

Praying Psalm 51 (50) in Jesus' company

¹Be gracious to me, O God,
according to your covenant love.
According to your tender compassion,
blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me more and more from my guilt;
cleansing me from my sin.

³I know my transgressions;
my sin is always before me.

⁴Against you, against you, I have sinned.
What is evil in your sight I have done.

You are just in your sentence,
blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵For it was into sin, into guilt, that I was born.

⁶Indeed you desire truth in the heart;
then in the secret of my heart make me know wisdom.

⁷If you purge me, I will be purified.
If you wash me, I will be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear rejoicing and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed exult.

⁹Turn your face away from my sins,
and blot out all my guilt.

¹⁰Create in me, O God, a purified heart,
put a new and steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence.
Do not take from me your holy spirit.

¹²Give me again the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a generous spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

Praying Psalm 51 (50) in Jesus' Company continued

¹⁴Rescue me, O God, my saviour,
and I will sing aloud of your justice.

¹⁵O God*, open my lips,
and I will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you have no desire for sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷My sacrifice is a contrite spirit;
a broken, a crushed, heart, O God, you will not spurn.

¹⁸In your goodness show favour to Zion.
Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

¹⁹Then you will delight in proper sacrifices,
holocausts offered on your altar.

In the previous psalm (Psalm 50) God accuses the people of sin. Psalm 51 is the second part of the penitential cult: admitting sin and pleading for forgiveness. The focus is on God's justice: the truth that God always acts in accordance with who God is. In verses 1-9 the psalmist humbly admits his sin and so acknowledges God's justice in judging him as a sinner. In verses 10-17 the focus is on God's justice in bringing him salvation. God, being God, will always show mercy and re-create a sinner's life, so that, freed from sin, we will be able to live beautifully from the heart.

1. The innocent Jesus (see the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 38-39) had no need to pray this psalm. He keeps us company as we, who do need to pray it, seek forgiveness and healing. Jesus came, as he said, 'to call sinners to repentance' (Matthew 9:13). The psalmist is confident in the covenant love [*hesed*] of God. He calls on God to be gracious [*hanan*]; and, confident in God's tender compassion [*rahamim*], he begs God to blot out the record of his transgressions. It is only in the light of God's covenant love, graciousness and tender compassion that we dare to look at our sins. It is only in that same light that we see sin for what sin truly is.

All three qualities attributed to God in verse 1 are in the creedal formula found throughout the Old Testament when speaking of God: 'GOD, tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in covenant love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6). '*hesed*' speaks of God's fidelity to the covenant of love. 'Graciousness' [*hanan*] speaks of the many ways in which God shows this love. 'Tender compassion' translates the Hebrew word *rahamim*, which is related to the word for 'womb' (*rehem*). It speaks of the motherly tenderness of God. The Greek Septuagint Version translates 'tenderly compassionate' as *oiktirmôn*, which is the word used by Luke when Jesus calls us to 'be tenderly compassionate as your Father is tenderly compassionate' (Luke 6:36). We see God's kindness, graciousness and tender compassion in Jesus (see the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 38-39).

2. In verse 2 the psalmist prays that he will be washed clean from the filth left by his sinful behaviour, and that he will be purified (as from leprosy). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we are not alone, and encourages us: 'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us' (Hebrews 12:1). He encourages us to 'look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Hebrews 12:2): the 'pioneer', for Jesus leads by example, and calls us to follow him; the 'perfecter', for he has reached the goal for which we are all striving.

3. The psalmist acknowledges that God is just in passing judgment upon him (verse 4). We are, of course, conceived and born innocent, but we are born into a sinful world and sin is contagious (verse 5). We speak of this as Original Sin, that is, the sin of our origins, and of the environment into which we are born.

4. In verse 6, knowing that only 'the truth will set us free' (John 8:32), the psalmist prays for wisdom. Wisdom speaks of order, harmony and beauty. Human wisdom is an acquired skill in judging the best way of acting in the changing and often complex circumstances of life, and in putting decisions into operation. What the psalmist is praying for is that special wisdom which concerns the purpose of life itself and the way in which we relate to God, the source of life, God. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit that gives us a special sensitivity and openness to receive God's self-revelation to us. It enables us to savour and relish the divine.

It is by keeping our eyes on Jesus and by opening our souls to receive his Spirit that we learn this wisdom. In contemplating Jesus we see who we really are and we learn how to respond to the action of God's Spirit in our lives. By this Spirit we are transformed, so that the life of Jesus becomes our life, his thoughts become our thoughts, his responses become our responses, his prayer becomes our prayer.

To speak of divine Wisdom is to speak of God's design for the world. Each of us is created and held in existence by God to be part of the beauty of this design. We will fulfil our purpose only by being open to the inspiration of grace. If we choose to resist grace, God can use even our resistance to further God's mysterious designs. What a personal tragedy it would be, however, for us not to enjoy being part of the beauty of divine communion.

With the gift of prayer comes an invitation to surrender to God's loving action in our souls. If we respond in faith and allow the initiative to come wholly from God, then, and only then, all that we are and all that we do becomes suffused with divine Wisdom. Then we can begin to say with Saint Paul: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). It is a journey of faith, for we journey in darkness: our eyes are unable to take the brightness of God's light. It is a journey of hope: for now we have only touches of the embrace for which we are made and for which our hearts long. It is a journey of love. It is in being in trusting communion with God that our souls find peace.

From the beginning to the end of his Gospel, John wants us to hold in our minds and hearts the picture of this intimate communion of God and the Word, God and Wisdom, for the Gospel is about how this Word, made flesh in Jesus, reveals the true nature of God as love, and invites us to share in the communion which we are here contemplating. In reminding us that everything that has come into being has its existence through the Word (see John 1:3), John is saying that creation is essentially an act of revelation. In creating, God is revealing the communion of love that he enjoys with the eternal Word, with Wisdom. Creation is an expression of God's Wisdom. Its glory is a sacrament of the glory of God.

James, the brother of the Lord, writes: 'The Wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy' (James 3:17). As we pray for wisdom let us hear Jesus invite us: '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).

5. The psalmist's prayer: 'Let me hear rejoicing and gladness' (verse 8) recalls the 'music and dancing' (Luke 15:25) that celebrated the return of the prodigal son.

6. As noted earlier, the hinge for the second part of Psalm 51 is verse 10, where the focus is still on God's justice ('I will sing aloud of your justice', verse 14), but not on God's justice in condemning the sinner (as in verses 1-9), but on God's justice in bringing salvation.

7. Only God's gift of the Spirit can effect the reconciliation for which the penitent is praying. God promised through the prophet Ezekiel: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you' (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

With the psalmist we pray: 'Do not cast me away from your presence. Do not take your holy spirit from me' (verse 10). As Christians, the 'new and right spirit' (verse 10) that we long for is the Spirit of Jesus himself, given to us from the cross and constantly offered by the risen Jesus. As Paul says: 'The spirit gives life' (2 Corinthians 3:6). 'You were taught ... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Ephesians 4:23-24).

The new spirit has created a new way of being human, a new 'Adam' (Genesis 2:7). As Paul says: "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit ... The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven ... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven' (1 Corinthians 15:45-49). We sinners long for restoration of our baptismal consecration and the holiness of being incorporated again into God's people.

8. In verse 13 the psalmist promises to tell others about God's ways and so attract others to follow him in repentance so that they, too, will enjoy the life that God wants for them, and give glory to God.

9. Note the repetition in verse 17 of the word 'crushed' (verse 8). The psalmist's hard heart is broken, crushed back to dust, so that God can, once again, breathe his spirit into the dust and recreate him.

10. Verses 18-19 are outside the tight structure of the psalm. It is likely that they were added after the return to Judah from Babylon.

Reflecting on Psalm 52 (51) in Jesus' Company

- ¹O you who wield power, why do you boast
of the evil you do against those who are faithful to the covenant?
- ²All day long you are plotting their destruction,
slashing them with your razor tongue.
- ³You prefer evil to good.
You choose to lie rather than speak the truth.
- ⁴With your deceitful tongue you love the destructive word.
- ⁵Very well, God will break you down and remove you forever.
God will snatch you from your tent
and uproot you from the land of the living.
- ⁶The just will watch in awe [fear], and laugh at those who do evil:
⁷'So this is the one who would not take refuge in God,
but trusted in the power of wealth,
and grew powerful through crime!'
- ⁸Here am I, like a green olive tree in the house of God.
I have always trusted in the covenant love of God.
- ⁹I will thank you forever, because of what you have done.
In the presence of the faithful I hope in you, for you are good.

This is a meditation on the behaviour and destiny of those who 'have grown powerful through crime', and those who are 'faithful to the covenant'. Those who do evil boast of the evil that they have the power to do (verse 1). They 'prefer evil to good' (verse 3). They 'choose to lie rather than speak the truth' (verse 3). They 'trust in the power of wealth and grow powerful through crime' (verse 7).

The psalmist warns those who do evil that they will suffer the consequences of the choices which they are making: 'God will uproot you from the land of the living' (verse 5). They will surely die, and what then will become of their wealth and power?

By contrast, those who are faithful to the covenant maintain a profound sense of awe: living their life in the presence of their God (verse 7). Their hope is not in wealth or power but in the 'covenant love of God' (verse 8).

1. For a reflection on truth see Psalm 12, pages 47-49.

2. Jesus has a stern warning for those whom the psalmist is criticising, those whom Jesus calls the 'rich': 'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep' (Luke 6:24-25).

Luke's Gospel has a lot to say about the 'rich'. They are 'proud in the thoughts of their hearts' (Luke 1:51). Their pride causes them to be self-reliant and therefore closed to what can be received only in dependence upon God. They 'go away empty' (Luke 1:51). They exercise religious power in Israel (Luke 1:52). They are unrepentant (Luke 3:7-9). When Jesus comes among them, they seek to get rid of him (Luke 4:9), and they accuse Jesus of blasphemy (Luke 5:21).

The 'rich' are 'choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life' (Luke 8:14). They are not open to the blessedness of the poor or to eternal life (Luke 10:25). Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan, the rich can see someone in need and not be moved by compassion (Luke 10:31). Jesus' indictment of the lawyers and Pharisees (Luke 11:37-54) makes a good commentary on the woes of the rich.

Luke includes the parable of the man who hoarded his possessions (Luke 12:13-21). Luke has a long section on the right use of money (Luke 16:1-15), the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14). In each case the man who seeks to rely on himself without reference to God misses out on life. In exalting himself, he fails to receive God's gracious gift.

In Luke 11:39-52 Jesus names some of the behaviours of those who wield power with no regard for those they oppress. They 'clean the outside of the cup, but inside are full of greed and wickedness.' They 'neglect justice and the love of God.' They 'load people with burdens hard to bear, and do not lift a finger to ease them.' They 'take away the key of knowledge; they don't enter themselves, but hinder others who want to enter.'

The best way to understand Jesus use of the word 'rich' is to examine his use of the contrasting word 'poor': those whom the psalmist says have put their hope in God (verse 9). At the beginning of his ministry Jesus announced in the synagogue at Nazareth that his mission was 'to bring good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18). We hear him declare: 'Blessed and happy are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed and happy are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed and happy are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed and happy are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven' (Luke 6:20-23).

The word 'poor' applies literally to those who do not have the resources to meet their own needs. We are 'poor', therefore, to the extent that we recognise that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God on whom we are totally dependent. Jesus is telling his disciples that they will be 'blessed'. That is to say, they will have that special happiness that flows from God's blessing. They will share Jesus' communion with God to the extent that they recognise their own powerlessness and complete dependence on God. This will mean giving up attempts to rely on themselves without reference to God. It will mean looking to God as the only source of their hope and salvation, trusting that God wants only to love them. The poor are those whom the psalmist describes as 'faithful to the covenant' (verse 1). They are blessed now because God takes them to heart and, in Jesus, is answering their cry.

When our lack of resources to meet our pressing needs is obvious, we are less likely to think of ourselves as self-sufficient than when our material welfare is secured.

We should make an important clarification. It should be obvious from Jesus' own commitment to the poor and oppressed that he is in no way justifying material, economic poverty, nor is he saying that there is anything good about any of the deprivations experienced by the oppressed poor. The deceptive and superficial self-reliance that goes with wealth is a trap that caused Jesus to say: 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God' (Luke 18:24). However, it can be hard for the materially poor too because of the temptation to envy and despair.

As we watch Jesus, we see that he cannot resist the cry of the poor, and he calls his disciples to share in his mission of liberation (Luke 9:1-2). When he meets a person who wants to be his disciple and who has resources to help the poor, he asks him to rid himself of his possessions — of the riches that burden and 'possess' him — and to give them to those who need them. Only then will he be free to follow Jesus (Luke 18:22). Whatever resources we have, we will be judged on how we shared them with those in need (Luke 3:10-11).

Jesus, therefore, is not praising poverty. He is calling his disciples to recognise that they are not independent, that they do not have the resources in themselves to be or to do anything, but that they are totally dependent upon God. He is assuring them that, if they place their trust in God and act accordingly, they will experience now the communion with God that will satisfy their deepest need and longing. He promises them a share in his communion with his Father.

The 'poor' are those who believe that God who delights in Jesus delights also in them. They believe that it is God's purpose to save them from all that hinders their full communion with him and thus limits their freedom to live full human lives.

Luke is a realist. The poor will experience hunger; they will weep; and they will be rejected, as Jesus and the prophets were rejected (Luke 6:21-23). It is one thing for a child to trust. It is another for an adult, in a world of sin and oppression and suffering, to maintain this same loving trust in God while being committed to do God's will. The challenge presented by Jesus to his disciples is to remain 'poor' under persecution. We will see Jesus in his public ministry and especially in his suffering and death living with this childlike trust. In the face of a cruel death Jesus can still say to God: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46; Psalm 31:5).

The Christian community suffered through the tensions they experienced because of the misunderstanding and rejection at the hands of their Jewish brothers and sisters. They suffered also through the opposition they found when they attempted to put into practice the liberating love of Jesus in a society in which the powerful were determined to maintain the class divisions and unjust structures that supported their position. The persecuted poor are assured by Jesus that, however painful their circumstances, they will experience now in this world the bliss of divine communion, the profound peace of belonging in this world because they are at home with God.

