we all share: 'God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:4).

## Praying Psalm 28 (27) with Jesus

**<sup>1</sup>I call on you, GOD, my rock. Do not refuse to hear me.  
Do not be silent. Without you I will die.**

**<sup>2</sup>Hear the sound of my pleading, as I cry to you for help,  
as I lift up my hands in prayer toward your temple.**

**<sup>3</sup>Do not drag me away with the wicked,  
with those who speak peace to their neighbours,  
while mischief is in their hearts.**

**<sup>6</sup>Blessed are you, O GOD. You hear the sound of my pleading.**

**<sup>7</sup>YOU are my strength and my shield, in whom my heart trusts.  
When help comes to me, my heart exults,  
and with my song I give God thanks.**

**<sup>8</sup>YOU are the strength of the people,  
the saving refuge of God's anointed.**

**<sup>9</sup>Help your people, and bless your heritage.  
Sustain them. Be their shepherd for ever.**

Verses 4-5 are omitted from the Church's liturgy.

<sup>4</sup>Repay them according to what they do, the evil of their deeds.

Repay them according to their actions;

repay them as much as they deserve.

<sup>5</sup>Because they have no regard for what YHWH is doing,

for the work of God's hands,

God will break them down and not build them up again.

These verses present an image of God that could find no place in Jesus' prayer, and should not find a place in ours. The psalm is not used in the Church's lectionary, and the only time we find it in the Prayer of the Church is on Friday Week 1 in the Prayer during the Day, when verses 4 and 5 are omitted. It is not God who 'breaks sinners down'. It is not God who punishes. We do this to ourselves when we stubbornly and persistently block God's love out of our lives.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Christians we can hear Jesus crying out in his agony and on the cross (verses 1-2).

We can hear, too, his exultation, when God hears his cry (verses 6-8). We are invited to share this psalm with him.

## Praying Psalm 29 (28) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>Acclaim GOD, you beings of heaven.

Acclaim the glory and might of GOD.

<sup>2</sup>Acclaim GOD's glorious name.

Prostrate yourselves before GOD in GOD's holy temple.

<sup>3</sup>The voice of our glorious God  
thunders above the mighty waters!

<sup>4</sup>The voice of GOD, full of power.

The voice of GOD, full of splendour.

<sup>5</sup>The voice of GOD shatters the cedars of Lebanon,

<sup>6</sup>makes Lebanon leap like a calf,

Sirion like a young wild ox.

<sup>7</sup>The voice of GOD flashes flames of fire,

<sup>8</sup>shaking the wilderness of Kadesh.

<sup>9</sup>GOD's voice rends the oak tree,  
and strips the forest bare.

In your temple, O GOD, all cry: 'Glory!'

<sup>10</sup>For you rule over the mighty waters.

Your rule is for ever.

<sup>11</sup>Give strength to your people, O GOD.

Bless your people with peace.

This is a psalm to the cosmic God of the storm. The numinous quality of a tempest reveals the sacred. Though the expression 'Fear of GOD' is not found here, this psalm captures well the sense of awe and wonder that characterise our response to God's presence. We reflected on the expression 'Fear of GOD' on page 24 when praying Psalm 2.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we recall the following scene: 'A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm' (Matthew 8:24-26).

Matthew uses similar imagery to highlight the earth-shattering significance of Jesus' death: 'The earth shook, and the rocks were split' (Matthew 27:51).

The Book of Revelation uses the image of thunder to emphasise the power of God's Word: 'The mighty angel gave a great shout, like a lion roaring. And when he shouted, the seven thunders sounded' (Revelation 10:3). 'I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder' (Revelation 14:2). 'I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder peals, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready' (Revelation 19:6-7).

## Praying Psalm 30 (29) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>I will praise you, O GOD, for you have raised me up.

You have not let my foes gloat over me.

<sup>2</sup>I cried to you for help, O GOD.

<sup>3</sup>I was dying and you restored me to life.

<sup>4</sup>Sing praises to GOD, O you faithful,

give thanks as you shout aloud the holy name.

<sup>5</sup>GOD's favour lasts a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,

but joy comes with the dawn.

<sup>6</sup>When all was going well,

<sup>7</sup>I thought that, with God's powerful blessing,

I could stand as secure as a mountain.

Then you hid your face and I shook with fear.

<sup>8</sup>I cried out, 'O GOD! O GOD!' I begged, I pleaded:

<sup>9</sup>What good is there in my death, in my going down to the grave?

<sup>10</sup>GOD listened, was moved with pity, and came to my help.

<sup>11</sup>You turned my mourning into dancing.

You clothed me with joy.

<sup>12</sup>I witness to your glory. I praise you and will not be silent.

O GOD, I will never stop thanking you.

Omitted

<sup>5</sup>God's anger lasts but for a moment.

<sup>9</sup>Will the dust praise you?

Will it tell of your faithfulness?

The psalmist was facing death (verses 1-3). In keeping with the understanding of his times, he sees his sickness as an expression of 'God's anger' (verse 5), God's punishment for his sins. In Ancient Israel it was assumed that physical death is the end of life, so the dead cannot praise God or tell of God's faithfulness (verse 9). He bargains with God: why not preserve his life? That way God can continue to receive his praise. God has listened to his pleading and has restored his health (verse 2). He invites 'God's faithful ones' to join him in singing God's praises (verse 4).

1. Jesus does not see illness as a punishment from God (see the reflection on 'God's anger' under Psalm 2 pages 20-23). Nor does he share the psalmist's understanding of death. When the Sadducees tried to make fun of the idea of life after death, Jesus responded: 'You are wrong. You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God' (Mark 12:24). He goes on to remind them of God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush, when God declared: 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exodus 3:6). Jesus adds: 'He is the God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong' (Mark 12:27).

2. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him pleading with God, throughout his life, but especially in his agony and on the cross. Jesus knew what it is like to 'shake with fear' (verse 7). He is risen now and enjoying for all eternity the communion with God for which he longed. In the resurrection God 'restored him to life when he was going down into the grave' (verse 3). Joy came to him on the morning of the Resurrection (verse 5). God 'turned his mourning into dancing, and clothed him with joy' (verse 11), and Jesus 'never ceases from thanking God' (verse 12). Paul writes: 'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him' (Romans 6:9). The sequence sung in the Easter liturgy includes the following verse: 'Death with life contended: combat strangely ended. Life's own Champion slain, yet lives to reign.'

3. We, who hope to live with him in God's eternal embrace recall Jesus' promise: 'I am going to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also' (John 14:3). 'Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy ... you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (John 16:20-22). Paul writes: 'As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1 Corinthians 15:22).

## Praying Psalm 31 (30) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>In you, O GOD, I seek refuge. Let me not suffer shame.  
May your justice be my security.

<sup>2</sup>Come close to hear me! Come quickly to rescue me!  
Be my rock of refuge, my mighty stronghold.

<sup>3</sup>You are indeed my rock, my fortress.  
Go before me; be my guide.

<sup>4</sup>The net tightens around me.  
Release me, for you are my protector.

<sup>5</sup>Into your hands, O GOD, I commit my spirit.  
You have redeemed me, faithful God.

<sup>6</sup>I place my trust in you.  
<sup>7</sup>I exult and celebrate your covenant love.

You saw my affliction.  
You watched over me while I was in danger.  
<sup>8</sup>You did not put me at the mercy of the enemy.  
You set me on open ground.

<sup>9</sup>Be gracious to me, O GOD, for I am in distress.  
My eyes are swollen from grief. I am racked with pain.  
<sup>10</sup>Sorrow consumes my life. My days are filled with sighs.  
[Guilt saps my strength.] My bones waste away.

<sup>11</sup>My enemies mock me. I am the butt of their jokes.  
I am an object of dread to those who see me.  
They turn and run the other way.

<sup>12</sup>No one thinks of me. It is as though I was dead.  
I am of no use, like a discarded pot.

<sup>13</sup>I can hear the whispering of the crowd:  
'Attack from every side!' They scheme to take my life.

<sup>14</sup>But I trust in you, O GOD. You are my God.

<sup>15</sup>My life is in your hands.  
Rescue me from my enemies  
Ruthlessly they hunt me down.

<sup>16</sup>Show your servant your radiant face.  
In your covenant love save me.

<sup>19</sup>How abundant is your goodness  
to those who revere you,  
to those who find in you their refuge.  
Let everyone see how good you are.

<sup>20</sup>In the secret hiding place of your presence  
you protect us from their scheming.  
In your tent you hold us safe  
from the tongues of the violent.

<sup>21</sup>Blessed be GOD, who has shown me wonderful love.

<sup>22</sup>I said in my alarm, 'I am excluded from your presence.'  
But you heard my supplications when I cried to you for help.

<sup>23</sup>Love GOD, all you who are faithful.  
GOD preserves those who believe,  
but repays in full those who act in pride.

<sup>24</sup>Be strong, let your heart take courage, all you who hope in GOD.

Omitted

<sup>6</sup>You hate those who venerate worthless idols.

Verses 17-18 are omitted from the Church's liturgy.

<sup>17</sup>Do not let me be put to shame, YHWH, for having called on you;  
let the wicked be put to shame; let them go in silence to Sheol.

<sup>18</sup>Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently  
against the just with pride and contempt.

1. The psalmist has experienced a serious breakdown. He speaks of a 'net tightening around him' (verse 4). He speaks of his 'affliction' and of being in 'danger' (verse 7). He is 'in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul too and my body. My life is spent in sorrow, and my years go by in sighing; my strength fails because of my guilt, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, my neighbours enjoy themselves at my expense. I am an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street run the other way. No one thinks of me. It is as though I was dead; I have become like a useless pot' (verses 9-12). People are 'plotting to take my life' (verse 13). And, worst of all 'I said in my alarm: I am excluded from GOD's presence' (verse 22).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we can hear him echoing the painful words of the psalmist, even to feeling 'excluded from God's presence: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). Perhaps Jesus could even say: 'My strength fails because of my guilt' (verse 10). We know that Jesus was sinless (see Psalm 6, pages 38-39), but being sinless is not the same as feeling sinless. Jesus was always faithful in doing his Father's will (see page 11), but does this mean that he did not experience doubt as he struggled? (see Mark 14:35-36). When our experience mirrors that of the psalmist we can pray the psalm with Jesus, confident that he knows. He is with us, even when our suffering, unlike his, is the result of our sin.

2. The psalmist turns to God in his distress: 'Come close to hear me; come quickly to rescue me' (verse 2). He pleads with God: 'lead me and guide me' (verse 3). Only God can 'disentangle me from the net that tightens around me' (verse 4). He looks to God as his 'refuge, a strong fortress to save me' (verse 2). He trusts God (verses 6, 14). As we pray with Jesus, he teaches us to turn to God when we are in distress, as he did: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death' (Hebrews 5:7).

3. The psalmist invites those who are 'faithful', that is, those bonded to God by fidelity to the covenant (the hasidim, verse 23), to join him in thanking God for hearing his pleading and for rescuing him: 'I will exult and celebrate your covenant love because you have seen my affliction; you have watched over me while I was in danger. You have not put me at the mercy of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad, open place' (verses 7-8). 'O how abundant is the goodness that you have reserved for those who fear you, and have dispensed to those who take refuge in you, for everyone to see!' (verse 19). 'You heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help' (verse 22).

4. 'Show to your servant your radiant face' (verse 16). This is a frequent theme in the psalms and throughout the Scriptures: 'May GOD bless you and keep you; may GOD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; May GOD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace' (Numbers 6:24-26). See the reflection on seeking God's face in Psalm 27, page 96. Praying this with Jesus we think of the man who ran up to Jesus wanting to experience the life that he saw in Jesus and his companions. We are told that 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him' (Mark 10:21). We are left to imagine what passed between them in that gaze. All we know is that the man 'went away grieving'. He couldn't bring himself to leave behind what he saw as his wealth.