As we meditate on this psalm, let us hear Jesus encouraging us not to be impressed with wealth and power. Let us join him in recognising that all we have his gift, bestowed on us by our Loving God. Let us open our minds and hearts to listen to 'every word that comes from God' (Matthew 4:4), and to commit ourselves to be 'faithful to the covenant' (verse 1). See page 11 for a reflection on Jesus' obedience.

Praying Psalm 53 (52) with Jesus

¹Fools tell themselves 'There is no God.'
They are corrupt. They perpetrate dreadful deeds.
None of them does good.

²God looks down on the human race
to see if there is anyone who is wise,
anyone who seeks after God.

³They have all gone astray,
they are all depraved.
There is no one who seeks God, no, not one.

⁴Do they know nothing, these evildoers?
They devour my people like so much bread.
They never pray.

⁵*Well, then, they will be in great terror,
terror such as has never been.*

⁶O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
When God restores the fortunes of the people,
then Jacob will be glad, and Israel rejoice.

Omitted

⁵*For God will scatter the bones of those
who have no place in their lives for God.
They will be put to shame, for God has rejected them.*

Psalm 53 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.

Psalm 53 appears again in the Psalter as Psalm 14. We refer the reader to Psalm 14 for a reflection. Where Psalm 53 has 'God', Psalm 14 has 'YHWH'. Perhaps Psalm 53 was composed in the northern kingdom and Psalm 14 is an adaptation made for the temple in Jerusalem. Verse 5 is somewhat different. Psalm 14 reads: 'Well then, they will have to tremble, for God stands with the just. You may thwart the plans of the poor, but GOD is their refuge' (verses 5-6).

Verse 5 is not a statement that a disciple of Jesus can make. We can choose to close ourselves off from grace, but God never rejects anyone.

Praying Psalm 54 (53) with Jesus

¹O God, judge in my favour.

Use your power to save.

²Hear my prayer.

Be attentive to my words.

³For the insolent rise up

determined to destroy me.

The ruthless seek my life.

They have no regard for God.

⁴Surely, God comes to my aid; God* sustains my life.

⁶With a free heart I will sacrifice to you.

I will give thanks to you, O GOD, for you are good.

⁷You have rescued me from every danger.

Verse 5 is not included in the Christian liturgy

⁵The evil that my enemies carry out will turn back upon them.

In your faithfulness, put an end to them.

Omitted

⁷I have seen the downfall of my foes.

This is a psalm of supplication (verse 2). The psalmist appeals to the divine tribunal for the justice that his enemies are denying him. He appeals to God's reputation as a just and faithful judge.

The psalmist is pleading for justice, not based on any qualities of his own (the prayer is simple and sincere), but based on God's honour as judge, God's authority and power to vindicate. He is relying on God's faithfulness to justice.

Verse five is not included in the psalm as prayed in the Christian liturgy. It is an example of a sentiment that is recognised as having been transcended in the teaching of Jesus who commands us to love our enemies, not seek vengeance against them. We may share the feelings of the psalmist, but Jesus has taught us a better way to pray. Rather than react to the injustice, we are to remain in the presence of God, and pray for those causing it: 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall 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' (Matthew 5:43-45).

It is one thing to offer thanks to God for delivering me 'from every danger' (verses 6-7). It is another to 'look in triumph on my enemies' (verse 7).

Praying Psalm 55 (54) with Jesus

¹Hear my prayer, O God, do not hide from my pleading.

²Attend to me and respond. With my cares, I cannot rest.

³I tremble at the shouting of the enemy. They threaten. They attack.
They shout curses against me, giving vent to their fury.

⁴My heart is pounding, the terrors of death assail me.

⁵Fear and trembling come upon me. Horror overwhelms me.

⁶If only I had the wings of a dove, I would fly away and find rest.

⁷I would escape far away, and take refuge in the wilderness.

⁸I would hurry to find shelter from the raging wind
and the devouring tempest,
from the raging torrent of their lying tongues.

⁹O God* confuse them, confound their speech,
for I see violence and strife in the city.

¹⁰Day and night they patrol, high on the city walls.
Crime and injustice flourish inside.

¹¹There are nothing but ruins in the city.
Cruelty and fraud are present wherever I look.

¹²If it were one of my enemies insulting me,
then I could bear it.
If it were an opponent who was behaving insolently towards me,
then I could walk away.

¹³But it is you, my companion, my intimate friend!

¹⁴How close was the friendship that existed between us,
as we walked together in harmony in the house of our God.

¹⁶As for me, I call upon God. GOD will save me.

¹⁷Evening, morning and noon I complain and lament.

¹⁸God will redeem me unharmed from the battle I wage.
Many are arrayed against me, but God hears my cry.

²⁰They have no reverence ['fear'] for God.

They betray their friends. They break the covenant.

²¹Their speech is softer than butter, but their heart is set on war.
Their words flow smoother than oil, but they are naked swords.

²²Cast your burden on GOD, who will sustain you.

God will never permit the just to fall.

My God, I place all my trust in you.

Verse 15 is not in the liturgy.

¹⁵Let death catch them unprepared. Let them go down alive to the grave;
for evil dwells in their homes and malice in their hearts.

Omitted

¹⁹God, who is enthroned from of old, will hear me,
and will bring them down,
because they do not amend their ways, nor do they fear God.

²³You, O God, will cast them down into the lowest pit;
the bloodthirsty and treacherous shall not live out half their days.

The psalmist is clearly terrified. Anarchy rules in the city (verses 3-11 and 20-21). If he could escape he would, but he cannot (verses 6-8). He is especially hurt that his intimate friend has turned against him (verses 12-14). There is only one to whom he can turn, and that is God to whom he addresses his prayer: 'Hear my prayer, O God' (verse 1); 'Evening, morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, that he may hear my appeal' (verse 17). He places his trust in God (verse 23).

The sevenfold description of evil in verses 9-11 (violence, strife, crime, injustice, ruin, cruelty, fraud) is symbolic of the complete anarchy that is reigning in the city.

1. We think of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem: 'If you, even you, had only recognised 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 recognise the time of your visitation from God' (Luke 19:41-44).

2. In the Hebrew Scriptures suffering carries with it an extra burden, as it was assumed that God controls the world and that as a consequence whatever happens must be willed by God. Since it was axiomatic that God is just, suffering was understood to be a divine punishment for sin. Of course sin does have its own terrible effects, but Jesus freed us from seeing suffering as caused by God (see the reflection on Psalm 2, pages 21-23). Listen to Peter: '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' (1 Peter 4:13).

3. As Christians we reflect on the anguish suffered by Jesus. There were times when he was able to escape from those who were hounding him and were determined to kill him:

'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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way' (Luke 4:29-30).

'They tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come' (John 7:30).

'They picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple' (John 8:59).

'They tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands' (John 10:39).

But there was no escaping the crucifixion.

'Now my soul is troubled' (John 12:27).

'Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me' (John 13:21).

'Jesus took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me' (Matthew 26:37-38).

'In his anguish Jesus prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground' (Luke 22:44).

'Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?' (Luke 22:48).

4. There are sentiments in this psalm that disciples of Jesus cannot pray, thanks to Jesus' revelation to us of the true God. In the heart of the psalmist arises a violent desire to see his enemies wiped out. He sees no other way to have peace or justice (verse 15). This verse is omitted from the Church's liturgy. Also, verse nineteen speaks of God bringing down the enemies. In verse twenty-three we see that the psalmist is still struggling. He concludes by saying that he trusts God, but only after he lashes out once more against his enemies.

Jesus is so different. His trust in God always leads him to forgiveness, even in situations that are brought about by people who obstinately refuse to do God's will. He assures his disciples at the Last Supper: 'The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!' (John 16:32-33).

5. Verse twenty-two ('Cast your burden on God, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the just to fall') may be an oracle pronounced during the liturgy, or it may be the psalmist's own heart speaking to him. It is echoed in Peter: 'Cast all your anxiety on God, because he cares for you' (1 Peter 5:7).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we embrace him on the cross, and allow him to embrace us on ours, knowing that he understands our pain. As we hear him say 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46), we pray with the psalmist: 'My God, I place all my trust in you' (verse 23).

Praying Psalm 56 (55) with Jesus

¹Be gracious to me, O God, for my enemies attack me.

They trample me down.

²Wave after wave of them pursue me.

They give me no respite as they bear down upon me.

³*I thank God, I praise God, and God's word.*

⁴*I trust in God, and am not afraid.*

What can mere mortals do to me?

⁵All day long they discredit my words.

Their only thought is to harm me.

⁶They band together in ambush.

They track me down to take my life.

⁸You have kept an account of my turmoil.

You have kept a record of my tears.

⁹My enemies will retreat when I call on you.

This I know, that God is on my side.

¹⁰*I thank God, I praise God, and God's word.*

¹¹*I trust in God, and am not afraid.*

What can mere mortals do to me?

¹²I am bound by the vows I made to you, O God.

I will carry them out, as I offer you my thanks.

¹³You have delivered me from death,

you have kept my feet from stumbling,

so that I may walk in the presence of God,

and enjoy the light of the living.

Verse 7 is not in the liturgy

⁷Repay them for their crimes.

In your anger, God, cast them down!

This is a prayer of trust in God accompanied by a request for God, who is just, to protect the psalmist against human cruelty and violence.

Verse four functions as a refrain. It is repeated in verses ten to eleven. The psalmist is encouraging himself to trust and not be afraid. We recall Paul's powerful declaration of faith: 'If God is for us, who is against us?' (Romans 8:31).

The psalmist praises God for God's word (verse 4). By contrast, his enemies discredit his word (verse 5).

After recording his suffering, the psalmist calls on God to punish his oppressors (verse 7). This verse is not used in the Church's liturgy. It is not a prayer Jesus would pray. He taught us to pray for our enemies rather than plead with God to cast them down in anger. For a reflection on anger in relation to God see Psalm 2, pages 20-23.

The psalmist knows that God is aware of his sufferings. They are not forgotten. We think of Jesus who is with us in our wanderings, his tears mingling with ours (verse 8).

Upheld by God the psalmist now walks steadily, knowing that 'God is on my side' (verse 9).

It appears that, faced with such danger, the psalmist has made a vow to God. In verse 12 he expresses his commitment to carry out what he has promised, as he offers thanks to God for hearing his cry. On thanksgiving see the reflection on Psalm 21, page 74.

In the final verse, either the psalmist has already experienced deliverance and has now come to offer God a thanksgiving offering, or he is so sure of God's answer that he knows his request is as good as answered.

Praying Psalm 57 (56) with Jesus

¹Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me.

Where else can I hide?

In the shadow of your wings I take refuge,
till the destructive storms pass by.

²I cry to you, God the Most High,
as you carry out for me your loving designs.

³Send from heaven to save me.

Frustrate the desires of those who assail me.

Send me your love that never fails.

⁴I am lying down among lions
that greedily devour human prey;
their teeth are spears and arrows,
their tongue a sharpened sword.

⁵Arise, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory shine on earth.

⁶They set for me a net, a trap to ensnare me.
They dug a pit in my path, but fell in it themselves.

⁷My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast.
I will sing and make melody.

⁸Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.

⁹I will thank you, O God*, among the peoples;
among the nations I will sing your praises.

¹⁰For your covenant love is as encompassing as the heavens;
your faithfulness as the skies.

¹¹Arise, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory shine on earth.

The psalmist is taking refuge in God's presence (verse 1) till a calamity passes. It seems he is being falsely accused (verse 4). The judgment, according to custom, will take place in the morning at the city gate. The psalmist pleads with God to intervene on his behalf to ensure a just verdict. He trusts that God's faithful covenant love will dispel the darkness with the rising sun (see the refrain, verses 5 and 11). Rather than await the dawn, the psalmist wants to hurry it on with his expectant hope that God's faithful covenant love will light up the heavens like the first rays of the rising sun. He realises that it is not God who needs awakening, it is himself ('Awake my soul', verse 8). He remains vigilant.

He is confident that God has heard his cry. His accusers will be caught like animals in the trap they have set for him (verse 6). The beautifully confident conclusion (verses 7 to 11) comes out of a lot of suffering, and profound trust in God's 'love that never fails' (verse 3), God's 'covenant love and faithfulness' (verse 10).

1. Saint Augustine sees this psalm as celebrating the passion of Jesus. We are invited to contemplate the pierced heart of Jesus on the cross. 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he' (John 8:28). We think of the innocent Jesus trusting in God and confident that the darkness of crucifixion and death will be dispelled by the light of the resurrection. For us the ultimate dawn is when we share in Jesus' risen life.

2. The refrain includes a prayer: 'Let your glory shine on earth.' Introducing the birth of Jesus, Luke draws on the imagery of this psalm: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us' (Luke 1:78). When Jesus is born 'a multitude of the heavenly host praised God saying: Glory to God in the highest heaven' (Luke 2:13-14). God's glory (God's radiant beauty) is revealed on earth in everything Jesus was, everything he said and everything he did.

In his Second Letter to the Christian communities in Corinth, Paul recalls a scene from the Book of Exodus (34:29-35). The people have worshipped a golden calf. Moses pleads with God to remain present to his people in spite of their sin. God cannot reveal his glory directly to the sinful people for that would mean their destruction. So God reveals God's glory to Moses who will mediate God's presence to the people. The reflected glory on Moses' face authenticates his word as the word of God, but even this reflected glory causes the people to be afraid. So Moses veils his face.

The symbolism of the veil is carried over into the curtain veiling the inner sanctuary of the temple, the holy of holies. God is present among his people, but necessarily veiled. Hence the longing of the people to see the face of God and the promise that one day 'you shall see and be radiant' (Isaiah 60:5). Paul is comparing God's revelation through the ministry of Moses with the new revelation: the revelation of God in Jesus through Paul's ministry.

The ministry entrusted to Moses 'came in glory', as was demonstrated by the transfiguration of Moses' face. The ministry entrusted to Paul came in 'abounding glory', 'greater glory' - as is dramatically portrayed by Paul's disciple Luke in the scene of Jesus' transfiguration (see Luke 9:28-36).

'Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone' (Luke 9:28-36).