At the Last Supper 'Philip said to Jesus: Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied' (John 14:8). Like the psalmist he wanted to see God's 'radiant face' (verse 16). Jesus responded: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let him look upon us with love, and let us return Love's gazing, knowing in faith that 'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus, the Messiah' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

5. 'O how abundant is the goodness that you have reserved for those who fear you' (verse 19). We looked at 'Fear of God' in Psalm 2, page 23. We are not being told to be afraid of God. The psalmist is reminding us not to lose a sense of awe and wonder and reverence when God's Presence is revealed to us. This reverence is a gift from God and opens us to God's 'abundant goodness'.

6. The psalmist speaks of the security he experiences 'in the secret hiding place of your presence' (verse 20). He is referring to the 'temple'. As we pray this with Jesus we think of the community of Jesus' disciples, for we are sustained by the faith, hope and love that we find there. We think, too, of our own heart, remembering Jesus' words: 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever: the Spirit who abides with you, the Spirit who will be in you' (John 14:16-17). Jesus goes on to promise: 'I am coming to you ... You will see me, because I live and you will live' (John 14:18-19). 'My Father will love you and we will come to you and make our home in you' (John 14:23). The human heart is 'the secret hiding place of God's presence' (verse 20). In the human heart Jesus is in communion with God, the communion of love we call the Holy Spirit. We are invited to join him there. Jesus instructed his disciples: 'Whenever you pray, go into your room, and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret' (Matthew 6:6).

7. Perhaps the most profound prayer in this psalm is found in verse 5: 'Into your hands I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me, YHWH, faithful God'. The psalmist is suffering intensely. He chooses to believe in God's faithfulness, and so knows-in-faith that, however things may seem, God has redeemed him. Luke places these words on the lips of the dying Jesus: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). Compare the dying words of Stephen: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59).

8. The psalmist's final exhortation is: 'Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in GOD' (verse 24). Compare Paul: 'Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love' (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

## Praying Psalm 32 (31) with Jesus

- <sup>1</sup>Blessed and happy are they whose sins are forgiven.  
<sup>2</sup>Blessed and happy are they to whom GOD imputes no guilt,  
 whose spirit is no longer darkened by sin.  
<sup>3</sup>If you remain silent, you will waste away,  
<sup>4</sup>weighed down by sin day and night,  
 your strength dried up as in a summer drought.  
<sup>5</sup>If you acknowledge your sin and stop hiding your guilt,  
 if you confess your transgressions,  
 your God will forgive your sin and remove your guilt.  
<sup>6</sup>This is why the faithful pray to GOD in times of danger.  
 Even the rush of a mighty flood will not touch them.  
<sup>7</sup>You, O God, are my hiding place; you free me from danger.  
 When I cry for help you encircle me with love.  
<sup>8</sup>I will instruct you and show you the road you must follow.  
 I will watch over you and give you counsel:  
<sup>9</sup>'Do not be a horse or mule, without understanding,  
 needing bridle and bit before anyone can approach you.'  
<sup>10</sup>Many are the torments of the wicked,  
 but covenant love surrounds those who trust in GOD.  
<sup>11</sup>Be glad and rejoice in GOD, O you just.  
 Shout for joy, all you upright of heart.

1. The psalmist was profoundly depressed until he acknowledged his sin and pleaded with God for forgiveness. The experience of forgiveness brought profound joy and a sense of deep gratitude. He is advising others to follow his example. Paul quotes verses 1-2 in his Letter to the Romans (4:7-8).

2. The psalmist's spirit, the life-breath that has its source in God is 'no longer darkened by sin' (verse 2). Now he enjoys the purity that comes in communion with God. We might reflect on the following texts from the New Testament: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:8-9). 'Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective' (James 5:16).

3. Sin has its effects in our lives. The psalmist describes what was happening to him while he refused to face up to what he was doing. When he finally admitted his sin, he experienced God's forgiveness and release. John has the same message: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:8-9).

4. The psalmist came to know that when he cried for help God 'encircled him with love' (verse 7); 'covenant love surrounded him' (verse 10). We recall Jesus' words: 'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (Luke 15:7).

5. In verses 8-9 it is not clear whether it is the psalmist offering advice, or God. Either way, we still have work to do in making sure we do not fall back into sin. We remember Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery: 'I do not condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again' (John 8:11). Ultimately we will experience relief from tribulation caused by sin only if we humbly listen to God, who is 'watching over us and giving us counsel' (verse 8).

•••••

The message of this psalm is a simple one. We would do well to ponder it, and, to do so in the presence of Jesus, for he came to call sinners to repentance ( Mark 2:17). While he is without sin himself and so cannot pray verses 3-5 as in the psalm, he knew the consequences of those who did not seek forgiveness. With some adjustment of the text, instead of listening to the psalmist speaking from his experience - an experience that Jesus does not share – we can hear Jesus speaking to us, and pleading with us to acknowledge our sin.

We can say to him: 'You are my hiding place' (verse 7). As we cry for help he 'encircles us with love' (verse 7). He is 'watching over us and giving us counsel' (verse 8). He is assuring us that 'covenant love surrounds those who trust in God' (verse 10).

## Praying Psalm 33 (32) with Jesus

- <sup>1</sup>Ring out your joy to GOD, you lovers of justice.  
How right it is to praise!
- <sup>2</sup>Give thanks to GOD upon the lyre.  
Make music with the ten-stringed harp.
- <sup>3</sup>In a new song raise your voice to God.  
Play skilfully on the strings.
- <sup>4</sup>For the word of GOD is true.  
What God says, God does.
- <sup>5</sup>GOD, the lover of justice and truth,  
fills the earth with covenant love.
- <sup>6</sup>By GOD's word the heavens were made,  
and by God's breath all their starry host.
- <sup>7</sup>God collects and stores the waters of the sea.
- <sup>8</sup>Let all the inhabitants of the earth pay homage.  
Let them stand in awe of God.
- <sup>9</sup>GOD speaks and the world comes into existence.  
GOD commands and creatures spring into being.
- <sup>10</sup>GOD brings the designs of the nations to nothing,  
frustrating their plans.
- <sup>11</sup>It is GOD's designs that stand,  
the plans of God's heart from age to age.
- <sup>12</sup>Blessed and happy is the nation who worship GOD,  
the people whom GOD has chosen.
- <sup>13</sup>From heaven God sees all the inhabitants of the earth.
- <sup>14</sup>From where God sits enthroned,
- <sup>15</sup>God fashions the hearts of them all, knowing all their deeds.
- <sup>16</sup>Kings are not helped by their armies,  
nor soldiers because of their strength.
- <sup>17</sup>The warhorse is a vain hope for deliverance.  
Despite its strength, it cannot save.

- <sup>18</sup>GOD looks with love on those who believe,  
on those who count on God's covenant love
- <sup>19</sup>to deliver them from death, to keep them alive in famine.
- <sup>20</sup>With all our being we wait for GOD, our strength and our shield.
- <sup>21</sup>Our heart finds joy in GOD. We trust God's holy name.
- <sup>22</sup>Let your covenant love be upon us, O GOD,  
for we place all our hope in you.

1. The psalmist is inviting us to praise God the creator of the universe, and what God is doing in the world. Indeed, all that God does manifests God's 'faithfulness' (verse 4); 'the earth is full of the covenant love of God' (verse 5). He speaks of the power of God's word (verses 6 and 9). In the Prologue to the Gospel of John we read: 'All things came into being through God's Word. Without God's Word not one thing came into being' (John 1:3). 'God spoke, and it was; commanded, and it came to be' (verse 9). God created the universe simply by a word (Genesis 1:3). The heart of human beings, however, he fashions day by day as he gazes with love upon us.

2. The psalmist speaks of the 'plans of God's heart' (verse 11). Jesus is the central focus of the plans of God's heart. We are praying this psalm with him who is God's 'Word-made-flesh' (John 1:14), 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him' (Colossians 1:16).

3. The psalmist reflects on the power of the Creator. If God can command the sea to respect the land and not to encroach beyond the boundaries set by God, and can lock up the subterranean ocean, preventing the collapse of the pillars that support the earth, and allowing it only to well up to the surface in springs and rivers, then let everyone stand in awe at God's power (verse 8). As in the opening chapter of Genesis, God's will, God's Word, is enough to create divine order. How foolish are those who think that they can oppose God with their paltry plans (verse 10).

4. In reflecting on Psalm 2:11 we looked at the expression 'Fear of God' (verses 8 and 18) and saw that it is not the same as being afraid of God. Rather, it speaks of a sense of awe and wonder in relation to God's mysterious Presence. If there is an element of fear in this it is fear of our capacity to turn away from God's Presence. This understanding of 'Fear of God' is reinforced in this psalm. A regular feature of Hebrew poetry is making a statement in one line and following it by making the same point in a second line, using different words in order to depth the meaning. In verse 8 we read: 'Let all the earth fear GOD'. Then in the following line the meaning is explained: 'Let the inhabitants of the earth stand in awe'. Then in verse 18 we read: 'The eye of GOD is on those who fear God'. The following line explains: 'on those who hope in God's covenant love'.

5. The psalm ends in a prayer: 'Let your covenant love be upon us, O GOD, even as we place our hope in you' (verse 22).

## Praying Psalm 34 (33) with Jesus

- <sup>1</sup>I will bless GOD at all times, praise continually on my lips.  
<sup>2</sup>With thanksgiving I glory in GOD. Let the lowly hear and be glad.  
<sup>3</sup>Join with me in singing of GOD's greatness,  
together let us praise our God.  
<sup>4</sup>I sought and GOD replied, setting me free from all my fears.  
<sup>5</sup>Look to GOD, and be radiant.  
<sup>6</sup>This poor person cried, and GOD heard me,  
and saved me from every danger.  
<sup>7</sup>The angel of GOD encamps around those who revere GOD.  
<sup>8</sup>O taste and see that GOD is good.  
Blessed are you who take refuge in God.  
<sup>9</sup>Live in awe, you holy ones. You will want for nothing.  
<sup>10</sup>The rich and powerful suffer want and go hungry.  
Those who seek GOD lack nothing good.  
<sup>11</sup>Come children, listen to me; I will teach you to cherish GOD.  
<sup>12</sup>Do you desire life, and time to enjoy success?  
<sup>13</sup>Well then, keep your tongue from evil,  
and your lips from speaking deceit.  
<sup>14</sup>Finish with evil. Learn to do good. Seek peace, and pursue it.  
<sup>15</sup>The eyes of GOD are on the just, to attend to their cry for help.  
<sup>17</sup>Cry out for help. GOD hears, and rescues from every danger.  
<sup>18</sup>GOD is near to those whose hearts are broken,  
helping those whose spirits are crushed.  
<sup>19</sup>Many are the afflictions of the just, but GOD rescues from them all.  
<sup>20</sup>GOD keeps guard over all their bones; not one of them will be broken.  
<sup>21</sup>Evil brings death to the wicked.  
Those who hate the just will be condemned.  
<sup>22</sup>GOD redeems the lives of God's servants.  
No one who takes refuge in GOD will be rejected.

Omitted

<sup>16</sup>The face of YHWH confronts evildoers,  
to cut off all memory of them from the earth.

Recalling how God responded to his cry of distress, the psalmist is encouraging others to follow his example by placing their trust in God who is 'near to those whose hearts are broken, coming to the aid of those whose spirits are crushed' (verse 18).

1. As we pray this psalm with Jesus, we listen to the words as coming to us from the lips of the risen Jesus. Enjoying now eternal communion with God, his whole being 'glories in God' (verse 2), praising God with a heart overflowing with gratitude, for he continually sought God, and God 'answered him and delivered him from all his fears' (verse 4). It is his communion with God that matters most to Jesus and nothing gives him greater joy than to proclaim this to us, and invite us to 'sing of God's greatness, and together praise our God' (verse 3). As we join Jesus in praising God, we do so especially for God's gift to us of Jesus. As Paul says: 'We glory in God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 5:11).