The 'old covenant' is no longer the place to which we are to look to find God's glory revealed. The new covenant, the covenant promised long ago, is now being proclaimed. The glory that came with the ministry of Moses had to be 'set aside' (2 Corinthians 3:7). What is being proclaimed through the ministry of Paul is something 'that remains.' One cannot read that statement without hearing an echo from Paul's earlier letter which described love as that which remains (1 Corinthians 13:13). The ministry of the new covenant is the ministry of God's saving love.

Moses needed to be veiled so that the people would not gaze at God's glory and die. Such a veiling was not needed by Paul, for his ministry is to proclaim the good news that God, through Jesus, is giving sinners his own Spirit which can change their hearts so that they can be in communion with the Holy One and gaze upon the face of God without fear of condemnation and death.

If we cannot see God's 'glory shining on earth' in Jesus, it is because we have a veil over our eyes. The only one who can remove the veil is Christ. We must allow ourselves to be drawn by the Spirit of Christ into the communion of love that is found within the Christian community. If we fail to welcome the good news, this is a sign that our 'minds' remain 'hardened' and 'a veil lies over our hearts.' What Isaiah said is still true: 'these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me' (Isaiah 29:13).

If we wish to have the veil removed we must do what Moses did: we must 'turn to the Lord' (2 Corinthians 3:16). How? By looking for where the activity of the Lord (the Spirit) is revealed. God promised through the prophet Jeremiah: 'I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart' (Jeremiah 24:7). It is only through the active power of God's saving love that we can receive this new heart, and it is 'the light of the gospel' that reveals 'the glory of the Messiah, who is the image of God' (2 Corinthians 4:4).

With the gift of the Spirit and a new heart we will at last be free from all that enslaves us – free to hear God's word and to obey God's will; free at last to 'love the Lord your God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our might' (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Paul concludes with a beautiful description of the essence of the Christian life enjoyed by all those who welcome the proclamation of the gospel. Christ is the Wisdom of God, 'a breath of the power of God', 'a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty', 'a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of God's goodness' (Wisdom 7:25-26). Christ is the 'mirror', the 'image' of GOD (see 2 Corinthians 4:4, 6), and when 'with unveiled faces' we contemplate Christ, we see there 'the glory of GOD.' As Moses was transformed when he went into the presence of God, so are we. For us Christians, however, for 'all of us', it is into Christ that we are transformed. It is God's Spirit who effects this transformation, for it is the Spirit who is 'the source of your life in Christ Jesus' (1 Corinthians 1:30).

The redeeming, healing and saving love of God revealed in the heart and on the face of Jesus, invites us to look upon him with faces unveiled. Daring to believe the good news, we contemplate Christ and are bathed in his light. He gives us his Spirit who purifies our hearts. It is God whose glory we contemplate on the face and in the heart of Christ. It is God's Spirit, the Spirit of love that binds Jesus to God, who purifies our hearts, and transforms them into the heart and the mind of Christ. It is in the Christian life of the minister of the new covenant, and in the Christian lives being lived in their own community, that the Corinthians are to see the radiance of God's glory. For 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).

Reflecting on Psalm 58 (57) in Jesus' Company

The Church does not use this psalm in the liturgy.

There is a place in the prayer of a disciple of Jesus for wanting justice from God, but there is no place for wanting God to 'break the teeth' (verse 6) of one's enemies, or for longing for 'vengeance', and delighting in 'bathing one's feet in the blood of the wicked' (verse 10). Jesus could not pray this psalm, neither should a disciple.

¹You gods, are your verdicts just?

Do you judge people fairly?

²No! In your hearts you devise crimes;
you deal out violence on earth.

³The wicked go astray from the womb;
they err, uttering lies from their birth.

⁴They have venom like that of a serpent,
like the deaf adder that stops its ear

⁵lest it hear the sound of the snake charmer,
expert in casting spells.

⁶O God, break their teeth.

GOD, tear out the fangs of the young lions!

⁷Let them drain away like water;
let them be trodden down and wither like grass.

⁸Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime;
like the aborted foetus that never sees the sun.

⁹Sweep them away like bushes caught in a sudden whirlwind,
like wild beasts, like a funeral pyre!

¹⁰The just will rejoice when they see vengeance done.
They will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.

¹¹People will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the just;
surely there is a God who judges the earth.'

Surrounded by violence and injustice, the psalmist can see little good in the human race. He blames the gods and calls on GOD to act by sweeping the evil away and ensuring a reward for the just. The final verse sums up his sentiments: 'Surely there is a reward for the just; surely there is a God who judges the earth.' As we reflect on the psalm we would do well to reflect on the fact that the evil that the psalmist is complaining about is not all 'out there'. It can be found also 'within'. The same applies when we pray in the 'Our Father': 'rescue us from evil' (Matthew 6:13). Our main need is to be rescued from the evil that seeks to find residence in our own heart.

The Psalmist is crying out against the way evil is expressed in his world. He is crying out against those who abuse executive and judicial power by acting unjustly. He is crying out against those whose hearts are corrupt and who act accordingly. They are dead inside. They have no problem in sacrificing the innocent for an ideology, a cause or a party. When they act in an evil way, it is premeditated, deliberate and cold-blooded. Their evil is second nature to them. It does not occur to them that they are doing wrong, though this takes away neither responsibility nor guilt.

They are hardened against compassion, so puffed up are they with their own power and importance. They are snakes – the epiphany of Evil. Their bite is poisonous (verses 4-5).

Having expressed his shock and horror, the psalmist gives vent to his anger and to an impassioned plea. He implores God to intervene against the satanic power of injustice and violence (verses 6-9).

Praying excerpts from Psalm 59 (58) with Jesus

¹Rescue me, God, from my foes;
protect me from those who rise up against me.

²Rescue me from those who do evil.
Save me from those thirsting for my blood.

³They are out to take my life.
They stir up strife against me.

⁴For no fault of mine, O GOD,
they hasten and make ready to attack.
Rouse yourself to my call, come and see!

⁵You, Mighty GOD, are God of Israel.

⁹O my strength, I watch for you.
*For you, O God, are my fortress.
You show me covenant love.*

¹⁰God goes before me
and shows me the defeat of my enemies.

¹¹People will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the just;
surely there is a God who judges the earth.

¹⁶As for me, I will sing of your might.
Every morning I will acclaim your love.
For you have been a fortress for me,
a refuge in the day of my distress.

¹⁷O my strength, I will sing praises to you.
*For you, O God, are my fortress,
You show me covenant love.*

We can join Jesus in praying the verses chosen by the Church for use in the liturgy. There were those in Jesus' life who were 'out to take his life' and who were 'stirring up strife against him' (verse 3). We looked at the opposition Jesus had to face when reflecting on Psalm 3, pages 25-26. The word translated 'life' in verse 3 indicates that it is not only the psalmist's physical life that his enemies are after. They are out to destroy his dreams, his hopes and everything that gives meaning to his life. It was the same with those who opposed Jesus, and it can be the same for Jesus' disciples.

The psalmist feels that he can call on God for help, as he has not brought on this punishment by his own transgression, sin or guilt. Mighty God (verse 5), God of the universe, is the God of Israel and the Lord of history. Surely GOD will not allow this injustice to prevail!

The refrain in verse nine is especially beautiful. Like the psalmist, Jesus looked to God for strength. Paul encourages us to do the same: 'Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power' (Ephesians 6:10). 'May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience' (Colossians 1:11). 'Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 2:1). The refrain goes on: 'I watch for you.' See the reflection on Psalm 4, page 28, where we meditated on Jesus' prayer. Also the reflection on Psalm 34, page 111, where we are encouraged to 'look to God and be radiant.' See Psalm 11, page 46, where we reflected on Love's gazing. The refrain concludes with the words: 'My God, you show me love.' The refrain is repeated in verse seventeen, but with a significant change. In verse nine the psalmist is on the watch for God. In verse seventeen he sings in praise of God. His trust has brought him peace. He knows that GOD heeds his plea.

The 'I' in verse sixteen is emphatic. The enemy are behaving like animals. They will not prevail against GOD. The psalmist is confident in God's protection and when the day dawns after a night of darkness, he will give voice to his praise.

In the Church's liturgy,
Psalm 59 (58) is prayed only in the Prayer of the Day, Friday Week 2.

The following verses are omitted.

- ⁵Awake to punish the nations;
spare none of them who treacherously plot evil.
- ⁶*They turn up at dusk, howling like wild dogs and prowling about the city.*
- ⁷There they are, snarling, their mouths filled with daggers –
for they think 'Who will hear us?'
- ⁸But you laugh at them, O GOD; you hold the nations in disdain.
- ¹¹Do not kill them, not if it means that my people will forget them.
Use your power to make them totter,
and bring them down, God*, our shield.
- ¹²The sin of their mouths is the loquacious nonsense that they utter;
let them stay trapped in their insolence
by the lies and the curses that they utter.
- ¹³Annihilate them in your wrath; annihilate them that they may be no more,
and that they may know that God rules in Jacob
and to the utmost ends of the earth.
- ¹⁴*They turn up at dusk, howling like wild dogs and prowling about the city.*
- ¹⁵They roam about in search of food, and growl if they do not get their fill.

The verses omitted in the Church's liturgy are a powerful expression of the psalmist's feelings, but they don't fit well as Christian prayer. Thanks to Jesus we do not pray that God will 'awake to punish the nations' (verse 5), nor that God will 'laugh at them' (verse 8). Jesus teaches us to love them and pray for them (Matthew 5:44), not that they 'stay trapped in their insolence' (verse 12). We do not want God to 'annihilate them in wrath' (verse 13). See Psalm 2, pages 20-23 for a reflection on God's 'anger'. The psalmist does not want the enemies of Israel to be killed quickly. He wants them to fall from power, to suffer humiliation and to have to live through the results of their evil, and only then to be consumed. This will allow the people of Israel (Jacob) to witness what happens to them and remember God's special care for his people. It will also give time for the nations of the world to see that Israel's God is the real God.

Reflecting on Psalm 60 (59) in Jesus' Company

The understanding of God as a Warrior Lord, the thinking that God controls what happens in history, and the attitude the psalmist has to enemies leave this psalm as an historical record, but not as a prayer for Jesus or a disciple.

- ¹O God, you have rejected us. Our wall has been breached.
You are angry with us. We need you to return.
- ²You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open.
Repair its cracks for it is tottering.
- ³You have made your people suffer a disaster.
You have given us a wine to drink that has made us reel.
- ⁴Set up a standard for those who revere you,
that they might rally to it out of bowshot.
- ⁵Give victory with your powerful arm,
so that those whom you love may be rescued.
- ⁶God has decreed from the sanctuary:
'I will triumph and divide up Shechem.
I will portion out the Vale of Succoth.
- ⁷Gilead is mine, and Manasseh.
Ephraim is my helmet; Judah is my commander's staff.
- ⁸Moab is my wash bowl; on Edom I plant my shoe.
Against me, Philistia, hurl forth a war cry if you dare!
- ⁹Who will lead us to Edom to breach the city wall?
- ¹⁰God, will you still hold back? Will you desert our camp?
- ¹¹Grant us help against the foe, for human help is of no avail.
- ¹²With God we will do valiantly. It is our God who will crush our foes.

The tension between God's remembered promise and the actual situation expressed in a lament is resolved in the final verse with an act of trust. The psalmist knows that God will rescue 'those whom you love' (verse 5).

Verses 5-12 are found also in Psalm 108:6-13.

Praying Psalm 61 (60) with Jesus

¹Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.

²From the end of the earth I call with a despondent heart.

Carry me high on a rock where they cannot reach me.

³You are my refuge, my bastion against the enemy.

⁴I want to abide in your tent forever,
find refuge under the shelter of your wings.

⁵You, O God, have heard my vows.
You have given me the heritage
that belongs to those who revere ['fear'] you.

⁶Prolong the life of the king;
may his reign endure for generations!

⁷May your eyes always be upon him.
May your covenant love and faithfulness watch over him.

⁸And I will continue to sing praises in your honour,
as I fulfill my vows each day.

The psalmist is living in exile (verse 2). He is pleading with God to protect him against his enemies (verse 3). He would love to live in the temple with God, who dwells there in the sanctuary, under the outstretched wings of the cherubim (verse 4). We find this prayer repeated in the psalms.

'Guard me as the pupil of your eye;
hide me in the shade of your wings' (Psalm 17:8).

'How precious is your covenant love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shade of your wings' (Psalm 36:7).

'Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me.
In the shade of your wings I will take refuge,
till the destructive storms pass by' (Psalm 57:1).

'In the shade of your wings I sing for joy' (Psalm 63:7).

'God will cover you with pinions,
and under God's wings you will find refuge' (Psalm 91:4).

The psalmist is carrying out his religious obligations faithfully. He belongs among those who 'revere ('fear') God (verse 5). For a reflection on the meaning of 'Fear of God' see Psalm 2, page 23. In addition, he has made solemn promises (vows) to God (verse 5), which he is fulfilling each day (verse 8), confident that God will reward him by giving him his share in 'the heritage that belongs to those who revere you' (verse 5).

In verses 6-7 he prays for the king: 'May your eyes always be upon him. May your covenant love and faithfulness watch over him.' 'Covenant love' (*hesed*) and 'faithfulness' (*emet*) appear together in the creedal formula of Exodus 34:6, which is as close as we get to a definition of God's essential characteristics in the Hebrew Bible: 'God merciful and gracious, abounding in covenant love and faithfulness.' These divine characteristics appear together in other psalms.

'YOUR paths are covenant love and faithfulness,
for those who keep your covenant' (Psalm 25:10).

'Covenant love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other' (Psalm 85:10).

'YOU are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in covenant love and faithfulness' (Psalm 86:15).

'Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
covenant love and faithfulness go before you' (Psalm 89:14).

'You have remembered your covenant love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel' (Psalm 98:3).

When, like the psalmist, we are despondent and fearful, we are invited to pray this psalm with Jesus. Having remained faithful to God in everything, Jesus now enjoys 'the heritage that belongs to those who revere God' (verse 5). In God's presence, he is experiencing God's glory (John 17:5).

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). Listen to him as he prays that his Father's gaze will always be upon us; that God's covenant love and faithfulness will watch over us (verse 7). He encourages us: 'Make your home in me as I make my home in you' (John 15:4). Let us renew our faith that he 'longs to gather us as a hen gathers her brood under her wings' (Matthew 23:37).

Let us renew our commitment to the covenant, and to the promises we have made, and let us join the risen Jesus in singing praise to God (verse 8).

Praying Psalm 62 (61) with Jesus

¹*Only in God can my soul find rest. In God alone is my salvation.*

²*God is my rock, my safety, my fortress. I shall not be shaken.*

³**How long will you keep up your attack?**

**How long will you batter your victim
as you batter a leaning wall, or a tottering fence?**

⁴**Their only plan is to bring a person down.**

**They take pleasure in falsehood.
With their mouths they utter blessings,
but in their hearts they curse.**

⁵*Only in God can my soul find rest. In God alone is my hope.*

⁶*God is my rock, my safety, my fortress. I shall not be shaken.*

⁷**In God is my salvation and my glory,
my stronghold, my haven.**

⁸**Trust God at all times, O people.**

Before God, our refuge, pour out your hearts.

⁹**Common folk are but a breath, those of high estate a delusion.**

Placed in the scales, up they go; they weigh less than a breath.

¹⁰**Put no trust in extortion. Set no vain hopes on fraud.**

If your wealth increases, do not set your hearts on it.

¹¹**Time and again God has said: 'Strength and love are mine to give.'**

Covenant love belongs to you, O God*, our shield.

¹³**You repay each of us according to what we have done.**

1. The psalmist is suffering from unrelenting aggression (verses 3-4). Praying this psalm with Jesus we reflect on the unrelenting opposition Jesus had to face (see Psalm 3, pages 25-26).

2. The refrain (verses 1-2 and 5-6) beautifully expresses the psalmist's faith: 'Only in God can my soul find rest.' This takes us to the heart of Jesus' prayer (see the reflection on Psalm 4, page 28). Ultimately our soul can find rest only in God, for human beings are no more than a breath, a puff of wind (verse 9; Hebrew *hebel*, the name given to Cain's brother in the story in Genesis 2:4-8). We must put trust in God (verse 2), not in fragile human beings like ourselves (see Psalm 39:4-6).

3. In the first refrain the psalmist says: 'In God alone is my salvation' (verse 1). The Hebrew *yeshu'a* ('salvation') and the related verb occur 136 times in the psalms. Salvation speaks of the presence and action of God who answers our cry for help and comes to our aid. The classical text is Exodus 14, which describes the action of God at the Red Sea: 'As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to GOD ... Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the salvation that GOD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. GOD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still ... Thus GOD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians' (Exodus 14:10, 13-14, 30).

Reflecting on the victory of Cyrus of Persia over the Babylonian armies and the imminent return of the exiles to Jerusalem, the prophet writes: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns' ... All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation wrought by our God' (Isaiah 52:7,10; quoted in Luke 3:6). God's salvation is offered to the whole human race: 'Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other' (Isaiah 45:22).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we remember that the name 'Jesus' derives from the word 'salvation.' Joseph is told: 'Your wife, Mary, will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21). Zechariah was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' and made this prophecy about his son, John: 'You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 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, to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1:76-79).

Since God is a 'saving God' we should cry to God when we are in distress, trusting that God hears our cry and will come to aid us. In a powerfully symbolic scene Matthew portrays Jesus walking on the sea. Jesus was not dragged down into the chaos that threatened to engulf him. Peter wanted to be like Jesus in this. While he kept his eyes on Jesus he, too, could 'walk on water', but as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus he 'began to sink'. He cried out: 'Lord, save me!' (Matthew 14:30). We are invited to join Peter in this cry, remembering that Jesus came 'to seek out and save the lost' (Luke 19:10).

Paul's message at the beginning of his first missionary journey was about salvation: 'You descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent' (Acts 13:26). Luke concludes Paul's preaching in Rome with the same message: 'Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen' (Acts 28:28).

Remembering the ways in which God has responded in the past brings peace and joy in the knowledge that whatever our sufferings, God is the one who saves. The accent is on God bringing divine help to aid us in our difficulties, not protecting us from having to face them. Jesus went through a terrible death. God did not intervene to protect him from it, but God did respond to Jesus' pleading, and raised him to eternal life. 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. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (Hebrews 5:7-8). If we welcome God's grace, we, too, will be raised to life with Jesus.

4. When the refrain is repeated in verses 5-6, 'salvation' is replaced by 'hope' (tiqwah). In English 'hope' is closely associated with 'expectation' and 'desire'. In the psalms it is related to trust. A perfect expression of hope is found in Psalm 131: 'My heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother. My soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in God from this time on and forevermore.' A little child is not looking for a future gift. Rather, undistracted by thoughts of the future, it is resting peacefully, trusting in its mother's love. This is what it means to hope.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of 'our hope of sharing the glory of God' (Romans 5:2). It is through Jesus that we exult in the hope of final salvation when we will enjoy God's glory, when our whole being will be caught up in the eternal radiance of God's light and love. Paul is thinking here of the future, but he also retains the meaning which hope (*elpis*) has in the psalms and in the prophetic writings. Paul's focus is not on longing, but on a present attitude of peaceful trust that, as we now share Jesus' life of communion with God, so, in the future, we will enjoy a full and eternal communion with him in the glory of God. Our 'hope of glory' is 'Christ living in us' (Colossians 1:27). As Paul says: '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). Paul prays: 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (Romans 15:13).

The Letter to the Hebrews 6:19 likens hope to a grappling iron that anchors our soul in heaven where the risen Christ has entered into glory. He holds us fast. If we cling to him we will join him there.

Paul regularly associates hope with faith and 'love.' Perhaps the most well-known text is in his hymn to love which concludes: 'Now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Pursue love' (1 Corinthians 13:13). There is a place for eager longing. There is also, and more importantly, a place for hope, where the focus is not on longing for something for which one is expectantly waiting, but on present assurance because of the God in whom one now places one's confidence, on whom one now relies, to whom one now looks. We are sure that what God has promised will happen, and we can leave the future peacefully to God, and focus now on love. Let us join the psalmist and Jesus in praying: 'Only in God can my soul find rest. In God alone is my hope.'

5. For 'God is my glory' (verse 7) see the reflection on Psalm 57, pages 177-179.

6. In verses 8-12 the psalmist pleads with others to do what he is doing: to place their trust, their hope, in God alone. He reminds us that the power claimed by our oppressors is illusory (verse 9). Real power rests with God, and ultimately what matters to God is not power and wealth gained by fraud (verse 10). Jesus tells us: 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6:21). Ultimately what matters is the way we live (verse 13) - a point highlighted by Jesus in the parable about the ultimate judgment (see Matthew 25:31-46).

As we 'pour out our hearts' (verse 8) with Jesus, hear him say: 'Come to me all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Learn from me for I am humble and gentle of heart, and you will find rest for your soul' (Matthew 11:28-29).

Praying Psalm 63 (62) with Jesus

¹O God, you are my God, for you I rise at dawn.

My soul thirsts for you. My body [‘flesh’] pines for you,
like a dry, weary, waterless land.

²I gaze on you in the sanctuary,
to behold your power and your glory.

³Your love is worth more than life.

My lips will sing your praise.

⁴I will praise you as long as I live.

I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

⁵I am filled as with a banquet.

I praise you with joy.

⁶I think of you as I lie awake,

meditating on you throughout the night.

⁷You have been my help.

In the shade of your wings I sing for joy.

⁸I cling to you with all my heart.

Your right hand holds me fast.

Verses 9-11 are omitted in the Church’s liturgy

⁹Those who want me dead will go down into the depths of the earth.

¹⁰They will die by the sword, their bodies food for jackals.

¹¹When their lying mouths are stopped, the king will rejoice in God.

All who put their trust in God will sing in exultation.

The psalmist thinks of God as he lies on his bed at night (verse 6), and he rises in the morning to praise God in the temple (verse 2). Psalm 63 is a prayer of longing and trust. Note the constant reference to the body: flesh, lips, hands; seeing, tasting, touching, speaking. For a reflection on longing see Psalm 11, page 45. For a reflection on thirsting for God see Psalm 42, pages 132-133.

1. Longing for communion with God is a recurring theme in the psalms:

‘O Lord, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you’ (Psalm 38:9).

‘As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?’ (Psalm 42:1)

‘My soul longs, indeed it faints, for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God’ (Psalm 84:2).

‘Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually’ (Psalm 105:3-4).

‘I stretch out my hands to you;
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land’ (Psalm 143:6).

‘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’ (Psalm 36:8-9).

We are encouraged by the words of Jeremiah, which tell us of God’s response to our longing: ‘When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me’ (Jeremiah 29:13).

2. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we might reflect on two contrasting scenes in the gospels. In the first scene (Mark 10:17-22) a rich man comes up to Jesus full of a beautiful desire. He wants what he calls ‘eternal life’ - that is a life that knows no bounds, but that keeps on filling the heart from the fount of all life who is God. We all know this desire. It is no surprise that when he experiences this desire he is attracted to Jesus. We are told that Jesus gazed upon him and loved him. So why did the man go away grieving? What was his problem? In the scene just before this one, people are bringing little children to Jesus. When the disciples object Jesus says: ‘If you do not receive the kingdom of God as a little child you will never enter it’ (Mark 10:15). The rich man is very earnest, and has been exemplary in obeying God’s commandments, but he doesn’t want to change and become like a child. He doesn’t want to let go control. He doesn’t want to make space for God’s gift.

Life is a gift. How can we accept a gift if our hands are full and we don't want to let anything go. For the rich man the problem was not wealth. Rather it was the fact that his riches possessed him. He was into control and he thought he could stay in control and possess eternal life as well. But we can't. As Jesus says, salvation – finding the life we seek and need – is impossible for us (Mark 10:27). We can't get it on our own. It comes from God. There is no need for us to go away grieving, for God loves us and longs to give God's Self to us. Can we free ourselves to receive what we so long for?

Things are very different for Mary Magdalene when she goes to the tomb after the Sabbath to be with Jesus (John 20:1, 11-18). Pope Gregory the Great expresses beautifully what happened.

'Because of the ardent love of her heart, Mary Magdalene continued seeking Jesus when she could not find him, even after the other disciples had gone away. In tears she kept searching, and, afire with love, she yearned for him. Thus it happened that she alone saw him. She had already sought and found nothing, but she continued seeking and so found the object of her love. While she was seeking, her longing grew stronger and stronger, until it was allayed in the embrace of Him whom she was seeking ... At first she did not recognise him, but then Jesus said to her: Mary! ... as if to say: "Now recognise the one who recognises you" ... Outwardly it was He who was the object of her search, but inwardly it was He who was teaching her to search for Him' (Homily 25).

It is to satisfy this same desire that we come together on the day of the Resurrection (Sunday) to 'the sanctuary' (verse 2) for the eucharist. We remember the advice of Saint John of the Cross: 'God does not give grace and love except according to the soul's desire and love. The more the soul desires and loves, the more God gives' (Spiritual Canticle 13,12).

We find this sentiment of longing expressed again and again throughout the history of the Church. In the first years of the second century Ignatius of Antioch writes ahead to the community in Rome as he was being taken there under armed escort to be thrown to the lions for the sport of the populace.

'He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire ... Here is one who longs only to be God's; do not delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God. If any of you has God within himself, understand my longings, and feel for me, because you will know the forces by which I am constrained ... Here am I, yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for the things of this world, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, "Come to the Father". There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love' (Letter to the Romans 6,1-2).

Gregory of Nyssa (d.395) writes:

'God wants the delay in pleasure to set afire the desire of the soul so that, together with this ardour, joy may also increase ... To find God means to seek Him continually ... This is truly seeing God, when one is not sated in desiring Him ... God is eternally sought ... The teaching which Scripture gives us is, I think, the following: the person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following Him. The contemplation of His face is an endless walking towards Him ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped' (Homily 2 on the Canticle of Canticles, 801).

The theme of longing recurs often in the writings of Augustine (d.431):

'I call upon you, God my Mercy, who made me and did not forget me when I forgot you. I call you to come into my soul, for by inspiring it to long for you you prepare it to receive you' (Confessions 13.1).

In a conversation between his soul and God, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (d.1109) writes:

'Come now, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in Him. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for Him and, having locked the door, seek Him out. Speak now my whole heart, speak now to God: 'I seek your face, O Lord, your face I seek.' ... What shall I do, most high God, what shall this exile do, tormented by love of you and yet cast off far from your face? I yearn to see you, I desire to come close to you, I long to find you, I am eager to seek you out and I do not see your face ... Look upon us, Lord; hear us, enlighten us, show yourself to us. Give yourself to us that it may be well with us, for without you it goes so ill for us. Have pity on our efforts and our strivings towards you, for we can avail nothing without you. Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you' (Proslogion chapter 1).

Mechthild of Magdeburg (13th century) writes:

'I delight in loving him who loves me, and I long to love him to death, boundlessly, and without ceasing. Be happy, my soul, for your Life has died for love of you. Love him so fiercely that you could die for him. Thus you burn ever more without ever being extinguished as a living flame in the vast fire of high majesty. Thus you become full of the fire of love. This makes you here utterly happy.

You can no longer teach me anything. I cannot turn away from love. I must be its captive. Otherwise, I cannot go on living. Where it dwells, there I must remain, both in death and in life. This is the folly of fools who live free of anguish' (Book 1, 28, The Flowering Light of the Godhead).

We must trust this longing. Like the deer longing for flowing streams we may not know what direction to take, or we may not have the energy to run. Let us be gentle with ourselves. It is God who has placed the longing in our heart, and, provided we attend to it, we will continue to find ourselves drawn.

We do not have to go anywhere to be with God. God is within us. We are simply to say Yes to God as God draws us inwards into our own heart where God longs to be in communion with us. Give in to the longing. Create times of stillness. Learn to 'waste time' in prayer, listening to the murmuring of the longing as it washes over the rocks of uncertainty and doubt. The experience of the psalmist can help persuade us that in experiencing this longing we are not alone.

3. Psalm 63:2 reads: 'I gaze on you in the sanctuary, to behold your power and your glory.' For a reflection on Love's Gazing see Psalm 11, page 46. For a reflection on 'the face of God' see Psalm 31, pages 104-105.