2. Jesus invites us to 'look to God and be radiant' (verse 5). We think of Jesus as he looked to God at his transfiguration where his 'face shone like the sun' (Matthew 17:2). We are reminded of the depiction of the exalted Jesus whose 'eyes were like a flame of fire ... his face like the sun shining with full force' (Revelation 1:14,16). Paul writes: 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:16). 'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

3. Jesus assures us that God's protective Presence 'encamps around those who revere [fear] God' (verse 7). The word 'fear' here and in verses 9 and 11 needs careful attention. See our reflection on page 23 in relation to Psalm 2:11; also pages 109 and 145.

4. In a cult setting the reference in verse 8 ('taste and see') is to taking part in the communion sacrifice. 'Taste and see' can also refer to contemplation in which we savour the goodness of God. We find this verse echoed in the New Testament: 'Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good' (1 Peter 2:2-3).

5. The psalmist addresses the 'holy ones' (verse 9). Holiness in the Bible is an attribute reserved for God. Only God alone is holy. The assembled people are called 'holy' here, not because of any attribute they possess, but only because God, the Holy One has chosen to be present in their midst.

6. The psalmist assures us that 'the person who seeks after God lacks nothing good' (verse 10). Jesus tells us: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and everything else will be given you as well' (Matthew 6:33).



7. In verses 11-14 the psalmist instructs us in what to do if we 'desire life'. In the New Testament Peter includes these verses in his advice: 'Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. For "Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer" (1 Peter 3:9-12).

8. 'God keeps guard over the bones of the just; not one of them will be broken' (verse 20). They will experience suffering, but their 'bones' will not be broken. Just as bones survive death, so the nation will continue on. This truth was symbolically represented in the Passover ceremony in which no bone of the lamb was broken: 'You will not break any of its bones' (Exodus 12:46). John draws attention to this as he depicts Jesus on the cross: 'These things occurred so that scripture might be fulfilled: None of his bones will be broken' (John 19:36). Physical death cannot destroy Jesus' life, and it cannot destroy ours.

## Praying excerpts from Psalm 35 (34) with Jesus

Verses 1-3 portray God as a Warrior Lord. Verses 4-8 are omitted in the Church's Liturgy

<sup>9</sup>**I will rejoice in you, O GOD,  
celebrating what you have done for me.**

<sup>10</sup>**With all my heart I cry: 'O GOD, who is like you?  
You deliver the poor from those who are too strong,  
from those who take away what little they have.'**

<sup>11</sup>**Malicious witnesses rise up,  
accusing me of things about which I know nothing.**

<sup>12</sup>**They repay me evil for good, leaving me forlorn.**

<sup>13</sup>**I prayed for them with my head bowed on my bosom,**

<sup>14</sup>**as though I grieved for a friend or a brother.**

**I went about as one who laments for a mother,  
bowed down in mourning.**

<sup>15</sup>**But they gathered against me.**

**The mob took me by surprise, and together they assaulted me.**

<sup>16</sup>**Lacking piety, they mocked again and again, gnashing their teeth.**

<sup>17</sup>**Rescue me from their ravages.**

<sup>18</sup>**Then I will thank you. In the congregation I will praise you.**

<sup>19</sup>**Do not let my treacherous enemies rejoice over me,  
or those who hate me without cause enjoy themselves at my expense.**

<sup>22</sup>**O GOD, you see it all! Do not be silent!**

**God\*, do not be distant from me!**

<sup>23</sup>**Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence,  
for my cause, O my God!**

<sup>24</sup>**Vindicate me, O GOD, according to your justice,  
and do not let them rejoice over me.**

<sup>27</sup>**Let those who desire justice for me shout for joy and be glad,  
and say evermore, 'Great is GOD,  
who delights in the welfare of God's servant.'**

<sup>28</sup>**Then my tongue will tell of your justice  
and praise you all day long.**

## Omitted

<sup>1</sup>O God, contend with those who contend with me;  
fight against those who fight against me!  
<sup>2</sup>Take hold of shield and buckler. Rise up in my defence!  
<sup>3</sup>Take up the spear and block the way against my pursuers;  
say to me, 'I am your deliverance.'

Verses 4-8 are not in the Church's Liturgy

<sup>4</sup>Let those who seek after my life  
be put to shame and dishonour.  
Let those who devise evil against me  
be turned back and confounded.  
<sup>5</sup>Let them be like chaff before the wind,  
with the Angel of YHWH scattering them.  
<sup>6</sup>Let their way be dark and slippery,  
with the Angel of YHWH pursuing them.  
<sup>7</sup>For without cause they hid their net to catch me;  
for nothing they dug a pit to take my life.  
<sup>8</sup>Let ruin come on them unawares.  
And let the net that they hid ensnare them;  
let them fall into the pit, to their own ruin.

Verses 20-21 are not in the Church's Liturgy

<sup>20</sup>For they do not speak peace.  
They conceive deceitful words against those who are quiet in the land.  
<sup>21</sup>They open wide their mouths against me;  
they say, 'Aha, Aha, we saw you do it.'

Verses 25-26 are not in the Church's Liturgy

<sup>25</sup>Do not let them say in their hearts,  
'Aha, we have what we have always been wanting.'  
Do not let them say, 'We have devoured you.'  
<sup>26</sup>Let all those who rejoice at my calamity be put to shame and confusion;  
let those who exalt themselves against me  
be clothed with shame and dishonour.

This is an intense and insistent plea for God to intervene on the side of the psalmist against his enemies who are bringing false accusations against him (verse 11).

1. This psalm is not found in the Church's lectionary. In the Prayer of the Church it occurs only in the Office of Readings for Friday Week 1, and even there verses 4-8, 20-21 and 25-26 are omitted.

The image of God as a warrior king (verses 1-3) is not the way Jesus conceived of God. In verses 5-6, the psalmist speaks of the Angel of God pursuing and scattering those who devise evil against him. The 'Angel of God' is not an angel in the sense of a spiritual being carrying out God's will. Rather, it is a way of speaking of God acting, while preserving God's transcendence. Matthew speaks of the 'Angel of the Lord' in his prologue (Matthew 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19), and at the resurrection (Matthew 28:2). He is speaking of a revelation from God, as is Luke in his account of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:9), and in Acts 5:19, 8:26, 12:7, 23.

2. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we recall the terrible opposition he encountered (verses 11-12, 15-16), reaching its climax in his crucifixion (See the reflection on Psalm 3, pages 25-26). The cry: 'My God, do not be distant from me' (verse 22) echoes Jesus' cry from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34).

Through his own suffering Jesus experienced compassion for the oppressed: 'When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matthew 9:36); 'When Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick' (Matthew 14:14). See the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 33-34. Especially painful is the fact that the psalmist's enemies are people whom he has supported when they were in trouble (verses 13-14). How must Jesus have felt when the crowd shouted: 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' (John 19:6). Jesus did not call on God for vengeance. He offered his life to God 'in order to bring them to God' (1 Peter 3:18). From the cross we hear him pray: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34).

3. Jesus invites us to share his joy that God cares for the poor (verses 9-10 and 27). He speaks to us the words he spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper: 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete' (John 15:11). 'I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (John 16:22).

## Praying Psalm 36 (35) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**Sin speaks to sinners in the depths of their hearts.**

**God is watching them, but still they experience no fear.**

<sup>2</sup>**They so flatter themselves in their mind  
that they know not their guilt.**

<sup>3</sup>**In their hearts are mischief and deceit. All wisdom is gone.**

<sup>4</sup>**They plot the defeat of goodness as they lie on their beds.  
Committed to evil, they have no regrets.**

<sup>5</sup>**O GOD, your covenant love extends to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the skies.**

<sup>6</sup>**Your justice is like the high mountains,  
your judgments are like the great deep.  
You give life to all living beings.**

<sup>7</sup>**How precious is your covenant love, O God!  
All people may take refuge in the shade of your wings.**

<sup>8</sup>**They feast on the abundance of your house.  
You slake their thirst  
from the river of your delights.**

<sup>9</sup>**For with you is the fount of life.  
In your light we see light.**

<sup>10</sup>**Keep on loving those who know you,  
doing justice to upright hearts.**

<sup>11</sup>**Do not let the arrogant trample over me,  
or wicked hands assault me.**

<sup>12</sup>**See how those who do evil lie prostrate.  
Flung down, they are unable to rise.**

1. The psalmist gives us a graphic description of those who have no place in their lives for God (verses 1-4). They have allowed evil to enter and corrupt their hearts. As we ponder this psalm with Jesus we hear him warn us: 'It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come' (Mark 7:21). We pray to welcome God's love, which alone can purify our hearts, and we pray for the courage to allow this purification.

They should be terrified at what they are doing and at the path of destruction that they have chosen to follow - but they are not (verses 1-2). They have no sense of the sacred, and their way of life separates them from the deepest desires of their hearts.

2. The psalmist praises God's covenant love to those who take refuge in him (verses 5-9). He prays that this love will continue (verse 10). Jesus assures us that it will.

3. 'People take refuge in the shade of your wings' (verse 7). In the inner sanctuary of the temple was the mercy-seat, God's gold throne. It covered the ark of the covenant and was guarded by the cherubim whose wings extended over it. The people sought refuge in God's presence, shaded by these outstretched wings.

4. 'They feast on the abundance of your house, and you slake their thirst from the river of your delights. For with you is the fount of life' (verses 8-9). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him invite us: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:37-38). The heart of Jesus is the source of this life-giving water. As he said to the Samaritan woman: 'If you knew the gift of God, you would ask me and I would give you living water ... The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:10, 14). The Book of Revelation speaks of 'the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city' (Revelation 22:1).

5. 'In your light we see light' (verse 9). In the Prologue to his gospel John writes: 'In God's Word was life, and the life was the light of all people' (John 1:4). We hear Jesus say: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). 'I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness' (John 12:46). Let us ask Jesus to light the lamp of his love in our hearts.

God's love reaches out to everyone. It is received by those who 'know' God (verse 10). The psalmist is not speaking here of those whose knowledge of God is correct – though erroneous ideas about God are an obstacle. Nor is he speaking about those who know about God. Throughout the Bible, knowing refers to the knowing of intimate communion, knowing in love. We can be in intimate communion without realising that it is God with whom we are in communion. It is possible to know about God or have correct ideas about God (in so far as this is possible), but not be in communion with God. God is offering love unconditionally, but we are free to welcome or reject this love. If we do not welcome it, and are unwilling to be drawn into intimate communion with God, we are unable to receive the 'covenant love' (verses 7 and 10), so faithfully and so persistently offered to us.

## Reflecting on Psalm 37 (36) in Jesus' Company

<sup>1</sup>Do not fret because people act badly;  
do not envy those who do wrong.

<sup>2</sup>They wither like grass, and fade like the green of the fields.

<sup>3</sup>Trust in GOD, and do good, cultivate faithfulness.

<sup>4</sup>Let GOD be your delight,  
and you will be given what your heart is seeking.

<sup>5</sup>Commit your life to GOD. Trust God to act on your behalf.

<sup>6</sup>and your justice will shine forth like the dawn,  
your judgments like the sun at noon.

<sup>7</sup>Rest in GOD and wait patiently.

Do not fret over those who prosper  
as they carry out their evil schemes.

<sup>8</sup>Restrain your anger. Control your rage.  
Fretting leads only to evil.

<sup>11</sup>It is the meek who will inherit the land,  
and enjoy abundant prosperity.

<sup>12</sup>The wicked plot against the just, and gnash their teeth.

<sup>13</sup>Their end is near.

<sup>14</sup>The wicked unsheathe the sword and draw the bow  
to bring down the poor and needy,  
to kill those who live upright lives.

<sup>15</sup>Their sword will enter their own heart, their bow will be broken.

<sup>16</sup>Better the few things owned by the just  
than to be wealthy and do evil.

<sup>17</sup>The power of the wicked will be broken.  
GOD sustains the just.

<sup>18</sup>GOD watches over the lives of the blameless;  
their heritage will go on for ever.

<sup>19</sup>They are not put to shame in evil times,  
in the days of famine they have all they need.