'The upright shall behold his face' (Psalm 11:7).

'I shall behold your face; when I awake I shall be satisfied,
knowing that you have appeared' (Psalm 17:15).

'One thing I asked 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' (Psalm 27:4).

4. Psalm 63:6 reads: 'I think of you as I lie awake, meditating on you throughout the night.'

'Their delight is in the law of GOD,
and on GOD's law they meditate day and night' (Psalm 1:2).

'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,
GOD, my rock and my redeemer' (Psalm 19:14).

'I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my spirit' (Psalm 77:6).

'I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds' (Psalm 77:12).

'May my meditation be pleasing to God, for in GOD I rejoice' (Psalm 104:34).

'Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long' (Psalm 119:97).

'I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds,
I meditate on the works of your hands' (Psalm 143:5).

'On the glorious splendour of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate' (Psalm 145:5).

5. Psalm 63:7 reads: 'In the shade of your wings I sing for joy.' For a reflection on 'the shade of God's wings' see Psalm 61, page 186.

Praying Psalm 64 (63) with Jesus

¹Hear my cry, O God. Listen to my complaint.

I am afraid. Please keep me safe.

²Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked,
from the scheming of those set on evil.

³They sharpen their tongues like swords.
Like arrows they aim their cutting words.

⁴They ambush the innocent.
They shoot suddenly and have no fear.

⁵They hold fast to their evil purpose.
They talk of laying hidden snares:

⁶'Who can see us?' they say,
'Our scheme is cunningly conceived.'

⁷It is God, who searches the mind
and knows the depths of the heart.

¹⁰The just rejoice and find refuge in GOD.
The upright of heart sing praise.

Omitted

⁷Suddenly they are struck
by arrows shot at them by God.

⁸Because of their tongue God brings them to ruin.
All who see them shake their heads in horror.

⁹Everyone is afraid.
They ponder what God has done.

The psalmist thinks of God as a 'warrior Lord' who controls everything that happens (see the reflection on Psalm 2, pages 20-22). Since 'God searches the mind and knows the depths of the heart' (verse 7), the psalmist is confident that God is bringing about the defeat of those who 'hold fast to their evil purpose' (verse 5). He encourages us to find refuge in God, and to continue to 'rejoice' and 'sing praise' (verse 10).

Praying Psalm 65 (64) with Jesus

¹To you our praise is due, to you who dwell in Zion.

²We make our vows to you, our God, to you who answer our prayer.

³We come to you, all of us, with our burden of guilt.
Our transgressions overwhelm us, but you continue to pardon.

⁴Blessed and happy are those whom you bring near to live in your courts.
We are filled with the goodness of your house,
with the graces of your holy temple.

⁵By awesome deeds you answer us with justice, O God our saviour.
You are the hope of the ends of the earth and of the far distant isles.

⁶By your power you establish the mountains,
you who are girded with might.

⁷You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves, and the tumult of the peoples.

⁸Those who live at earth's farthest bounds
are overawed by your signs.
The lands of sunrise and sunset you fill with your joy.

⁹You tend the land, providing it with water.
How wonderful the harvest!
Your river in heaven brims over to give the earth what it needs.

¹⁰You water abundantly the furrows, levelling their ridges,
softening them with showers and blessing their growth.

¹¹You crown the year with your bounty.
Your furrows overflow with abundance.

¹²The pastures of the wilderness flourish.
The hills are girded with joy,

¹³the meadows are clothed with flocks,
the valleys are decked with grain.
They shout for joy. Yes, they sing.

The psalmist is aware of how blessed he is to be able to join the assembly as they approach God in the temple (verse 4). The occasion is probably the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16).

1. At the heart of Israel's faith is the belief that God 'forgives guilt (*'awôn*) and transgression (*pesha'*) and sin (*hâtâ'*)' (Exodus 34:7). *hâtâ'* is the word used most frequently in the psalms for 'sin', though it is not used in this psalm. It denotes an offence committed against someone with whom one is in an established relationship. This applies most significantly to our covenant relationship with God. It covers not only the offence but also the consequences for the sinner and for whatever and whoever it is that he has polluted through his sin.

The psalmist speaks of the 'burden of guilt' (*'awôn*, verse 3). This affects the sinner. It also affects the community. He is confident that we are all welcome to approach God (verse 3). Our 'burden of guilt' is no reason to stay away (verse 3).

'Our transgressions (*pesha'*) overwhelm us' (verse 3). *pesha'* denotes a break in relationships caused by an act that is so serious as to provoke outrage and threaten serious sanctions. In regard to God it denotes a rebellion that breaks communion – a break that God wants to mend.

2. The psalms have a rich and varied vocabulary for pardoning sin. They plead with God to 'remove' it (Psalm 32:5); to 'look away from' it (Psalm 51:9); to 'cover it over' (Psalm 32:1); to 'rub it out' (Psalm 109:14); to 'wash it away' (Psalm 51:4); to 'purge it away' (Psalm 51:7); to 'not remember it' (Psalm 25:7). Here in Psalm 65 the psalmist is confident that God 'continues to pardon' (Hebrew *kpr*, verse 3). *kpr* is used for 'pardon' in only four psalms: here, and in Psalms 49:7, 78:38 and 79:9. It means 'to cover' and the reference is to the Day of Atonement when the high priest enters the Holy of Holies and approaches the 'mercy-seat', the golden 'cover' (Hebrew *kaporet*) of the ark, God's throne where God, though invisible, has chosen to dwell among his chosen people. Sin cannot be in the presence of God. As the high priest approaches the 'cover' with the sins of the people, they are consumed in the fire of God's merciful forgiveness.

When we feel paralysed, unable to move forward, let us pray that, like the paralysed man, we will have friends who have faith, who will take us to Jesus, and we will hear him say: 'your sins are forgiven' (Mark 2:5). When others know of our sins, and we cannot escape our reputation, let us not despair of being able to love. Let us still go to Jesus and hear him say: 'your sins must have been forgiven, or you could not love so much' (Luke 7:47). Let us remember that Jesus came to call sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:13). He poured out his life in love 'for the forgiveness of sins' (Matthew 26:28). Let us hear him pray from the cross: 'Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). Let us take to heart Paul's exhortation: 'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you' (Ephesians 4:32) – an exhortation included in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: 'Father, forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive anyone indebted to us' (Luke 11:4).

3. The psalmist is filled with gratitude that he has been chosen to 'live in God's courts', where he is 'filled with the goodness of God's house, with the graces of God's holy temple' (verse 4). As we pray this psalm with Jesus, we reflect on Jesus' words: 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (John 15:16). We call to mind the many graces we have received. In the context of being in 'God's house' we think especially of the gift of the Eucharist.

4. In verses 5-8 the psalmist speaks of God's 'awesome deeds' all over the world. In verses 9-13, in one of the most beautifully descriptive pieces of biblical poetry, he invites us to look at the 'miracle' of the seasons and the harvests. God is the Lord of the universe and of history and of nature: 'the lands of sunrise and sunset you fill with your joy' (verse 8). At the Last Supper Jesus spoke about going to God (John 13:33 and 14:4) and returning to his disciples (John 14:3, 18). He went on to say: 'If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father' (John 14:28). He asks them to rise above their sadness and to think of what his going means to him. He is returning to the one he loves.

Jesus wants us to believe that this return is good for us. Throughout the whole Gospel Jesus has been drawing people to himself only so that he might share with them the life of the one he calls 'Father.' From his communion with his Father he is able to send his Spirit to us (John 7:39; 14:15-17). He is able to come to us with his Father (John 14:23). The 'joy' which we are promised is the joy experienced by the Baptist when he heard the voice of the bridegroom (John 3:29), the joy of those who share Jesus' mission (John 4:36). This joy is a fruit of the Spirit (John 20:20-21). It is the joy of having Christ living in us (Galatians 5:22). It is the joy of knowing that we are 'heirs to the promises' (Galatians 3:29), the joy of experiencing the love of our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Paul exhorted the Christians in Thessalonica to 'rejoice always' (1 Thessalonians 5:16). The joy which Paul wishes for them is the joy that fills the heart of Jesus, whose desire it is 'that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete' (John 15:11). It is the happiness of those who live by the beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3-12): those who recognise their dependence upon God and who look to their Father for everything; the joy of the gentle who sense the sacred at the heart of every situation; the joy of those whose hearts have been broken, but who, through the pain, have learned compassion; the joy of those who hunger and thirst for justice; the joy of those who show mercy to others; the joy of the pure in heart who see God; the joy of those who work for peace; the joy of those who share in the sufferings of Jesus and who continue to give themselves in love.

It is the joy of encountering Jesus through his Spirit. The encounter is always a surprise, as filled with dread as it is with joy. It is not an experience to which we can cling. Our faith renewed, we are encouraged to walk in the night, knowing that 'the light shines in the darkness' (John 1:5). The 'Light of the world' (John 8:12) is walking with us. Our faith is 'a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts' (2 Peter 1:19).

Praying Psalm 66 (65) with Jesus

Omitted

¹**Cry out with joy all the earth,
²make music and sing of God's glory. Give God glorious praise!
³Sing, 'How tremendous your deeds!
 Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.
⁴Before you all the earth will bow, praising you in song.'**

⁵**Come and see God's wonders, God's tremendous deeds among us.
⁶It was God who formed dry land in the sea
 to enable the people to cross.
⁷Let our joy be in God who reigns for ever with might.
 God keeps watch on all the nations.
 Let rebels not raise their heads!**

⁸**Bless our God, you peoples. Let praise ring out in honour of God,
⁹who has kept alive our spirits, and kept our feet from stumbling.
¹²We passed through fire and water; but you brought us relief.**

¹³**I come into your house with offerings, animals from my herd,
¹⁴to carry out the promises I made you, when I found myself in trouble.
¹⁵I will offer you burnt offerings,
 with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams, bulls and goats.**

¹⁶**All you who revere ['fear'] God come and hear,
 and I will proclaim what God has done for me.
¹⁷I cried aloud, praising God.
¹⁹And God listened, heeding the words of my prayer.
²⁰Blessed are you, O God, for you did not reject my plea,
 or remove from me your covenant love.**

¹⁰You test us, O God, you try us like silver.¹¹You imprison us, you lay burdens on our backs.¹²You let others beat us down.

The assumption behind these verses is that God controls everything that happens, including the 'trials' that we experience (see reflection on Psalm 2, pages 20-22).

¹⁸If I had cherished evil in my heart, God (the Lord) would not have listened.

Jesus showed us that God listens to the cry of sinners, even of those 'who cherish evil in their hearts.' God listens, and offers forgiveness. Of course, to receive what God offers requires a change on our part. Love is never forced upon us. Though forgiveness is unconditionally offered, it is conditionally received – conditional upon our welcoming of grace, and our repentance.

* * * * *

The psalmist is inviting the assembly to join him in thanking God who has heard his plea and brought him safely through a period of trial. The assembly calls on the whole world to join in thanking the God of the universe, who redeemed his people and who answers prayer. The call to worship reminds us of Paul's hymn: 'At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Philippians 2:10-11).

In verses 5-7 the psalmist recounts the reasons that inspire him to call for worship and praise. God's wonderful deeds are evident all over the inhabited world (see Exodus 14-15 for songs of thanksgiving at the crossing of the Red Sea).

'God keeps watch on all the nations. Let rebels not raise their heads' (verse 7). God is continually scrutinising human behaviour. The pharaoh claimed 'I do not know GOD' (Exodus 5:2), and he was humiliated!

In verse 8 once again we are invited to praise God, 'who has kept alive our spirits' (verse 9). Paul assures us: 'Even when we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved' (Ephesians 2:5).

'We passed through fire and water, but you brought us relief' (verse 12). During their mission in Galatia, Paul and Barnabas 'strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God"' (Acts 14:22).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, we are being encouraged, whatever trials we are going through, to praise God: 'Blessed are you, O God, for you did not reject my plea, or remove from me your covenant love' (verse 20).

Praying Psalm 67 (66) with Jesus

¹O God be gracious to us and bless us,
show us the radiance of your face,
²that your way may be known on earth,
your saving power among the nations.

³*Let the nations praise you, O God;
let all the nations praise you.*

⁴May the whole world be glad
and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity,
you govern the nations of the earth.

⁵*Let the nations praise you, O God;
let all the nations praise you.*

⁶The earth has yielded its harvest.
Our God is blessing us.

⁷O God continue your blessing.
Let the whole world revere you.

⁸*Let the nations praise you, O God;
let all the nations praise you.*

The psalmist wants the whole world to experience God's gracious providence and to respond in praise. Especially notable is the universal ('catholic'), all-embracing, scope of the prayer. Praying this psalm with Jesus, we gaze on him, for it is in Jesus that God 'shows the radiance of God's face' (verse 1). When Philip asked to see God, Jesus replied: 'If you see me you see the Father' (John 14:9).

It was Jesus who made known upon earth God's graciousness and 'saving power', and so revealed the radiance of God's face. Paul prays: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1:3).

'Our God' (verse 6) is GOD. The nations are being invited to praise the one and only God!

Reflecting on Psalm 68 (67) in Jesus' Company

Psalm 68 is a hymn of victory in the style of Exodus 15. The Exodus event explains many elements of the hymn: the presence of God in Sinai (verse 8), the departure, and journey through the wilderness (verse 7), the resistance by some kings (verses 11-12; eg Moab and Bashan, Numbers 21). At the end of the journey they found a cultivated and irrigated land (verses 9-10; see Deuteronomy 11), in which the people settled. Psalm 68 takes the narrative up to the building of the temple as God's dwelling in the Holy Land (verses 16-18 and 35; see Chronicles).

Jesus shared the people's faith in God who liberated their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the promised land. He shared their belief in God's choice to dwell in a special way in the Jerusalem temple, so long as it is 'a house of prayer for all the peoples' (Mark 11:17). Furthermore, as he said to the Samaritan woman: 'The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth' (John 4:23).

But Psalm 68 is not a psalm that would find an echo in the heart of Jesus. The only time it is used in the Lectionary is on the twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary time, and then only the highlighted verses are prayed. The whole psalm is in the Office of Readings for Tuesday, Week 3. Presumably this is for historical interest, hardly as a Christian prayer. The God Jesus knows is not a Warrior Lord (verses 11-14, 17-18) who 'gallops over the plain' (verse 4), and 'scatters the enemy' (verse 1). Jesus does not want to see 'the wicked perish at the presence of God' (verse 2; see verse 21). He does not want us to 'bathe our feet in blood, that the tongues of our dogs may have their share of the foe' (verse 23). He does not 'shatter the heads of our enemies, who walk in their sinful ways' (verse 21). On the contrary he teaches us to love our enemies, because God loves them (see Matthew 5:44-48).

¹God rises up. The enemy scatters.

Let those who hate God flee.

²As smoke is blown away, so let them disappear.

As wax melts before the fire,

so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.

³The just are filled with joy. They exult before God.

They celebrate with jubilant song, making music in God's honour.

⁴Lay down a road for the One who gallops over the plain.

GOD is with us. Let us all rejoice!

⁵Father of orphans and protector of widows

is God in the temple: the holy habitation.

⁶God gives the desolate a home, leads prisoners to freedom.

The rebellious are banished to dwell in a parched land.

⁷O God, you went out at the head of your people.

The earth quaked when you marched through the desert.

⁸The heavens poured down rain,
at the presence of the God of Sinai,
at the presence of the God of Israel.

⁹You showered down a generous rain,
restoring the land, your heritage, when it languished.

¹⁰It is there your flock found a home.

In your goodness you provided for the poor.

¹¹God* sounds the war cry.

Great is the company of those who bear the tidings:

¹²'Kings, armies, they flee, they flee!'

Houses and farms are divided as spoil –
and you stay among the sheepfolds!

Come, share the plunder:

¹³silver plated doves with wings of bright gold.

¹⁴The Almighty scatters kings, like snow on Mount Zalmon.

¹⁵O mighty mountain, mountain of Bashan.

O many-peaked mountain.

¹⁶Why do you look with envy,
at the mountain where God has chosen to dwell?
It is there that GOD will dwell for ever.

¹⁷With chariots by the thousand, tens of thousands of archers,
God* came from Sinai into the holy place.

¹⁸You ascended the high mount, leading captives in your train,
receiving peoples as tribute, into your holy dwelling.

Paul adapts verse eighteen and applies it to the exalted Jesus ascending into heaven and pouring out the gift of God's Holy Spirit: 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people' (Ephesians 4:8). Instead of a procession of conquered kings bringing people as tribute to GOD, Paul presents Jesus as the one who has conquered death and is giving gifts to his people.

¹⁹Blessed be God*, who daily bears us up.

²⁰God is for us our Saviour. It is GOD who liberates from death,

²¹who shatters the heads of our enemies,
as they walk in their sinful ways.

²²God* said, 'I will bring them back from Bashan,
back from the depths of the sea.

²³that you may bathe your feet in blood,
that the tongues of your dogs may have their share of the foe.'

²⁴They witness your solemn procession,
the procession of God into the sanctuary:

²⁵singers in front, musicians behind,
between them girls sounding their timbrels.

²⁶Bless God in the great congregation.

Bless GOD in the assembly of Israel.

²⁷There is Benjamin, the least of them, at the head,
the princes of Judah in great numbers,
the princes of Zebulun, the princes of Naphtali.

²⁸Issue your commands, O God, from your temple in Jerusalem.

²⁹Reveal your great power, as you have done for us before.
Kings bear tribute to you.

³⁰Rebuke the wild animals that live among the reeds,
the herds of bulls, the calves of the peoples.
They fall prostrate before you those who lust after tribute.
Scatter the peoples who delight in war.

³¹Let bronze be brought from Egypt.
Let Sudan hasten to stretch out its hands to God.

³²Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth; sing praises to God*,

³³who rides through the ancient heavens,
causing his mighty voice to thunder.

³⁴Acknowledge the power of God who governs Israel;
whose authority is in the storm clouds.

³⁵Awesome is God in the sanctuary, the God of Israel;
giving power and strength to the people. Blessed be our God!

Praying Psalm 69 (68) with Jesus

¹Save me, O God. The waters have risen to my neck.

²I sink into the mud, and can gain no foothold.

You can see that I am struggling. The waters overwhelm me.

³I am weary with all my crying. Parched is my throat.

My eyes are swollen from looking for my God.

⁴More numerous than the hairs of my head

are those who hate me without cause.

Those who attack me with lies are too much for my strength.

How can I restore what I did not take?

[⁵O God, you know my folly;

the wrong I have done is not hidden from you.

⁶O God*, do not let those who hope in you

be put to shame because of me.

Do not let those who seek you be dismayed because of me.]

⁷It is for your sake that I have borne reproach,

that shame has covered my face.

⁸I have become a stranger to my family,

an alien to my mother's children.

⁹Zeal for your house has consumed me;

the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

¹⁰When I humbled myself with fasting,

they insulted me for doing so.

¹¹When I made sackcloth my clothing,

I became the butt of their jokes,

¹²the gossip of those who sit at the gates,

the subject of drunkard's songs.

¹³I make my prayer to you, my prayer for your favour.

In your great love, answer me, O God,

with your help that never fails.

¹⁴Rescue me from sinking in the mire, from the deep waters.

¹⁵Let not the flood engulf me, or death swallow me up.

¹⁶Answer me, Lord, in your great covenant love,

according to your tender compassion.

¹⁷Do not hide your face from your servant,

for I am in distress – make haste to answer me.

¹⁸Come close. I long for you. Redeem me. Free me from my enemies.

¹⁹You know the insults I receive. You know all my foes.

²⁰Insults have broken my heart.

I have reached the end of my strength.

I looked in vain for compassion,

for comforters, but none could I find.

²¹They gave me poison for food,

and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

²⁹I am brought low and in pain.

Let your salvation, O God, protect me.

³⁰Then I will praise your name in song;

I will acknowledge your greatness with thanksgiving.

³¹This will please GOD more than oxen,

more than beasts prepared for sacrifice.

³²Let the oppressed see it and be glad.

You who seek God, let your hearts revive.

³³For GOD hears the needy,

and does not despise those who are in bonds.

³⁴Let heaven and earth praise God,

the sea and all its living creatures.

³⁵For God will rescue Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah.

**The servants of the Lord will live there;
the land will be their possession.**

**³⁶Their offspring will inherit it,
and those who love God will dwell there.**

* * * * *

Verses 22-28 are not used in the Church's liturgy

²²Let their table be for them a trap, a snare for their allies.

²³Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see.

Make their loins tremble continually.

²⁴Pour out your indignation upon them;

let your burning anger overtake them.

²⁵Let no one live in their tents.

²⁶They persecute those whom you have struck down,

and those whom you have wounded they attack still more.

²⁷Add guilt to their guilt. May they have no acquittal from you.

²⁸Let them be blotted out of the book of the living.

Let them not be enrolled among the just.

In these verses the psalmist pleads for the utter destruction of his enemies. We cannot hear Jesus praying these words, and, as his disciples, we should not be praying them either. In verse twenty-two he uses the image of cloth laid on the ground hiding a pit. A victorious sacrificial banquet turns out to be a trap. Verses 22-23 are quoted by Paul to illustrate the hardened hearts of those who rejected the covenant (Romans 11:9-10). Verse twenty-five is quoted by Luke, referring to Judas: 'It is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it' (Acts 1:20).

* * * * *

The life of the psalmist is under threat because of the stand he is taking in obedience to God's will. He pleads for God's help, trusting that in God's good time it will be forthcoming, for he believes that 'GOD hears the needy and does not despise those who are in bonds'(verse 33). The psalm could have been composed by Jeremiah (see, for example Jeremiah 38:6). It could also have been composed by one of the leaders of the exiles in Babylon in the early years of exile prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. He was being ridiculed because he refused to give up hope that 'God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah'(verse 35).

Much of the psalm can be prayed while thinking of Jesus in his passion. Part of verse 4 is quoted by John: 'This was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, "They hated me without a cause" (John 15:25). The first part of verse 9 is placed on Jesus' lips by John in the scene where Jesus empties the temple: 'Zeal for your house has consumed me' (John 2:17). The second half of verse 9 is quoted by Paul: 'Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me' (Romans 15:3). As we pray verses 19-20 we think of Jesus being mocked by the soldiers (Matthew 27:27-30). Verse 21 ('They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink') lies behind the following text from the description of Jesus' passion: 'They offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it' (Matthew 27:34). Even on the cross Jesus knew that 'GOD hears the needy, and does not despise those who are in bonds' (verse 33).

I have placed in brackets verses 5-6 ('O God, you know my folly; the wrong I have done is not hidden from you. God of Israel, do not let those who hope in you be put to shame because of me. Do not let those who seek you be dismayed because of me'). These are not verses that the innocent Jesus could pray (On Jesus' innocence see the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 33-34). But we can pray them, and it is good to pray them in Jesus' presence.

Praying Psalm 70 (69) with Jesus

- ¹O God, hurry to free me. O GOD, make haste to help me.
²Let all those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion.
 Let those who seek to harm me be repulsed and disgraced.
³Let those who jeer at me (Aha!) be turned back in shame.
⁴Let there be rejoicing and gladness for all who seek you.
 Let those who love your saving presence say continually, 'God is great!'
⁵As for me, I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God!
 You are my help and my deliverer; O GOD, do not delay.

This is a plea for God's help. It is a duplicate of Psalm 40 verses 13 to 17. The psalms are slightly different in where they use 'God' and where they use the divine name, 'GOD.'

Note the contrast. In verse 4 the psalmist speaks of those who seek God, not those who seek to harm him (verse 2): those who proclaim: 'God is great!', not those who jeer at him: 'Aha' (verse 3).

'I am poor and needy' (verse 5). For a reflection on 'poor' see Psalm 52, pages 164-165.

'Let there be rejoicing and gladness for all who seek you' (verse 4). For a reflection on longing, see Psalm 11, page 45; Psalm 42, pages 132-134; and Psalm 63, pages 193-195. For a reflection on seeking God's face, see Psalm 31, pages 104-105.

Praying Psalm 71 (70) with Jesus

- ¹In you, O GOD, I seek refuge; I pray you do not fail me.
²In your justice set me free. Make me safe. Come close to hear me.
³Be for me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me.
 You are indeed my rock, my fortress.
⁴Rescue me, O God, from the hand of the wicked,
 from the grip of the violent.
⁵For you, O God*, are my hope.
 From my youth I have placed my trust in GOD.
⁶Upon you I have leaned from my birth.
 It was you who took me from my mother's womb.
 I will never stop praising you.
⁷Many look on me in awe, seeing that you are my refuge.
⁸I am full of praise for you. I can speak only good of you all day long.
⁹Do not cast me off now that I am old.
 Do not forsake me now my strength is spent.
¹⁰My enemies speak ill of me,
 those who want my end conspire against me.
¹¹'God has forsaken him, let us pursue him.
 Let us seize him, for there is no one to defend him.'
¹²O God, do not leave me alone.
 O my God, come quickly to help me!
¹⁴I will continue to hope. I will praise you more and more.
 All day long, however inadequate my words.
¹⁵I will tell of your saving help.
¹⁶I will praise the mighty deeds of our GOD.
 I will praise your justice, yours alone.
¹⁷You have taught me from my youth
 to praise your wondrous deeds.
¹⁸O God, do not forsake me, now that I am old and my hair is grey.
 I want to proclaim your power to the next generation.

**¹⁹Your might and your justice reach to the highest heaven.
The great things that you have done
are as high as the heavens, O God. Who can compare to you?**

²⁰You have brought me through many troubles.

I know you will do so again. You will restore my life.

²¹You will increase my honour, and comfort me once again.

²²I will praise you with the harp, for your faithfulness, O my God.

I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.

²³I will shout for joy. I will sing of how you saved me.

²⁴All day long I will tell of your justice.

Omitted

¹³Shame those who seek to harm me.

May they be covered with scorn and disgrace.

²⁴Those who tried to do me harm

have been put to shame and disgraced.

The psalmist is an old man who is pleading for God's help. As an old man he plays an important role in the community, and he senses that he has more to do in carrying out his responsibility to hand on the traditions to the young. He does not complain of sickness, only that his powers are diminishing and that there are people who want to see him dead. His trust in God and his maintaining of hope as an old man is impressive. Leaving aside the age factor, we can hear Jesus praying this psalm.

Verses 1-3 are almost identical with the opening words of Psalm 31.

In verse 5 the psalmist says to God 'You are my hope' (See also verse 14).' See the reflection on hope in Psalm 62, pages 190-191.

Verse 12 ('O God, do not leave me alone. O my God, come quickly to help me!') expresses a sentiment found often in the psalms. 'Come close to me. Trouble is near and I have no one to help me!' (Psalm 22:11). 'O GOD, do not leave me. O my strength, come quickly to my aid' (Psalm 22:19). 'O GOD, you see it all! Do not be silent! God*, do not be distant from me!' (Psalm 35:22). 'Your God will not forsake you. Your God is close' (Psalm 38:21).

In verse 15 the psalmist praises God for God's 'saving help'. See the reflection on salvation in Psalm 62, pages 189-190.

1. Psalm 71 is a supplication with an abundant amount of praise, beginning in verse 6: 'I will never stop praising you.' The Hebrew title for the Book of Psalms is *sêper tehillim* ('Book of Praises'). Psalm 22:3 declares that God is 'enthroned on the praises of Israel.'

With rare exceptions (see Psalm 146:1) the reference is to public, communal praise, expressed in song ('I will praise God with a song', Psalm 69:30), and with dancing and musical instruments ('Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre', Psalm 149:3). Psalm 150, the last psalm, says it all:

'Praise GOD [Alleluia!]! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise God in his mighty firmament! Praise God for God's mighty deeds; praise God according to God's surpassing greatness! Praise God with trumpet sound; praise God with lute and harp! Praise God with tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe! Praise God with clanging cymbals; praise God with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise GOD! Praise GOD [Alleluia!]!'

We are moved to praise God because of the awesome power and beauty of God revealed in creation and in God's presence and action in history: 'In the midst of the congregation I will praise you' (Psalm 22:22). Above all we praise God, because God's 'covenant love lasts forever' (Psalm 106:1). 'Praise GOD, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples! For great is God's covenant love toward us. The faithfulness of GOD endures forever. Praise GOD' (Psalm 117:1-2). 'Let them extol God in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders' (Psalm 107:32).