<sup>20</sup>The wrongdoers will pass away like the flowers, vanish like smoke.

<sup>21</sup>The wicked borrow, and do not repay.  
The just are generous and keep giving.

<sup>22</sup>Those blessed by GOD will inherit the land.

<sup>23</sup>GOD makes our steps secure,  
holding us in love as we journey through life.

<sup>24</sup>We might stumble, but we will not fall,  
for GOD is holding us by the hand.

<sup>26</sup>The just are always giving liberally and lending,  
and their children will be blessed.

<sup>27</sup>Avoid evil, and do good,  
and you will always have a home.

<sup>28</sup>For GOD loves justice,  
and will not forsake the faithful.

<sup>30</sup>The just utter wisdom, the judgments they pronounce are true.

<sup>31</sup>They carry the law of God in their hearts. They do not falter.

<sup>32</sup>The wicked watch for the just, seeking to kill them.

<sup>33</sup>GOD will not abandon the just to their power,  
or let them be condemned when they are brought to trial.

<sup>34</sup>Hope in GOD. Keep to the way of Love.

<sup>37</sup>Observe the blameless, keep your eyes on the upright.  
Prosperity is for the peacemakers.

<sup>38</sup>There is no future for those who cut themselves off from God.

<sup>39</sup>The deliverance of the just comes from GOD,  
their refuge in time of trouble.

<sup>40</sup>GOD strengthens them and rescues them from the wicked,  
and saves them, because they take refuge in God.

Omitted

<sup>9</sup>For the wicked will be cut off.

<sup>10</sup>Wait but a moment: the irreligious are no more.  
Search them out: they are not there.

Omitted

- <sup>25</sup>I have been young, and now am old,  
and I have never seen the just forsaken or their children begging bread.
- <sup>35</sup>I have seen the wicked puffed up with pride,  
towering like a luxuriant cedar.
- <sup>36</sup>I passed by again, and they were no more;  
though I sought them, they could not be found.

This is not a prayer. It is a manifesto on how to live in an unjust world. The psalmist calls on his age and experience (verses 25 and 35) to contrast two groups of people and God's judgment on their lives. Through greed, neglect, and historical events, the psalmist finds himself in a society in which some have grown rich at the expense of others. How are the dispossessed to act, and in what kind of project are those concerned for the dispossessed to be involved? Where is God in all this and how are people to do God's will? The psalm is a call not to lose heart when the irreligious seem to prosper, but to continue to trust in God and to wait upon God's grace. Justice will prevail. Not surprisingly, if we want to listen to Jesus, rather than the psalmist, we will need to make some adjustments to the text.

1. The psalmist speaks of 'bad people'/'wrongdoers' (verse 1). Throughout the psalm he builds up a picture of their lives and the evil for which they are responsible. They plan evil and carry it out (verses 7 and 12). They are 'irreligious', having no regard for God or God's will (verses 10, 28, 34 and 38). They are living in opulence (verses 7 and 16). They tower over others like a luxuriant cedar (verse 35).

He also describes what will happen to them. They will fade and wither (verses 2 and 10). Their day of retribution is coming (verse 13). Their sword will enter their own heart (verse 15). They will perish - vanish (verse 20). They will be cut off (verse 22). They will be no more (verse 36). They will be altogether destroyed (verse 38).

2. By contrast, there are those who 'trust in God and do good' (verse 3). They cultivate faithfulness (verse 3). They commit their life's journey to God (verse 5). They rest in God (verse 7). They hope in God (verse 9). They are meek (verse 11). They are poor and needy, but live good lives (verse 14). They are generous and keep giving (verses 21 and 26). They are blessed by God (verse 22). They are just (verse 29). They keep to God's way (verse 34). They are people of peace (verse 37).

The psalmist speaks of their reward. God will give them their heart's desire (verse 4). God will act on their behalf (verse 5). God upholds them (verse 17). Their heritage will last for ever (verse 18). They will have abundance (verse 19). They will not lack bread (verse 25). Their children will be for them a blessing (verse 26). They will always have a home (verse 27). They will experience salvation and liberation from God (verse 39). The central refrain of the psalm is that they will inherit the land promised to them by God: 'The meek will inherit the land' (verse 11; see also verses 3, 9, 18, 22, 27, 29). Jesus quotes this verse in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:5).

As we pray this psalm (especially verses 28-29) with Jesus we recall Jesus' parable concerning God's ultimate judgment of what matters in life. There are those who give food to the hungry, and drink to the thirsty, who welcome strangers and clothe the naked, who care for the sick and visit those in prison (Matthew 25:35-36). They will inherit 'God's kingdom' (25:34), 'eternal life' (25:46). And there are those who do not care for others in this way (Matthew 25:42-44). If they obstinately persist in their behaviour, the consequence for them will be separation from God (25:41 and 46).

3. The psalmist assures 'those who trust in God and do good' (verse 3): 'God will make your justice shine forth like the dawn, and your judgments like the noonday sun' (verse 6). God will act in favour of the oppressed; and will vindicate those who commit themselves to God. God is the one who liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt, led them through the desert and gave them the Promised Land. But there are some who, because of the injustice of the powerful, are not enjoying the land that is theirs. They are unjustly dispossessed. God will redeem them: 'God helps them and rescues them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in God' (verse 40). 'Their heritage will last forever' (verse 18). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him say: 'Believe in me, and even though you die, you will live' (John 11:25).

4. God will lead us on our journey and sustain us (verse 17). 'Our steps are made firm by God, when he delights in our way. Though we stumble, we will not fall headlong, for God holds us by the hand' (verses 23-24). 'The law of their God is in their hearts. Their steps do not slip' (verse 31). 'Wait for God, and keep to his way' (verse 34). 'God will not forsake the faithful' (verse 28).

Hear Jesus saying: 'Let God be your delight and you will be given what your heart is seeking' (verse 4). 'Commit your life to God' (verse 5). 'Rest in God and wait patiently' (verse 7). 'We journey through life, held in God's heart' (verse 23). 'God is holding us by the hand' (verse 24). 'You will always have a home' (verse 27). 'Hope in God. Keep to God's way' (verse 34).

5. 'I have been young, and now am old, and I have never seen the just forsaken or their children begging bread' (verse 25). It is hard not to think that the psalmist was looking at his world through rose-coloured glasses. Be that as it may, he is setting out to encourage his contemporaries to trusting abandonment to divine providence.

6. There are a number of parallels between Psalm 37 and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10). 'Blessed and happy are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed and happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed and happy are the meek, for they will inherit the land. Blessed and happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for justice will prevail. Blessed and happy are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed and happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed and happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed and happy are those who are persecuted because they are just, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

## Psalm 38 (37) Listening to Jesus

The psalm is composed as a prayer. I have adapted it to have Jesus speaking to us as we listen.

- <sup>1</sup>God is rebuking you, but not in anger;  
disciplining you, but not in wrath.
- <sup>2</sup>The arrows of Love are striking you,  
the hand of Love lies heavy upon you.
- <sup>3</sup>No part of your flesh is free from wounds  
because of your indignation.  
There is no sound bone in your body because of your sin.
- <sup>4</sup>Yes, your guilty deeds are overwhelming you  
their burden too heavy for you to bear.
- <sup>5</sup>Your wounds grow foul and fester because of your folly.
- <sup>6</sup>I know you are utterly bowed down and prostrate,  
mourning all day long.
- <sup>7</sup>You are burning with fever. No part of your body is free from pain.
- <sup>8</sup>You are utterly spent and crushed.  
You groan because of the anguish in your heart.
- <sup>9</sup>God\* knows all your longing;  
your sighing is not hidden from God.
- <sup>10</sup>Your heart is pounding, your strength is spent;  
the light of your eyes is gone.
- <sup>11</sup>Friends and neighbours avoid you, keeping their distance.
- <sup>12</sup>Those who seek your life lay snares for you.  
Those who seek to hurt you speak of ruin.  
They think up treachery all the day long.
- <sup>13</sup>Like the deaf who cannot hear, like the dumb unable to speak,  
<sup>14</sup>you have no words for your defense.
- <sup>15</sup>In GOD you can hope. God will answer you.

- <sup>16</sup>They are gloating over you,  
those who make fun of you when you stumble.
- <sup>17</sup>On the point of collapsing, you have no relief from your pain.
- <sup>18</sup>Confess your guilt.  
It is your sin that fills you with dismay.
- <sup>19</sup>Your enemies are strong.  
There are many who hate you for no reason.
- <sup>20</sup>They render you evil for good;  
they attack you for seeking what is right.
- <sup>21</sup>Your God will not forsake you. Your God is close.
- <sup>22</sup>God\* is hastening to come to your aid.

The psalmist acknowledges his sin (verses 3-4, 5 and 18), but cries out to God not to leave him in such terrible physical and mental anguish. This psalm is unusual in the power of its description of suffering. He assumes, according to the mentality of the time, that suffering is willed by God, and therefore must be a form of punishment for sin (verse 3). He asks forgiveness.

1. As with Psalm 32, so here, this is not a prayer that the sinless Jesus could pray (On Jesus' sinlessness see the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 33-34). We can adapt the psalm. Instead of listening to the psalmist address God, we can listen to Jesus addressing us, knowing that he will hold us in love as we acknowledge our sinfulness and plead for God's compassion.

2. The psalmist is not objecting against being rebuked and disciplined, but against the extent of it, expressed here in terms of God's anger (verse 1; on God's 'anger' see the reflection on Psalm 2, pages 20-23).

3. He is confident that in spite of his sin God knows that his deepest yearning is for communion with God (verse 9).

4. Having described his sufferings, he spends the rest of the psalm, beginning in verse 11, speaking of how other people are relating to him. They are afraid of the contagion that they would contract from contact with one with whom, in their eyes, God is obviously displeased. They take the occasion to threaten and defame him (verse 12).

## Praying Psalm 39 (38) in Jesus' company

<sup>1</sup>I said to myself: 'I will watch my behaviour  
lest I sin with my tongue.  
I will control what I say when confronted by the wicked.'

<sup>2</sup>I was silent and held myself back, but to no avail.  
The prosperity of the wicked stirred my grief,  
<sup>3</sup>my heart was burning within me.

While I was attempting control, the fire inside me blazed.  
I found myself unable to hold my tongue.

<sup>4</sup>'GOD, what will become of me? How fleeting is my life!

<sup>5</sup>A short span you have given me.  
My days are as nothing in your sight.

*We human beings are no more than a breath.*

<sup>6</sup>We pass away like a shadow, our life passes by.  
We amass possessions, not knowing who will enjoy them.

<sup>7</sup>So what am I waiting for, my God\*? My hope is in you.

<sup>8</sup>Free me from all my transgressions.  
Do not make me the taunt of the fool.

<sup>9</sup>I am silent. I do not open my mouth,  
since this is all your doing.

<sup>10</sup>Stop tormenting me.  
I am worn down by the blows of your hand.

<sup>11</sup>You chastise us in our guilt,  
like a moth consuming what we treasure.  
*We human beings are no more than a breath.*

<sup>12</sup>Hear my prayer, O GOD, attend to my cry.  
Do not ignore my tears. For I am your guest,  
a stranger passing by like all who have gone before me.

<sup>13</sup>Look away that I may breathe again,  
before I depart and am no more.'

The psalmist is facing death. He tries to restrain himself but cannot, and bursts into a cry to God for respite. It is a tragic reflection on the human condition. The tension is not resolved and the reflection is indecisive. Its key theme is expressed in the refrain: 'We human beings ('adam) are no more than a mere breath (hebel)' (verses 5 and 11). There is an allusion here to the story of Cain and Abel (Hebrew 'hebel'). Like Abel, we are here for a brief moment, and our life is over like a sigh, like a 'passing breath' (verse 5) that is here one moment and gone the next.

He assumes that it is God who determines how long we live ('It is you who have done it' verse 9), so, since God is never unjust, his 'short span of life' (verse 5) must be punishment for his sins. The guilt of his transgressions lies heavily upon him (verses 8 and 11). Tragically, his focus is on himself rather than on God, and so his hope is fragile. He wants God to turn his attention elsewhere and leave him living for a while yet (verse 13). He gives no indication of a belief in a life of communion with God beyond physical death.

1. Jesus' understanding of the way God relates to the human condition is very different from that of the psalmist. This, along with his sinlessness and his belief in God's gift of life after death, means that Psalm 39 is not a prayer that Jesus could make his own. However, there are aspects of the psalmist's experience that Jesus shared. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews compares Jesus' shedding of blood to that of Abel (Hebrews 12:24). Like the psalmist Jesus pleaded with his Father to save him from death. In his struggle in Gethsemane was he pleading for more time to complete his mission? Like the psalmist (verse 7) Jesus placed his hope in God. Unlike the psalmist, Jesus reached a place of peace and commitment to continue his mission of love, come what may, for he knew-in-faith that ultimately all that mattered was to do his Father's will ('Not my will but yours be done' Mark 14:36). Unlike the psalmist Jesus knew that physical death is not the end of life. He was passing from this world and going to the Father: 'I am coming to you' (John 17:13).

2. We can hear Jesus praying: 'GOD, what will become of me? How fleeting is my life! A short span you have given me. My days are as nothing in your sight. We human beings are no more than a breath. We pass away like a shadow, our life passes by' (verses 4-6). 'My God, my hope is in you' (verse 7). 'Hear my prayer, O GOD, attend to my cry' (verse 12).

3. For the rest we can pray the psalm in Jesus' company, knowing that he understands our fears, as he reminds us of our Father's longing for us to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10).

## Praying Psalm 40 (39) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>I anxiously waited for YOU, O GOD.

At long last you stooped down to me.

You heard my cry

<sup>2</sup>and drew me up from the desolate pit.

From the miry bog you set me on solid ground.

<sup>3</sup>You put in my mouth a new song, a song of praise.

Witnessing this, many will be moved

to put their trust in YOU.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed and happy are those who place their trust in YOU, O GOD,  
who are not seduced by idols, nor caught up in illusions.

<sup>5</sup>How many wonderful things you have done, O GOD.

How many graces you have thought up to favour us.

There is no one like you.

I am tempted to recount them,

but they surpass anything I could say.

<sup>6</sup>Sacrifice and offerings you do not desire.

You want a listening ear.

For burnt or sin offerings you have not asked.

<sup>7</sup>And so I say: 'Here I am.'

In the scroll of the book it is written of me

<sup>8</sup>that I am to carry out your will. O my God, I long to do it.

Your law is etched in the depths of my heart.

<sup>9</sup>I proclaim the good news of your justice

to the great congregation.

See, I have not restrained my lips.

You know this, O GOD.

<sup>10</sup>I have not kept your justice hidden within my heart.

I have spoken of your faithfulness and your saving help.

I have not concealed your covenant love and your faithfulness  
from the great congregation.

<sup>11</sup>O GOD, do not withhold from me

your tender compassion.

Let your covenant love and your faithfulness  
always keep me safe.

<sup>12</sup>I am beset with countless evils.

[My guilty deeds have overtaken me, until I cannot see.

They are more than the hairs of my head].

My heart sinks within me.

<sup>13</sup>Free me, O GOD. Hasten to help me.

<sup>16</sup>May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.

May those who love your saving presence keep saying,

'GOD is great!'

<sup>17</sup>As for me, I am poor and needy, but God (the Lord) thinks of me.

You are my helper, my deliverer. O my God, do not delay.

Verses 14-15 are not in the Church's liturgy.

<sup>14</sup>Let all those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion.

Let those who desire to harm me be repulsed and dishonoured.

<sup>15</sup>Let those who say to me 'Aha! Aha!' remain aghast because of their shame.



The psalmist sings in praise of God who has 'drawn me from the desolate pit'. His need for help continues and he admits that it is his own sins that are largely responsible for his suffering (verse 12). He has come to see that what God wants from him, more than anything else, is that he embrace God's will in his heart (verses 7-8).

While Jesus cannot pray the section of verse 12 in brackets, we can pray it and it is good to pray it in Jesus' company.

1. We join Jesus as he cries out to God in Gethsemane and from the cross (verses 1-2, 11 and 17; see reflections on Psalm 22, pages 78-81). We share his pain as he continues to reach out to those who, in rejecting him, are rejecting his Father, closing their hearts to God's longing to free them from their 'idols' and 'illusions' (verse 4).

2. We join Jesus, too, as he rejoices when people, so often the simple people, open their hearts to welcome God whose heart longs to embrace them (verses 3, 5 and 16): 'Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because ... you have revealed these things to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will"' (Luke 10:21).

3. The psalmist declares his commitment to carry out God's call to witness to his personal experience of God's justice and uprightness, truth and saving action, covenant love and fidelity, and God's compassion (verses 6-10). God has dug through his blocked ear to open up a path for his word into the very centre of the psalmist's being. In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)' (Hebrews 10:5-7). On Jesus' commitment to God's will see page 11. For a reflection on obedience see Psalm 123, pages 393-397.

4. The psalmist knows that the cult is not enough for him (verse 6). God is calling him to a special vocation. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus twice quotes the following from Hosea: 'I desire covenant love, not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6:6; quoted Matthew 9:13 and 12:5).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us thank him for revealing to us a God of love. Let us pray to see whatever is blocking us from listening to God's Spirit in our hearts, revealing God's loving will to us. Let us renew our commitment to doing God's will.

## Praying Psalm 41 (40) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**Blessed and happy are those who care for the poor.**

**When times are hard, GOD will rescue them.**

<sup>2</sup>**GOD protects them, preserves their life,  
and blesses them in the land.**

**GOD will not give them up  
to the will of their enemies,**

<sup>3</sup>**but on their sick bed will sustain them,  
restoring them from sickness to health.**

<sup>4</sup>**I said, 'GOD, be gracious to me; heal me.'**

<sup>5</sup>**Enemies wish evil upon me:**

**'When will you die? When will your name be forgotten?'**

<sup>6</sup>**When they come to see me, they pretend to be friendly  
but they are planning mischief in their hearts.**

**When they leave, they gossip about me.**

<sup>7</sup>**All who hate me gang up and plot evil against me.**

<sup>8</sup>**They say: 'He has contracted an incurable sickness;  
Confined to bed he will never rise.'**

<sup>9</sup>**Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,  
who shared my table, has abandoned me.**

<sup>10</sup>**But you, O GOD, be gracious to me. Restore me to health,  
so that I can show them how wrong they are.**

<sup>11</sup>**I will know that you are pleased with me  
when my enemies do not triumph over me.**

<sup>12</sup>**You have restored my health.**

**Keep me in your presence for ever.**

<sup>13</sup>**Blessed be GOD, the God of Israel,  
for ever and ever. Amen! Amen!**

1. The psalmist has contracted what appears to be an 'incurable disease' (verse 8). According to the mentality of the time, it was assumed that sickness must be God's will, and, since God is just, sickness was thought to be punishment for sin (verse 4). This was still the common assumption in Jesus' time, an assumption which Jesus challenged: 'As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him' (John 9:1-3). Sickness and death are part of the human condition. What Jesus' ministry reveals is that Love, when welcomed in faith, can bring a measure of healing.

2. The psalmist begins his prayer with a profound act of trust in God, who 'will sustain those who care for the poor on their sick bed, and will restore them from sickness to health' (verse 3). The psalmist knows he can call on God's graciousness, and appeal to be healed (verse 4). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him encouraging us in our sickness: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me' (John 14:1).

3. The psalmist's enemies and friends all share his assumption on the connection between sin and suffering. The psalmist's main concern seems to be that he does not want his enemies to see in his illness a vindication of their judgment of him.

4. His most acute pain is that 'even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who shared my bread, has abandoned me' (verse 9). This pain is echoed in the New Testament when Jesus is betrayed by one of the Twelve: 'The one who shared my bread has walked away from me' (John 13:18).

5. The psalm ends with gratitude. The psalmist's prayer has been answered: 'You have restored my health and you will keep me in your presence forever' (verse 12).

Verse 13 does not belong to Psalm 41. It marks the conclusion to Book I of the psalms.

As we pray this prayer with Jesus, let us invite him to touch our vulnerability and pain, trusting that he has compassion for us. Let us listen as he invites us: 'Come to me, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your soul' (Matthew 11:28-29).

## Praying Psalm 42 (41) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**As the deer longs for running streams,  
so my whole being longs for you, my God.**

<sup>2</sup>**With all the yearning of my soul I thirst for God, the living God.  
When will I come and see your face?**

<sup>3</sup>**My tears have been my food by day and by night,  
as I hear it said all the day long: 'Where is your God?'**

<sup>4</sup>**These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:  
how I would lead the rejoicing crowd into the house of God,  
amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving, the throng wild with joy.**

<sup>5</sup>**Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me?  
Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,  
my Saviour and my God.**

<sup>6</sup>**My soul is cast down within me as I think of you,  
from the region of the Jordan and Mount Hermon,  
from the hill of Mizar.**

<sup>7</sup>**Deep calls to deep in the roaring of the waters.  
All your waves and your billows crash over me.**

<sup>8</sup>**By day GOD sends forth such gracious love.  
By night I keep singing, pleading to the living God.**

<sup>9</sup>**I say to God, my rock: 'Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I go mourning, oppressed by the foe?'**

<sup>10</sup>**With cries that pierce me to the heart my enemies revile me,  
saying to me all the day long: 'Where is your God?'**

<sup>11</sup>**Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me?  
Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,  
my Saviour and my God.**

1. We begin praying this psalm by listening to Jesus as he expresses his longing in the words of the opening two verses: 'As the deer longs for running streams, so my whole being longs for you, my God. With all the yearning of my soul I thirst for God, the living God. When will I come and see the face of God?' It was this longing that drew Jesus to the Jordan to be baptised by John, a longing that opened his soul to hear God's response: 'You are my Son. I love you. I delight in you' (Mark 1:11). It was this longing that drew him into the wilderness to depth the meaning of God's response, for himself and for his mission (Matthew 4:1-11). It was this longing that kept calling him into prayer. He needed to be alone with God (see the reflection on Jesus' prayer in Psalm 4, page 31). Because of the intimacy of his communion with God Jesus could say: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:11). As his death drew near, Jesus could say to his disciples: 'I am going to the Father' (John 16:17), and to God: 'I am coming to you' (John 17:13). John concludes his account of Jesus' passion with the words: 'When Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said: "I am thirsty" (John 19:28), always thirsting for closer communion with God.

It is because of his own thirst that he recognised this same thirst in others. He recognised it in Andrew and his companion who followed Jesus to see where he lived (John 1:37-40). This was the thirst experienced by the people celebrating a wedding in Cana. Jesus' mother sensed this thirst when, representing every mother who longed for the coming of the Messiah, she said to Jesus: 'they have no wine' (John 2:3). This was the thirst that drew Nicodemus to Jesus. He wanted something more than his inherited religion could give him. His thirst was for 'eternal life' (John 3:16). This is what John the Baptist yearned for. He saw himself as the best man rejoicing in the presence of Jesus, the bridegroom (John 3:29). Jesus sensed this thirst in the Samaritan woman whom he encountered at Jacob's well: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you "Give me a drink", you would have asked him and he would have given you living (life-giving) water' (John 4:10). He went on to say: 'The water that I give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14).

The paralysed man at the pool of Beth-zatha wanted to find healing in the pool. Jesus knew he was longing for something more and made it possible for him to 'walk again' (John 5:9). On hearing of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew to a deserted place to be alone. The people joined him. Jesus 'was moved with compassion for them and cured their sick' (Matthew 14:14). Mark writes: 'Jesus was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things' (Mark 6:34). They were hungry. Jesus knew that their hunger was for more than food: 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, the food that I will give you' (John 6:27). 'The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (John 6:33). 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so you will live because of me' (John 6:57).