2. Besides our praise being a spontaneous response to the awesome power and beauty of God, it is also an expression of our gratitude: 'I will thank you in the great congregation; in the mighty throng I will praise you' (Psalm 35:18). 'I will praise God with a song, with thanksgiving' (Psalm 69:30). 'Let them thank GOD for God's covenant love for God's wonderful works to humankind' (Psalm 107:32).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear his heart overflow with gratitude to God: '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). He delighted to hear the cry of children praising God (Matthew 21:16). At the Last Supper, he offered the simple food of bread and wine to his disciples, promising that he was offering himself to them and would continue to do so forever, whenever they came together to remember him. Before offering to his disciples the gift of himself, he 'gave thanks' to God (Luke 22:17, 19).

3. Paul is moved to praise God 'for God's glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved' (Ephesians 1:6). Writing as a Jew he says: 'We, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of God's glory' (Ephesians 1:12). He goes on to include the Gentiles: 'In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory' (Ephesians 1:13-14).

To see what it means to live a life of praise of God's glory, we look at Jesus. We see Jesus living a life of intimacy with God, always listening in order to carry out God's will (see page 11), and always receiving and giving love, whatever the situation he found himself in, even on Calvary (see Psalm 22, pages 78-81). He loved God 'with all his heart, all his longing, all his mind and all his strength' (Mark 12:30), and he continued to give himself in love.

In his Letter to the Philippians Paul speaks of 'the perfect goodness which Jesus, the Messiah, produces in us for the glory and praise of God' (Philippians 1:11). Paul is calling us to welcome the Spirit of Love that bound Jesus to his Father, making space for Jesus to love in us and through us. Then our life becomes our worship, our prayer of praise. Paul wants the Christian community to live so beautifully that everyone will be moved to praise God.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews quotes Psalm 22:22, 'In the midst of the congregation I will praise you' (Hebrews 2:12). James invites the community to 'sing songs of praise' (James 5:13). In the Book of Revelation John hears a voice coming from God's throne: 'Praise our God, all you God's servants' (Revelation 19:5).

Praying Psalm 72 (71) with Jesus

- ¹O God, give *your* judgment to the king,
your justice to the king's son,
²that he may judge *your* people with justice,
and *your* poor with right judgment.
- ³May the mountains yield peace for the people.
⁴May the king defend the cause of the poor,
help needy families, and crush the oppressor.
- ⁵May he live while the sun endures,
as long as the moon lasts, from age to age.
⁶May he be like rain falling on the grass,
like showers that water the earth.
- ⁷In his days may justice flourish
and peace abound, until the moon fails.
- ¹²He rescues the needy when they call,
and those who have no one to defend them.
¹³He has pity on the weak and needy, and saves them.
¹⁴He liberates them from oppression and violence
for they are precious to him.
- ¹⁵Long may he live! May prayer be made for him continually,
and blessings invoked for him all day long.
- ¹⁶May there be abundance of grain in the land,
waving to and fro to the tops of the mountains.
May its fruit be luxuriant like that of Lebanon,
and its sheaves like the grasses of the field.
- ¹⁷May his name be blessed for ever,
his fame endure like the sun.
May all nations in him be blessed,
as they call down blessings upon him.

Verses 18-19 conclude Book 2 of the Book of Psalms.

**¹⁸Praised be GOD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.**

**¹⁹Praised be God's glorious name for ever.
May God's glory fill all the earth. Amen. Amen.**

Omitted

⁸May he have dominion from sea to sea,
from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.

⁹May the desert tribes bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust.

¹⁰May the kings of Tarshish and the sea coasts pay him tribute.
May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring him gifts.

¹¹May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him.

¹⁵May gold of Sheba be given to him.

The title reads: 'Of Solomon', presenting this as David's prayer for the son who is to succeed him. It is a prayer for whoever carries on the dynasty of David, a prayer for prosperity. This is made on the assumption that the king exercises his power in favour of the poor and needy, in accordance with the commission given him by God.

Since 'Christ Jesus intercedes for us' (Romans 8:34), we can hear him praying this psalm for those who are in positions of leadership in the community. Paul invites us: 'Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints' (Ephesians 6:18). In a special way we should pray for those whose decisions affect the whole community.

Paul exhorts the Christian community in Rome to 'be subject to the governing authorities' (Romans 13:1). This is on the assumption that the 'rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad' (Romans 13:3). We can pray that the judgments made by our political leaders are God's judgments (verse 1). We can pray that they recognise that the people they govern are God's people (verse 2). We can pray that they 'defend the cause of the poor, help needy families' (verse 4). We can pray that our political leaders 'rescue the needy when they call, and those who have no one to defend them; that they have pity on the weak and needy, and liberate them from oppression and violence' (verses 12-14). We can pray for peace and prosperity (verses 3 and 16).

We can also pray this psalm in the light of Jesus' mission. Mark writes: 'Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news from God, and saying, "The time has come, and the kingdom of God is close at hand"' (Mark 1:14-15). For a reflection on the Kingdom of God see Psalm 93, page 297.

Reflecting on Psalm 73 (72): 1-22 with Jesus

¹Truly our God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.

²As for me, as I walked I almost stumbled,

³I was envious of the arrogant,
of how those who disregarded God were prospering.

⁴They have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.

⁵They are not in trouble.
They are not stricken like other people.

⁶They wear pride as a necklace,
violence covers them like a garment.

⁷Their eyes swell up as they live on the fat of the land.
Their hearts are full of folly.

⁸They scoff with malice.
From on high they threaten oppression.

⁹They boast that heaven is on their side.
They lay claim to the world.

¹⁰People follow them and swallow what they say.

¹¹They ask, 'How can God know?
Does the Most High take any notice?'

¹²Such are the wicked; at ease as they accumulate wealth.

¹³So why keep my heart clean, washing my hands in innocence,

¹⁴when I was stricken all day long, punished day after day.

¹⁵Then I said: 'If I should speak like that
I should abandon the faith of your people.'

¹⁶I strove to fathom this problem,
too hard for me to understand.

¹⁷Then I penetrated the mystery of God,
and understood where these people were heading.

²¹When my heart was embittered,
when my feelings were disturbed,

²²I was stupid and ignorant.
I was like a brute beast toward you.

Praying verses 23-28 with Jesus

²³**Yet I am continually with you;
you hold me by the hand.**

²⁴**You guide me according to your plan.
You carry me to a glorious destiny.**

²⁵**Whom have I in heaven but you?
What does the earth mean to me without you?**

²⁶**My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**

²⁸**For me it is good to stay near you, my God.
I have made you my refuge.
I want to tell of all that you have done.**

* * * * *

Omitted

¹⁸You have placed them on a slippery path;
you see that they fall to their ruin.

¹⁹They will be destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!

²⁰It is like what happens when one awakes from a dream.
You dismiss them, Lord, as figments of the imagination.

²⁷Those who are far from you will perish.
You put an end to those who are faithless.

* * * * *

In the first part of the psalm (verses 1-22) the psalmist is sharing his pondering of a problem that he was finding 'too hard for me to understand' (verse 16). We may share his concern, and, if we do, it is good to ponder the question in Jesus' company, even though it is not the kind of question that would have concerned Jesus.

The second part of the psalm (verses 23-28) is a prayer, addressed to God. We can pray this with Jesus.

1. Because of the contrast between the prosperity of those who have no regard for God, and the apparent uselessness of his own fidelity, the psalmist was on the brink of abandoning his faith. He 'almost stumbled' (verse 2). He was in danger of 'abandoning the faith of my people' (verse 15). After describing the apparent prosperity of those who have no regard for God (verses 4-12), the psalmist says of his life: 'I was stricken all day long, punished day after day' (verse 14).

He comes to see that despite appearances, there is no good fortune in the destiny of the irreligious (verses 18-20 and 27). I have omitted these verses because the assumption behind them is that God controls whatever happens, and that God will certainly punish 'those who disregard God' (verse 3). Our behaviour has consequences, but these are self-inflicted, not expressions of God's will.

2. The prayer (23-26 and 28) is among the most beautiful statements of faith in the psalms. It describes the value of 'keeping one's heart clean, and washing one's hands in innocence' (verse 13). We may not prosper here and now the way the faithless prosper, but the prosperity of those who disregard God is short-lived and is not to be compared with the intimacy that the psalmist experiences with God: 'I am continually with you; you hold me by the hand. You guide me according to your plan. You carry me to a glorious destiny' (verses 23-24). This is 'the faith of my people' (verse 15), and the psalmist chooses to re-commit himself to his ancestral faith.

He continues his prayer: 'Whom have I in heaven but you? What does the earth mean to me without you?' (verse 25). Then, once again, he addresses us: 'My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever' (verse 26). His final words are addressed to God: 'For me it is good to stay near you, my God. I have made you my refuge. I want to tell of all that you have done' (verse 28).

Let us listen to Paul: 'Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having 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 3:7-9).

Let us pray verses 23-28 of the psalm with Jesus, re-committing ourselves to our ancestral faith, the faith of Jesus which he pours into the hearts of all his disciples (Romans 5:5). This is the faith of the Christian community.

Reflecting on Psalm 74 (73) in Jesus' Company

This psalm is not included in the Lectionary. It is included in the Prayer of the Church, in the Prayer during the Day for Tuesday Week 3. The assumption behind the psalm is that God is ultimately responsible for whatever happens, and so for the destruction of the city and the sanctuary. The psalmist understands that God must be angry to allow this destruction (verse 1). This does not fit with God as revealed by Jesus (see the reflection on the 'Anger of God' in Psalm 2, pages 20-23).

We may find ourselves struggling, like the psalmist, in the face of evil. However, Psalm 74 is not a psalm that Jesus could pray. It has some historical interest, but is hardly suitable for Christian prayer.

¹O God, my God why do you leave us abandoned?

Why are you so angry against the sheep of your pasture?

²Remember your assembled people, whom you acquired long ago.

You freed us that we might be

the people who are closest to your heart.

Remember Mount Zion, where you established your dwelling.

³Come and look at where everything lies in ruin.

See the devastation the enemy has caused to your sanctuary.

⁴Your foes have lain waste the place of assembly.

They have set up their standards there.

⁵They have hacked their way in

as one takes an axe to the thickest part of the forest.

⁶With hatchets and hammers, they have smashed the woodwork.

⁷They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrated your dwelling place.

⁸As they burnt it to the ground they cried:

'Exterminate the whole nation.

Burn all the meeting places of God in the land.'

⁹We have no signs from you.

There is no longer a prophet among us.

There is no one who knows how long this will last.

- ¹⁰How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
Is the enemy to revile your name for ever?
- ¹¹Why are you holding back,
keeping your powerful arm hidden from view?
- ¹²Yet you, O God, are our King from of old,
bringing salvation to the land.
- ¹³You divided the sea by your might.
You broke the heads of the dragons in the sea.
- ¹⁴You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
- ¹⁵You opened springs and torrents;
you dried up flowing streams.
- ¹⁶Yours is the day, yours the night;
you established the moon and the sun.
- ¹⁷You fixed all the bounds of the earth;
you made summer and winter.
- ¹⁸O GOD, remember this. See how the enemy scoffs,
and how a foolish people reviles your name.
- ¹⁹Do not hand over to the wild animals
the life and hopes of your dove.
Do not forget for ever the lives of your poor.
- ²⁰Have regard for your covenant.
The dark places of the land vomit forth violence.
- ²¹Do not let the downtrodden be defrauded.
Let the poor and needy praise your name.
- ²²Rise up, O God, plead your cause;
remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.
- ²³Do not forget the clamour of your foes,
the uproar of your adversaries that is growing ever more strident.

Jerusalem has been devastated. The psalm could be a response to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in 587BC, or by the Syrians in the early second century BC. Judah's enemies mock Jerusalem's God (verses 18 and 22). The psalmist wonders why the Creator God, who conquered chaos (verses 13-14), does not intervene, but allows the fury of the enemies to prevail.

Verse 13 uses the language of myth to speak of God's power in creation. 'Dragons' seems to refer to Rahab, the mythological sea serpent, and Leviathan, a monster of chaos in Canaanite mythology. God is portrayed as defeating Rahab and so bringing the ordered creation out of primeval chaos. Why does God not come to protect the downtrodden and the poor who cry for help? (verses 19 and 21).

It makes no sense that God would allow to be undone what he himself has done, to reject what he Himself has chosen, to repudiate what he has redeemed, to choose his dwelling and then let it be burned, to consecrate it and then let it be profaned!

All familiar supports have gone (verse 9). Where does this leave God's promises? Where does it leave the covenant? What is the meaning of Israel? Will this tragedy ever have an end?

The psalmist speaks of Israel as God's 'dove' (verse 19). We find the same image in the Song of Songs where the Divine Lover says: O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely' (Song 2:14).

Praying Psalm 75 (74) with Jesus

¹We give you thanks, O God, as we invoke your name.

We proclaim for all to hear your wondrous deeds.

²I, your God, choose the time to set things right.

³Even were the earth to totter, I will secure its foundations.

⁴I say to the boastful: "Stop your boasting!"
and to the wicked, "Do not flaunt your power.

⁵Do not oppose the One on high,
or insolently confront your God".'

⁶For justice is not from east or west,
or the wilderness, or the mountains.

⁷It is God who executes judgment.

⁹As for me, I will rejoice forever.

I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.

¹⁰The strength of the just will be exalted.

Omitted

⁷God puts one person down, and lifts up another.

⁸For in the hand of GOD is a jug filled with drugged wine.

He will pour from it a draught, and the wicked shall drain it to the dregs.

¹⁰God will break the power of the wicked.

Jesus taught us that God is Love and that God's love is poured out over all people, 'the righteous and the unrighteous alike' (Matthew 5:45). The psalmist speaks of God 'putting one person down and lifting up another' (verse 7). Luke uses similar language: 'The Lord has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty' (Luke 1:51-53). The proud are scattered, not by God, but as a consequence of their behaviour. The powerful are brought down, not by God, but as a consequence of their behaviour. It is not God who sends the rich away empty, as we see in Jesus' response to the rich man who came to him looking for 'eternal life' (Mark 10:17-22). If the 'power of the wicked is broken' (verse 10), it will be by the power of love (see the reflection on God's justice in Psalm 9, page 41).