Jesus was in the temple for the celebration of the New Year Festival. It was the final day of the celebration, the Day of Rejoicing in the Torah, a festival of water and light. Here again, drawing on his own experience, Jesus wanted to connect with people's deepest yearnings. He cried out: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart (the heart of Jesus and the heart of the disciple) will flow rivers of living water"' (John 7:37-38). John goes on to explain: 'He said this about the Spirit which believers in him were to receive' (John 7:39).

John recounts the story of the man who was born blind. It is a story of enlightenment. He sees after he washes in the pool of Siloam (John 9:7) – a washing that is a symbol of baptism into the community of Jesus' disciples.

Jesus is deeply moved by the death of his friend Lazarus (John 12:33-35). Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary, want their brother to live. In this, the final sign, we are being invited to believe that physical death is not the end of our longing or of our life of communion with God. We will cast off the burial cloths and be welcomed into eternal life: 'Unbind him. Let him go free' (John 11:44).

At the Last Supper, 'Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end' (John 13:1): 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you' (John 14:1-2). Philip longed to see God: 'Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied' (John 14:8). Jesus responded by telling Philip that to see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9), because: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:10). Jesus promised that God would send his Spirit to dwell in us (John 14:17). This is the Spirit promised in John 7. Moreover Jesus and his Father would come to us and make their home in us (John 14:23). Jesus knew that our thirst is ultimately a thirst to enjoy the intimacy of God's life. Hence his prayer: 'I ask that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17:20-21), 'that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26).

We draw this reflection to a close by focusing on Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb. She was surprised to find the tomb empty, and ran to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple who ran to the tomb, and, finding it as Mary Magdalene had told them, they 'returned to their homes' (John 20:10). Not Mary, who remained at the tomb, weeping (John 20:11). It was because of her intense longing to see Jesus that she alone 'saw' him (John 20:18), when he called her by name (John 20:16).

In The Book of Revelation we read: 'The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift' (Revelation 22:17).

2. Verse 3 ('My tears have been my food by day and by night, as I hear it said all the day long: 'Where is your God?') takes us to Gethsemane and Calvary. At the Last Supper Jesus assured his disciples that even though they would leave him: 'I am not alone. The Father is with me' (John 16:32). In Gethsemane he continued to trust God. He continued to commit himself to do his Father's will (Mark 14: 36).

On Calvary Jesus cried: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) as he heard the leaders scoffing: 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, God's chosen one' (Luke 23:35). But he could still pray: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46).

3. The psalmist has experienced God's presence. Now he is exiled from the sanctuary and his priestly ministry and misses the experience of closeness (verse 4). He experiences God as absent, but he is like a timid female deer, alert to the scent of the life-giving water for which she longs. We think of the water flowing from the right side of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34), and, once again, recall his promise: 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38). We long to see the face of God (see the reflection on Psalm 31, pages 131-132). Paul assures us: 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (1Corinthians 13:12). The Book of Revelation assures us: 'They will see his face' (Revelation 22:4).

4. The psalmist questions his sadness: 'Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me? Hope in God. I will continue to praise you, my Saviour and my God' (verse 5), which acts as a refrain (see verse 11). God is called 'Saviour'. God does not prevent us from having hurtful experiences (often brought about by us and others refusing to obey God), but God does come to us with God's saving help, sustaining us to go through the difficulties, and maintaining for us the divine communion in which life consists.

5. The psalmist gives expression to the sadness that comes over him as he describes being overwhelmed with forces of chaos, made all the more painful by the taunts slung at him for believing. In his pain, he prays: 'My soul is cast down within me as I think of you' (verse 6). The sound of the cataracts bursting out from the mountain where the Jordan rises symbolises for the psalmist the destructive and chaotic forces that threaten to overwhelm him (verse 7). The pagan neighbours have their idols. The psalmist has nothing to show. They challenge him: 'Where is your God?' (verses 3 and 10). Compare the taunt thrown at Jesus as he was dying: 'He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son' (Matthew 27:43).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, pray to share Jesus' faith, hope and love. Pray to share Jesus' thirst for God, Jesus' longing to see the face of God. Jesus gazes on us with such love. Trust him and know that in returning his gaze we are looking on God and enjoying the communion for which we are being held in existence.

## Praying Psalm 43 (42) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>**You be my judge, O God.**

**Defend my cause against a godless people.**

**Rescue me from the deceitful and unjust.**

<sup>2</sup>**You are God. I take refuge in you.**

*Why have you cast me off?*

*Why must I go mourning oppressed by the foe?*

<sup>3</sup>**Send forth your light and your truth;**

**let these be my guide;**

**let them bring me to your holy mountain,**

**to the place where you dwell.**

<sup>4</sup>**I will go to the altar of God,**

**to God, my exceeding joy;**

**and I will praise you on the harp,**

**O God, my God.**

<sup>5</sup>*Why are you cast down, my soul?*

*Why are you groaning within me?*

*Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,*

*my Saviour and my God.*

Though Psalms 42 and 43 are numbered separately in the Hebrew Bible and in the Greek Version, the psalms belong together. This is underlined by the fact that the refrain in Psalm 43:2 is also in Psalm 42:9, and the refrain in Psalm 43:5 is also in Psalm 42:5 and 11.

As in Psalm 42 the psalmist thinks of the cult (holy mountain, dwelling, altar, praise). The imagery in verse 1 is taken from the court, as the psalmist is appealing to the highest tribunal – that of God. He expresses his desire and his trust that he will experience again the communion with God which he experienced in the past.

In exile the psalmist asks for God's light and truth to escort him back into God's presence (verse 3).

In verse 5 we hear the refrain for the third time (see Psalm 42:5 and 11), now sung as an exultant hymn by the psalmist who knows that God has heard and will answer his prayer.

## Reflecting on Psalm 44 (43) in Jesus' Company

This psalm, more than most, highlights the importance of recognising that the writings of the Bible, including the psalms, are human documents (see Chapter One, pages 4-7). Those responsible for composing Psalm 44, and those who treasured it, however inspired, were praying from within the context of their understanding of God and of God's relationship with the world, and especially with them as God's chosen people.

Very little of this psalm could be prayed by Jesus, and, in view of Jesus' teaching about God and about how we should relate to people we think of as enemies, very little of it can be prayed by Jesus' disciples. The psalm is not in the Lectionary and is prayed in the Prayer of the Church only in the Office of Readings for Thursday Weeks 2 and 4.

The opening verses present the belief found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that it was God who drove out the inhabitants of Canaan and gave the land to Israel.

<sup>1</sup>We have heard, O God, our ancestors have told us,  
what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old:

<sup>2</sup>with your own hand you drove out the nations,  
and planted our ancestors there in their place;  
you brought affliction on the peoples,  
but brought prosperity to our ancestors.

<sup>3</sup>Not by their own sword did they win the land,  
nor did their own arm give them victory.

It was your right hand, and your arm,  
and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them.

Modern archaeology does not support this claim. The inhabitants of Canaan were not driven out by the Israelites invading from outside. An outside group introduced a new way of understanding God which was taken up by the indigenous inhabitants who formed Ancient Israel (see *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's new vision of Ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts*, by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman (The Free Press, Simon and Schuster, 2001).

Jesus longed for 'the light of God's countenance' (see the reflection on Psalm 42, page 173). He also knew how much his Father 'delighted in him' (Mark 1: 11 and 9:7). We are invited to share this with Jesus.

The psalmist shares the universally accepted view of his day that whatever happens in history is ultimately controlled by God (see the reflection on Psalm 2, pages 21-23), and so goes on to thank God for the many military victories Israel has had in the past

<sup>4</sup>You are my King and my God; you decree victories for Jacob.

<sup>5</sup>Through you we beat down our foes;  
through your name we trample on our assailants.

<sup>6</sup>For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me.

<sup>7</sup>It is you who have saved us from our foes,  
and have put to confusion those who hate us.

<sup>8</sup>In God we have boasted continually,  
and we will call upon you in thanksgiving forever.

That was the past. The present looks very different. Israel is suffering the consequences of military defeat. The psalmist is utterly bewildered. Why is God allowing foreign nations to plunder the land at will?

<sup>9</sup>Yet you have rejected us and shamed us.

You have not gone out with our armies.

<sup>10</sup>You made us retreat before the foe,  
and our enemies plunder us at will.

<sup>11</sup>You have made us like sheep for slaughter,  
and have scattered us among the nations.

<sup>12</sup>You have sold your people for a trifle,  
letting them go cheaply.

<sup>13</sup>You have made us the taunt of our neighbours,  
the derision and scorn of those around us.

<sup>14</sup>You have made us a byword among the nations,  
a laughing stock among the peoples.

<sup>15</sup>All day long my disgrace is before me,  
my face is covered in shame

<sup>16</sup>at the insults of the taunters and revilers,  
at the sight of the enemy attacking.

He would understand the calamity as divine punishment, if the people had been unfaithful to the covenant. However, as he sees it, this is not the case.

<sup>17</sup>All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you,  
or been false to your covenant.

<sup>18</sup>Our heart has not turned back,  
nor have our steps departed from your way,  
<sup>19</sup>yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals,  
and covered us with deep darkness.

<sup>20</sup>If we had forgotten the name of our God,  
or spread out our hands to a strange god,

<sup>21</sup>would not God discover this,  
God who knows the secrets of the heart?

<sup>22</sup>Because of you we are being killed all day long,  
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Verse twenty-two is quoted by Paul in Romans 8:36. Paul goes on to say that we who suffer because we follow Jesus are victorious because nothing can separate us from God's love. It is unthinkable that God would be unfaithful, so what is going on? Why is God so slow to act?

<sup>23</sup>Rouse yourself, O God\*! Why do you sleep.  
Awake, do not reject us any longer!

<sup>24</sup>Why do you hide your face?  
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

<sup>25</sup>We sink down to the dust,  
our bodies unable to rise from the ground.

<sup>26</sup>Rise up, come to our help.

Redeem us because of your covenant love.

They can do nothing. It is up to God to act as he acted in the past (verse 1). God is renowned for 'covenant love' (Hebrew *hesed*). The ultimate basis for the supplication is not their own innocence (though that has been stressed throughout the psalm). It is God's covenant love. The psalmist pleads with God to reveal this love now. The plea is urgent.

Jesus knew rejection and persecution (see reflection on Psalm 3, page 28). He even felt abandoned by God (Mark 15:34). As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote: 'Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7).

## Reflecting on Psalm 45 (44) in Jesus' Company

<sup>1</sup>My heart overflows with a noble theme.  
I dedicate my verses to the king.  
My tongue is as skilled as the pen of a scribe.

<sup>2</sup>You are the most handsome of men.  
How gracious is your speech.  
How your God continues to bless you.

<sup>3</sup>O mighty one, gird your sword upon your thigh.  
<sup>4</sup>In splendour and majesty ride on victorious,  
for the cause of truth and goodness and right.  
In defense of justice let your right hand show your dread deeds.

<sup>5</sup>Your arrows are keen. To you armies surrender.  
The king's enemies lose heart.

<sup>6</sup>Your throne is the throne of God.  
Your reign endures for ever.  
Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity.

<sup>7</sup>You love justice and hate what is evil.

Therefore God, your God, with oil of gladness  
has anointed you beyond your companions.

<sup>8</sup>Your robes are fragrant with aloes and myrrh.  
From the ivory palace you are greeted with music.

<sup>9</sup>Daughters of kings are among your loved ones.  
On your right stands the queen mother in gold of Ophir.

<sup>10</sup>Listen, O daughter, mark these words:  
Leave your family behind,  
forget your father's house.

<sup>11</sup>The king is infatuated with your beauty.  
Since he is your lord, you must bow to him.

## Reflecting on Psalm 45 (44) in Jesus' Company continued

<sup>12</sup>The city of Tyre comes with gifts,  
seeking your favour.

<sup>13</sup>The richest of the peoples honour you.

<sup>14</sup>The king's daughter is clothed with splendour;  
her robes embroidered with pearls set in gold.  
They are leading her to the king.

<sup>15</sup>She and her maiden companions  
are escorted amid gladness and joy  
into the palace of the king.

<sup>16</sup>In the place of your ancestors you will have sons.  
They will be princes over all the land.  
Your name will be celebrated for ever.

<sup>17</sup>The peoples will never cease thanking you  
from one generation to the next,  
giving praise to you through this song.

This is not a prayer, but a song to celebrate the wedding of the king. As we listen to it in Jesus' company, there are some verses that we can think of as applying to him.

1. Jesus' ministry was about 'truth and goodness, right and justice' (verse 4). His power to bring about the reign of God was far superior to the power of military prowess (verses 3-4). His was the power of Love, the power that creates and sustains the universe.

2. In his circular letter to the Gentile Christian communities in the East, Paul compares the virtues needed to live a Christian life to the armour of a soldier in the field (verse 3): 'Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places ... Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Ephesians 6:10-16).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes. The word faces us towards God' (Hebrews 4:12-13). In the Prologue to his Gospel, John states: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God' (John 1:1). Jesus is the incarnation of this Word (John 1:14). His word penetrates to the heart of our day to day living (our 'joints'), and to the centre of our vital energy (our 'marrow'), exposing the 'thoughts and intentions of the heart'.

3. The throne of the king is God's throne (verse 6), for the king is to execute God's will and God's justice, thus bringing about the reign of God in the land. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews quotes verses six and seven in relation to Jesus: 'Of the Son God says, "Your throne is God's throne; it endures forever and ever. Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity; you love justice and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" (Hebrews 1:8-9).

4. Jesus is the bridegroom (verses 11-15; see reflection on Psalm 23, page 83). He embraces sinners. So must his bride, the Church. Jesus was criticised for doing so, and so is the Church. The psalm reminds us that 'the king is infatuated with your beauty' (verse 11). We must not allow our own sin or the sin of others in the Church to distract us from her beauty as the Body of Christ in the world, continuing Jesus' liberating and healing ministry.

## Praying Psalm 46 (45) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>God is our refuge and strength,  
a helper close at hand in time of trouble.

<sup>2</sup>So we will not fear, though the earth should tremble,  
though mountains collapse into the sea,

<sup>3</sup>though waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains shudder before the crashing waves.

The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

<sup>4</sup>There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God,  
home of the Holy One, our God, the Most High.

<sup>5</sup>God is in the midst of the city. It cannot be shaken.  
God will be its help when the morning dawns.

<sup>6</sup>Peoples revolt. Kings mobilise their armies.  
The earth shudders whenever God thunders.

<sup>7</sup>GOD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

<sup>8</sup>Come, behold the formidable things  
the Lord has brought about on the earth:

<sup>9</sup>everywhere God puts an end to war, breaking the bow.

God shatters the spear, burns the chariot in a pyre.  
An end to your fighting!

<sup>10</sup>Be still and know that I am God.

I am exalted above the nations, supreme on the earth.

<sup>11</sup>The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The beautifully refined poetry of this psalm establishes it as one of the masterpieces of the psalter. It is a psalm of trust in God whose presence in the city has saved it from foreign aggression.

God is compared to a citadel that is inaccessible to an invading army, and so provides certain protection to the people of the city. This is picked up in the refrain (verse 3, 7 and 11).

1. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the disciples on the lake, threatened by a storm. During the 'storms' of our lives we hear Jesus say to us as he said to them: 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' (Matthew 8:26). 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom' (Luke 12:32). We contemplate Jesus at the Last Supper as he says to us: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid' (John 14:27). The women who were present at Jesus' burial and later found the tomb empty were told: 'Do not be afraid ... He has been raised' (Matthew 28:5).

In his ministry Paul faced many problems: 'One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent" (Acts 18:9). In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'We can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" (Hebrews 13:6, quoting Psalm 118:6). In the words of Psalm 46: 'Be still, and know that I am God' (verse 10).

2. Fundamental to the confidence of the inhabitants of Jerusalem was the fact that the city's water supply was secure: 'There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city, it will not be moved' (verses 4-5). Jesus says to us as he said to the Samaritan woman: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you "Give me a drink", you would have asked him and he would have given you living (life-giving) water' (John 4:10). He went on to say: 'The water that I give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). We think of Jesus: 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38). 'One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out' (John 19:34).

3. Living in a world tormented by violence and war we pray with the psalmist: 'God makes wars cease all over the earth, breaking the bows, shattering the spears, and burning the chariots in a pyre' (verse 9). Let us pray that we will all heed God who is inspiring everyone to forgo violence, and experience the blessing promised to those who make peace (Matthew 5:9).



## Praying Psalm 47 (46) with Jesus

<sup>1</sup>Clap your hands, all you peoples!

Acclaim your God, singing for joy.

<sup>2</sup>For GOD, the Most High, we must revere,  
great king over all the earth.

<sup>4</sup>Our inheritance, our glory, is from God,  
given to Jacob out of love.

<sup>5</sup>God goes up with shouts of joy,  
ascends to the blast of the trumpet.

<sup>6</sup>Sing praise to God, sing praise;  
sing praise to our King, sing praise.

<sup>7</sup>For God is king of all the earth;  
sing praise with all your skill.

<sup>8</sup>God is king over the nations;  
God reigns on the holy throne.

<sup>9</sup>The princes of the peoples are assembled  
with the people of Abraham's God.  
All the rulers on the earth belong to God,  
who reigns over all.

Omitted

<sup>4</sup>who subdues peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

This psalm celebrates the enthronement of the king.

1. 'GOD, the Most High, is to be feared, great king over all the earth' (verse 2). How can we recognise the majesty of God who reigns over the whole world without experiencing a profound sense of reverence, awe and wonder, and without realising our own smallness? As explained in the reflection on Psalm 2 (page 23), in the Hebrew Scriptures, 'fear of GOD' (verse 2) is primarily a matter of reverential awe at the majesty and mystery of God. However, there is frequently present also an element of fear of divine punishment. It is this latter element that is removed by Jesus who taught us to be afraid of our own capacity to reject God, but not to be afraid of God, whom he liked to address as 'Father'. Having stated that we should not be afraid of anyone other than God, Jesus went on to speak of God's care even for the sparrows, and he concluded: 'So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows' (Matthew 10:31). As John says: 'There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love' (1 John 4:18).

2. This psalm is prayed in the Church's liturgy to celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven 'when God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1:20). At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples: 'If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father' (John 14:28). As we pray this psalm with Jesus let us rejoice that he is experiencing the intimate communion with God that he always yearned for (see the reflection on Psalm 42, page 132-134).

3. 'Great king over all the earth' (verses 2 and 9). No one is outside the ambit of Jesus' loving influence and attraction: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32). From his pierced heart he fills the universe with his love: 'He ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things' (Ephesians 4:10).

Paul writes: 'that you may know what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things' (Ephesians 1:19-23). At the resurrection Jesus became 'king of kings' (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16). His reign is universal (verse 9), for God is to be 'all in all' (1 Corinthians 15:28). In The Book of Revelation we read: 'I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!"' (Revelation 5:13).

4. The psalmist rejoices in the land, 'our inheritance, our glory, given to Jacob out of love' (verse 4). The land is the pride and joy of a people who see themselves as the recipients of God's preferential love. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the many blessings we receive as members of the Church, 'which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:23).

## Praying Psalm 48 (47) with Jesus

- <sup>1</sup>Great is GOD and most worthy of praise  
in the city of our God.
- <sup>2</sup>God's holy mountain rises in beauty,  
the crowning joy of all the earth.  
Mount Zion, true pole of the earth, city of the great King.
- <sup>3</sup>God, in the midst of its citadels, is its sure defence.
- <sup>4</sup>Look, the kings are assembling, they advance together.
- <sup>5</sup>As soon as they see it, they are astounded;  
they panic, and take to flight.
- <sup>6</sup>Trembling takes hold of them,  
like the pangs of a woman in labour,
- <sup>7</sup>as when the east wind causes shipwreck to a merchant fleet.
- <sup>8</sup>As we have heard, so we have seen:  
this is the city of our Mighty GOD,  
the city of our God, who has established it for ever.
- <sup>9</sup>In your temple, O God, we ponder your covenant love.
- <sup>10</sup>Your praise, O God, like your reputation,  
reaches to the ends of the earth.  
Your right hand is filled with justice.
- <sup>11</sup>May Mount Zion be glad.  
At the sight of your judgments may the towns of Judah rejoice.
- <sup>12</sup>Walk through Zion, walk all around it,  
count its towers, admire its ramparts,
- <sup>13</sup>take note of its citadels, that you may tell the next generation:
- <sup>14</sup>'This is God, our eternal God, who is for ever our guide.'

The psalmist is inviting us to admire and celebrate Mount Zion (Jerusalem) and its temple. 'Mount Zaphon' (verse 2), near the mouth of the Orontes River in Northern Syria, was the sacred mountain of the storm god Baal-Hadad in ancient Canaanite mythology, the Canaanite equivalent of Mount Olympus for the Greeks. But, as even foreign kings can see (verses 4-8), no mountain city can compare to the city which is the abode of Israel's God, the 'great King' (verse 2).

1. Jesus in the Temple that is Heaven. We reflected on Jesus' love for Jerusalem when praying Psalm 2 (see page 23). As we begin to pray this psalm with Jesus our thoughts go to the 'heavenly Jerusalem' where the risen Jesus dwells with his Father. At the Last Supper Jesus said to his friends: 'If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father' (John 14:28). On the day of his resurrection he asked Mary of Magdala to go and tell Peter and the other apostles: 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17). We express our joy to Jesus that God raised him to life and took him to himself. Jesus spent his whole life longing for this.

As we love him, so our hearts are happy for him. His time of waiting, his time of suffering is over. Nothing can ever come between the longing of his heart and the joy of experiencing his heart's desire. Perhaps the most powerful picture of the Risen Jesus to be found in the New Testament is in The Book of Revelation. Describing his vision, John writes: 'I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force' (Revelation 1:12-16).

We are destined to enjoy Heaven with Jesus. The goal of our life is the same as his. We are called, like Jesus, to enjoy undistracted communion with God forever: 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9). 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also' (John 14:2-3). 'Father, you have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am' (John 17:22-24).

2. Jesus in the Temple that is the world. Having reflected with Jesus on our eternal home, where Jesus now lives with God, and where we hope to join him, our thoughts go to our present situation. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the presence of God, and so the presence of the risen Jesus, in the universe. Wherever we are, we confidently pray: 'your hand will lead me, and your right hand will hold me fast' (Psalm 139:7-10). Jesus is THE Sacrament, THE Mystery, THE Symbol of God. 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:19). 'In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Colossians 2:9). Being in communion with his Father, his heart is able now to reach out, beyond all the limits of space and time, to be wherever God's love is. And so he is able to be with us. We recall his promise: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32). We speak of him being at God's right hand – which is our way of saying that he is at the heart of God's powerful action, bringing about the reign of God's loving will in this our broken world.

We can still resist God's loving advances – hence the continual corruption of sin in our personal and communal lives. But nothing can stop God's love, and millions are welcoming this love and responding to it heroically in their lives. We know the way Jesus relates to us now, because we have seen the way he related to us before death took him from our sight and our touch. He whom God lifted up to himself is he whom we lifted up on a cross. If we want to see what it means for Jesus to ascend into heaven, the best image is the glorified Christ reigning from the cross. The words that he spoke from the cross teach us the way in which he will always relate to us.

He longs to forgive our sins ('Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing', Luke 23:34). He longs to take us with him to be with him forever in God's embrace ('This day you will be with me in paradise', Luke 23:43). He is thirsty for our hearts ('I thirst', John 19:28), and from his pierced side he pours out upon us the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist to cleanse and nourish us (John 19:34). He is constantly giving us the very Spirit of love that binds him to the Father, so that we can love with his love ('He gave up his spirit', John 19:30), and he assures us of his own mother's special care ('Here is your mother', John 19:27).

Paul writes: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us' (Romans 8:18). 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

3. Jesus in the Temple of the Church. In a special way, we reflect on the presence of the risen Jesus in the Church, the 'new Jerusalem', which Paul speaks of as 'the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation' (Ephesians 1:23). 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish' (Ephesians 5:25-27).

We thank God for the community of Jesus' disciples to whom it is our privilege to belong. When Philip asked to see the Father, Jesus told him that to see him is to see the Father (John 14:9). Similarly, if we want to see the face of Jesus we have only to look upon the face of the Church. Of course we need to be discerning. The Church is composed of sinners like you and me who have been partly enlightened by Jesus but who are still partly living in the dark. The Church is composed of people like you and me who long for God but who can easily be distracted and fail, sometimes seriously. There are sinners in the Church because the Church continues the mission of Jesus, clasping sinners to her bosom.

We look at the face of the saints, and we look at each other and marvel at the goodness that we see there. It is Jesus who is loving in and through us; it is Jesus who is praying in and through us. So we thank God for the holiness that is evident in the Church. The Spirit that comes from his heart comes to us through the community, especially through the sacraments.

We think of the three sacraments of initiation into the community. In Baptism we were united to Jesus and in Confirmation his Spirit was poured into our hearts. In Communion we are taken into heaven for a few moments and are given a taste of the communion with God and with all whom we love which will be our eternal home. Then there is the beautiful sacrament of Reconciliation. Jesus is always ready to forgive, heal and encourage us. In Marriage and in Sacred Orders our way of loving and our way of ministering to others is consecrated so that whenever we love, it is he who is loving in us, and whenever we serve it is Jesus who is serving in us. Finally, when we are losing our hold on life, our final journeying to God is surrounded by grace through the sacrament of Anointing.

Jesus promised that if we listen to the community we will hear him. We thank God in a special way for the Church, for it is there that Jesus continues to dwell in a special way, drawing us to himself. Jesus promised: 'I will build my church, and the gates of the Underworld will not prevail against it' (Matthew 16:18). The Book of Revelation speaks beautifully of the Church, describing it as 'the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven' (Revelation 3:12). 'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Revelation 21:2). 'I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb' (Revelation 21:22).

The Church is THE Sacrament, THE Mystery, THE Symbol of Jesus. The portrait of the Risen Jesus in The Book of Revelation concludes with the words: 'In his right hand he held seven stars.' These are the churches of Asia, representing the local Christian assemblies all over the world that draw Christians together to celebrate their faith. The risen Christ is holding the local churches in his hand.

In the Catholic Catechism (n. 776) we read: 'As sacrament, the Church is Christ's instrument. The Church is taken up by him also as his instrument for the salvation of all, the universal sacrament of salvation, by which Christ is manifesting and bringing about the mystery of God's love for all people. The Church is the visible plan of God's love for humanity, because God desires that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built into one Temple of the Holy Spirit.'

Speaking of the local church assembled for the Eucharist, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews picks up the imagery of Psalm 48 when he writes: 'You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first born who are enrolled in heaven' (Hebrews 12:22-23).

In Christ we find the fullness of God. Furthermore, while everything shares in the grace of Christ and reflects something of his fullness, it is to the church that we must look if we wish to see his fullness, for he fills the church with his Spirit (it can be called, therefore, his 'body') and pours out the fullness of grace into her. The church is the body which he fills with his life, which radiates his glory throughout the cosmos, and which draws the whole of humankind and all creation into his fullness as it is built up and grows into him.

The Second Vatican Council declares: 'The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only arousing in them a desire for the world to come, but also animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end' (The Church in the Modern World, §38). The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus' body, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God's love.

It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now, raised to the fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus - the Spirit of love which binds him to the Father - that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcomed. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the Church. 'In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him' (Colossians 2:9-10).

4. The Beauty of God's Temple. As we pray the psalm with Jesus, we are in awe at the beauty of the universe, being created and held in existence by God's Word (see John 1:1-13). We are in awe at the beauty of Jesus, in whom 'the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of the gift of truth' (John 1:14). We are in awe at the beauty of the Church. Speaking of the Church Paul writes: 'In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord' (Ephesians 2:21). 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (1 Corinthians 3:16). 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?' (1 Corinthians 6:19).

5. Jesus in the temple of the human person. Each of us personally is called and graced to be the temple in which God wants to dwell: 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom you know, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you ... If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home in you' (John 14:15-18, 23).

As we admire the beauty of the risen Jesus, and the beauty of his Body, the Church, our prayer is that 'all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3:18). The text continues: 'this comes from the Lord, the Spirit'. This is the Spirit of love that flows between God and the risen Jesus, the Spirit that is 'poured into our hearts' (Romans 5:5). We pray with Paul: 'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6). We pray that the beauty the psalmist sees in Jerusalem, the beauty we see in the face of Jesus, will increasingly be the beauty that God wants for each of us, till we can pray with Paul: 'It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

## Reflecting on Psalm 49 (48) in Jesus' Company

<sup>1</sup>Hear this, all you peoples!

Listen, inhabitants of the world,

<sup>2</sup>people both high and low,  
rich and poor alike.

<sup>3</sup>I have wisdom you need to hear.

My heart is full of insight.

<sup>4</sup>I turn my mind to an enigma.

To the sound of the harp I will present my challenge.

<sup>5</sup>Why should I fear times of trouble,

when criminals track me down to destroy me,

<sup>6</sup>people who trust in their wealth  
and boast of the abundance of their riches?

<sup>7</sup>Yes, none of us can buy our own freedom,

or pay a ransom to God for our lives.

<sup>8</sup>For the ransom is too high,  
well beyond our means.

<sup>9</sup>There is no escaping death,

no avoiding the grave.

<sup>10</sup>Look, even the wisest die.

They perish just like the foolish and the stupid.

They have to leave their wealth to others.

<sup>11</sup>The grave is their home for ever,

their final dwelling,

even if their names spread wide through the land.

<sup>12</sup>*Human beings in their opulence cannot endure;  
like the animals they must succumb to silence.*

## Reflecting on Psalm 49 (48) in Jesus' Company continued

<sup>13</sup>Such is the lot of those  
who find their security in themselves:  
just like sheep  
they are being driven to the grave.

<sup>14</sup>Death shepherds them.  
Straight to the grave they descend,  
and their form wastes away.  
The realm of the dead is their home.

<sup>15</sup>But I know God will rescue me,  
snatching me from the grip of death.

<sup>16</sup>Do not be concerned when people become rich,  
when the wealth of their house increases.

<sup>17</sup>When we die we will take nothing with us.  
There is no place for wealth in the grave.

<sup>18</sup>Though in their life they consider themselves blessed –  
for you are praised when you do well for yourself –

<sup>19</sup>they will go down to join their ancestors,  
and will never again see the light.

<sup>20</sup>*Human beings in their opulence cannot endure;  
like the animals they must succumb to silence.*

Psalm 49 is not a prayer. It is a reflection on death as an unavoidable dimension of the human condition. The rich and powerful cannot buy their way out of it. They are foolish, therefore, to be too impressed by the power they wield. We should not be too impressed either, but rather place our hope in God, who alone gives and sustains life (verse 15).

The psalmist knows what it is like to experience 'times of trouble' (verse 5). But he makes the point that we should not be afraid – persecutors die like everyone else (verses 9-11).

The idea of being ransomed from death (verse 15) takes on a new meaning in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' mission was to reveal God as love by giving himself in love for us. The way he lived and the way he died showed us how to live. His gift to us of the Spirit of his love-communion with God enables us to welcome him to live in us, trusting in God and offering our lives for others. As Jesus himself said: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28).

Paul writes: 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God ... and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:21, 23). 'He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity' (Titus 2:14). In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'He entered once for all into the Holy Place ... with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption' (Hebrews 9:12). Peter writes: 'You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors ... with the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18-19).

In listening to the psalmist's reflection in the company of Jesus, we might reflect on the following parable:

'Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But Jesus said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'

Then he told them a parable: The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God' (Luke 12:13-21).

## Praying Psalm 50 in Jesus' Company

<sup>1</sup>The Mighty God,  
the High GOD, speaks,  
summoning the earth  
from the rising of the sun to its setting.

<sup>2</sup>Out of Zion,  
the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth.

<sup>3</sup>Our God is coming and will not be silent.

First comes a devouring fire;  
then a mighty tempest.

<sup>4</sup>From on high God summons the heavens and the earth  
to witness the judgment of the people:

<sup>5</sup>'Gather to me my people,  
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.'

<sup>6</sup>The heavens declare God's justice,  
for God is coming in person as judge.

<sup>7</sup>'Listen, my people, for I will speak;  
Israel, I testify against you.  
I am God, your God.  
I accuse you. I lay the charge before you.

<sup>8</sup>I find no fault with your sacrifices;  
your offerings are always before me.

<sup>9</sup>I do not ask for more bullocks from your stalls,  
or goats from your herds.

<sup>10</sup>Every wild animal of the forest is mine,  
and the cattle in their thousands on my mountains.

<sup>11</sup>I know all the birds of the air;  
all that moves in the field is at my disposal.

<sup>12</sup>If I were hungry, I would not tell you,  
for the world and all that is in it is mine.

<sup>13</sup>Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls,  
or drink the blood of goats?

<sup>14</sup>Offer to me a sacrifice of confession  
and pay your vows to the Most High.

<sup>15</sup>Call on me in the day of trouble;  
I will deliver you, and you will honour me.'

<sup>16</sup>To the wicked God says:  
'How dare you quote to me my law.  
How dare you invoke the covenant,

<sup>17</sup>you who hate discipline, and turn away when I speak?

<sup>18</sup>You make friends with a thief when you see one.  
You keep company with adulterers.

<sup>19</sup>You give your mouth free rein for evil,  
and your tongue plots deceit.

<sup>20</sup>You sit and speak against your kin;  
you slander your own mother's child.

<sup>21</sup>This is how you behave  
and should I be silent?

Do you think that I am like you?  
I will accuse you to your face.

<sup>22</sup>Mark you this,  
you who never think of God!

I will not punish you  
without offering you an escape.

<sup>23</sup>They honour me who bring to me as their sacrifice  
admission of their guilt.  
I will see that those who correct their conduct  
will enjoy my salvation.'

## Psalm 50

This is a psalm composed for the penitential liturgy. God is accusing his people of their failure to keep the covenant. There are many allusions to the Sinai Covenant. Psalm 51 follows as the second part of the liturgy, in which the people acknowledge their sin and ask for pardon. There are many verbal connections between the two psalms.

'Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth' (verse 2). See the commentary on Psalm 48:2.

'Those bound to me' (verse 5) are those who owe fidelity to God, the hasidim, who have entered into a covenant relationship with God, a commitment of love (hesed). God is faithful to God's commitment. Are we?

In verse 7 God opens the case against the people, accusing them of sin. They are fulfilling all their cultic obligations. God has nothing of which to accuse them on that score (verses 8-13). But cult and sacrifices cannot substitute for a genuine relationship with God. They are guilty of breaking the covenant. We cannot carry out our religious duties, and use that to bribe God into silence.

Our relationship with God is tested by our relationship with others (verses 16ff). In the decalogue we are commanded not to kill, not to destroy through adultery the marriage relationship which is at the basis of family life, not to deprive others of the material things which they need to live properly, and not to accuse others falsely (Exodus 20:13-16). God is accusing the people of breaking the commandments: not fulfilling their side of the covenant.

It matters how we live. As we listen to this psalm we would do well to listen to Jesus' parable about what ultimately matters in human behaviour. We are judged on how we have loved (Matthew 25:31-46). What Psalm 50 asks of us is that we be honest. To the extent that we have broken the covenant, we should own up to our failure. Only honest confession ('a sacrifice of confession', verses 14 and 23) provides the basis for repentance, and a renewal of communion with God.