This is a hymn of praise for God's just judgment. It fits well here after Psalm 74. The sudden change of speakers (see the abrupt change from verse one to verse two) suggests a liturgical setting.

1. After giving thanks (verse 1) the assembly goes silent and hears God speaking through an oracle proclaimed in God's name by the priest (verses 2-5). The 'I' in verse two is emphatic. The psalmist is confident that God will act in God's time. It might feel as though the very foundations of the earth are shaken: 'When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? (Psalm 11:3). 'They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they grope in the dark; all the foundations of the earth are shaken' (Psalm 82:5). But the foundations are secured by God (verse 3).

2. The image of God holding a jug containing whatever we have to pass through (verse 8), is found in the account of Jesus' agony when Jesus prayed that he would not have to drink from the 'cup' (Matthew 26:39,42). Recall also Jesus' words to the sons of Zebedee: 'Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' (Matthew 20:22), and to Peter: 'Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?' (John 18:11). This is not meant to reinforce a mistaken image of God controlling everything, and our future being somehow fixed by God. Rather, it is challenging us, whatever happens, to trust in God's love which will always be present to enable us, as it enabled Jesus, to continue to trust and to love, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

Reflecting on Psalm 76 (75) in Jesus' Company

Psalm 76 is not offered for prayer in the Lectionary. It is in the Prayer of the Church for the Prayer during the Day, Sunday Weeks 2 and 4. Apart from the acknowledgment that God's judgment is 'to defend the oppressed' (verse 9), the image of God is of a warlord who is roused to fury against the enemies of Judah. This is not an image given us by Jesus. See Psalm 2, pages 20-23 for a reflection on 'the Anger of God'.

¹God, you are known everywhere in Judah,
your fame is great in Israel.

²Your tent is pitched in Jerusalem,
your command post on Mount Zion.

³There you break the flaming arrows,
shield and sword, all weapons of war.

⁴You are resplendent, majestic with mountains of plunder.

⁵The stouthearted are stripped of their spoil.
They are dazed, unable to move.

⁶At your battle cry, O God of Jacob,
both rider and horse lie stunned.

⁷You are awesome indeed!
Who can stand before you once your anger is aroused?

⁸From the heavens you utter judgment.
The earth reels, and is hushed in silence

⁹when you rise up as judge to defend the oppressed.

¹⁰When you are robed in fury,
even warriors must praise you.

¹¹Make your vows to GOD, your God.
Carry out what you have promised.
Bring your gifts to the one who is awesome,

¹²who cuts off the breath of princes,
and inspires fear in the kings of the earth.

Typical of the times, this psalm sees victory or defeat in war as determined by God. It asserts the irresistible power of God against Judah's enemies, and celebrates victory in battle. Its origin may have been in Judah after the fall of Samaria and the forced withdrawal of Sennacherib and his army from their siege of Jerusalem (701BC).

Celebrating God's judgment in favour of the poor is a common theme in the psalms. In Psalm 12, verse 5 we hear GOD declaring: 'Because of violence against the poor, because the needy groan, I will now rise up. I will keep them safe as they give their testimony.'

Terrible as is the might of an aggressive army, it is no match for God. The psalmists call the people to make thanksgiving offerings to GOD who has protected them from the violent intent of their enemies (verses 11-12).

Praying Psalm 77 (76) with Jesus

¹I cry aloud to God, cry aloud that God might hear me.

²In my anguish, I search for you, my God*.

My hands are raised at night without ceasing;
my soul refuses to be comforted.

³I remember God, and I moan;

I reflect, and my spirit faints.

⁴You withhold sleep from my eyes.

I am troubled and cannot speak.

⁵I consider the days of old,
remembering years long gone.

⁶All night memories fill my heart,

I ponder and my spirit keeps on questioning.

⁷Perhaps God* will always reject me,
and will never again turn and grace me?

⁸Perhaps God's covenant love to me is exhausted,
God's promises have come to an end?

⁹Has God forgotten to be gracious?

Can anger block God's mercy?

¹⁰I find myself saying: 'Woe is me!

The power of the Most High has altered!'

¹¹I remember your deeds, O GOD;

yes, I recall your wonders of old.

¹²I reflect on all that you have done,

and muse on your mighty deeds.

¹³Your way, my God, is holy. What god is great like you?

¹⁴You are God who works wonders;

you display your might among the peoples.

¹⁵With your strong arm you redeem your people,

the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

¹⁶Seeing you the waters churned,
shuddering, writhing, convulsed to the depths.

¹⁷Clouds poured down rain.

Thunder shook the heavens,

Lightning darted like arrows.

¹⁸Your thunder rolled round the sky,

your lightning lit up the world.

The earth trembled and shook.

¹⁹Your way led through the sea,

your path through the mighty waters;

yet no one saw your footprints.

²⁰You led your people like a flock

by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

1. The psalmist is desperate. He lies awake at night (verses 4 and 6) worrying about his situation which is such that he wonders whether God no longer cares for him (verses 7-10). God seems absent, but the psalmist cries out, trusting to be heard. He does not stop seeking this apparently absent God. He cannot see, nor can he touch, but he keeps stretching out, hoping for contact (verse 2). It is God who keeps the heart of the psalmist alert and his eyes open, longing to see, even though he cannot find words (verse 4) and his experience of God is tenuous and uncertain. The psalmist struggles to make sense of what is happening (verse 3).

The psalmist's problem is that God seems to be acting contrary to how God has revealed God's Self to be (verse 7). After all, God did proclaim to Moses: "GOD, GOD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in covenant love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). The psalmist is asking where is this covenant love, graciousness, and tender compassion now? All he experiences is silence.

2. He tries to sustain his spirit by recalling the wonderful ways in which GOD showed his care at the time of the Exodus from Egypt (verses 16-20).

Verse 19 ('Your way led through the sea, your path through the mighty waters; yet no one saw your footprints.')

calls to mind the Gospel scene of Jesus walking on the sea: 'When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and Jesus was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased' (Mark 6:47-51).

We think, too, of Jesus passing through death to the risen life and opening the way for us to follow.

3. The psalmist is experiencing a profound, even desperate, longing for communion with God, who seems not to be listening. He is searching for God (verses 1-6), but God seems to be absent (verses 7-9): 'Perhaps God will never again turn to me and be gracious to me' (verse 7). When we reflect on the transcendence of God, and the necessarily mysterious dimension of God's presence and action in our lives, it should not surprise us that this experience of God as absent is a significant element in everyone's religious experience. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is expressed beautifully and poignantly in the *Song of Songs*.

Bernard of Clairvaux in his Sermon 79 on the *Song of Songs* writes: 'Who is it whom your soul loves, for whom you inquire? Has he no name? Who are you and who is he? ... In this marriage song it is affections, not words, that are to be considered. Why is this, except that the holy love which is the subject of the entire song cannot be expressed by words, but only 'in deed and in truth'. Here love speaks everywhere. If you desire to grasp these writings, you must love. For anyone who does not love, it is useless to listen to this song of love, for a cold heart cannot catch fire from its eloquence.'

The *Song of Songs* makes a unique contribution to the Hebrew Bible in that it is a celebration of sexual love. The reader is left in no doubt that the yearning, the joy of discovery, the delight of consummation, are part, and a significant part, of the creation which God looks upon and sees to be 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). We are reminded of the statement in the Book of Genesis that it is as male and female that human beings are created 'in the image of God' (Genesis 27), and we hear the delight in Adam's voice when, at last, God gives him Eve as his companion (Genesis 2:23).

Though this delight in the erotic dimension of human sexual love is apparent in the text, commentators over the centuries, both Jewish and Christian, have passed quickly (perhaps too quickly) to see in the Song a mystical account of the love between God and his chosen People, between Christ and the Church. The New Testament is full of statements of God's love. In relation to the theme of the *Song of Songs*, we think of Jesus speaking of himself as the 'bridegroom' (see Mark 2:19-20; also John 3:29). We think, too, of Paul's reflection in Ephesians 5:21-32, and the nuptial banquet described in the concluding chapters of the Book of Revelation.

It was Origen's masterly ten volume commentary on the *Song of Songs* (only parts of which are extant), composed between 240 and 245AD, that set the pattern for subsequent Christian reflection which focused on Christ's love for the Church, but also on the mystical love-encounter with God that God offers to each and every person. The long tradition of interpretation calls us to see in human love a sacrament of God's love for us personally and for us as a community. The Song of Songs helps us avoid the danger of treating God's love for us and our response of love in too abstract a way. We are helped to reflect on God's yearning to love, and our profound need for divine communion. We recall the famous words of Saint Augustine: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless till we rest in you' (Confessions 1.1).

Like the psalmist, the lover is searching for the Beloved, who appears to be absent.

'Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer. "I will rise and seek him whom my soul loves." I sought him, but did not find him' (Song 3:1-2).

'I opened to my lover, but my lover had turned away, gone! My soul fainted within me. I sought him, but did not find him. I called him, but he gave no answer' (Song 5:5-6).

We find the same theme in *The Spiritual Canticle* of John of the Cross.

'Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?

You fled like the stag after wounding me;

I went out calling you, and you were gone.

Seeking my Love, I will go off to the mountains and to the waterside ...

Who has the power to heal me?

How do you endure, O life, not living where you live,
and being brought near death by the arrows you receive
from that which you conceive of your Beloved?

Why, since you wounded this heart, do you not heal it?

And why, since you stole it from me,

do you leave it so, and fail to carry off what you have stolen?

May my eyes behold you, because you are their light,
and I would open them to you alone.

Reveal your presence, and may the vision of your beauty be my death.

For the sickness of love is not cured except by your presence and image.

O crystal spring!

If only, on your silvered-over face, you would suddenly form
the eyes I desire, which I bear sketched deep within my heart.

We will go on to the high caverns in the rock which are so well concealed ...

There You will show me what my soul has been seeking,

And then You will give me yourself.

In his commentary on the poem John of the Cross states:

‘The sublime communication and the feeling of God being near is not a sure sign of the presence and grace of God, nor is dryness and the lack of a feeling of God’s closeness a sign of God’s absence’(1.3).

‘What more do you want? And what else do you search for outside, when within yourself you possess your riches, delights, satisfactions, fullness and kingdom - your Beloved whom you desire and seek? Be joyful and gladdened in your interior recollection with him, for you have him so close to you. Desire him there. Adore him there. Do not go in pursuit of him outside yourself. You will only become distracted and weary, and you will not find him or enjoy him more securely or sooner or more intimately than by seeking him within you. There is but one difficulty: even though he does abide within you, he is hidden. Nevertheless, it is vital for you to know the place of his hiding that you may search for him there with assuredness. And this is also what you ask, when with the affection of love you question: ‘Where have you hidden, Beloved?’ (1.8).

‘It brings special happiness to a person to understand that God is never absent, not even from a person in mortal sin’ (1.8).

‘Since you know that the Beloved whom you desire lives hidden within your heart, strive to be yourself truly hidden with him, and you will embrace him within and experience him with loving affection’ (1.10).

‘This is what it means to seek Him in faith. However confident you may be that you find, experience, and understand God, you must, because God is inaccessible and concealed, always regard Him as hidden and serve Him who is hidden in a secret way. Do not be like those foolish people whose understanding of God is so poor that they think that God is absent just because they do not understand, taste or experience Him’ (1.12).

‘You suffer so intently for God at this time, because you are drawing nearer to God, and so you have greater experience within yourself of the void of God, of very heavy darkness, and of spiritual fire which dries up and purges you, so that, thus purified, you may be united with God’ (13.1).

For reflections on seeking God, see also Psalm 42, pages 132-134, and Psalm 63, pages 193-196.

Reflecting on Psalm 78 (77) in Jesus’ Company

The psalmist is addressing his faith-community in Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel has been destroyed (721BC), because they ‘broke the covenant, refused to obey God’s law and forgot God’s wonderful deeds’ (verses 10-11). He does not want this to happen to Judah.

The psalmist begins by insisting on the importance of handing on the traditions that remind us of ‘the glorious deeds of God’ (verse 4).

¹Listen, O my people, to my teaching;
attend to the words I speak.

²I speak of what we have heard from of old,
³what we have known from our ancestors.

⁴We must not keep it from our children;
we must tell the coming generation
of the glorious deeds of GOD

⁵GOD established a law in Israel
and commanded our ancestors

to make it known to their children,

⁶so that future generations would know it,
and grow up to teach it to their young.

The psalmist insists:

⁷We are to place our hope in God,
and never forget what God has done.
We must keep God’s commandments.

He warns:

⁸We must not follow the example of our ancestors.
They were stubborn and rebellious,
fickle and unfaithful to God.

Closer to home, they must not behave like the northern kingdom.

⁹We should not follow the example of the people of Ephraim.
Their archers abandoned the field on the day of battle.

¹⁰They broke the covenant, refusing to obey God’s law.

¹¹They forgot God’s wonderful deeds.

Reflecting on Psalm 78 (77) in Jesus' Company continued

He reminds them of the wonderful things God did for their ancestors in Egypt, at the Red Sea and in the desert.

- ¹²Our ancestors witnessed what God did in the land of Egypt,
¹³how the sea was divided for their escape,
 and the waters were raised up like a wall. [Exodus 14:22]
¹⁴By day God led them with a cloud, by night with a glowing fire.
¹⁵God split rocks open in the wilderness, to quench their thirst.
¹⁶Streams gushed forth, flowing like a river. [Exodus 17]

Expanding on verse 8, he reminds them that, in spite of God's wonderful care of them, their ancestors rebelled against God.

- ¹⁷Yet they continued to rebel.
¹⁸Wilfully they put God to the test,
 by demanding the food they craved. [Numbers 11:4-6]
¹⁹They complained, 'Is it possible for God
 to spread a table in the wilderness?'
²⁰It was God who struck the rock and caused water to flow.
 Yet they dared to ask, 'What about bread and meat?'

God was 'filled with rage'. We must remember that the psalmist, in keeping with the mentality of the whole of the Hebrew Bible, thought of God controlling everything that happens. When terrible things happen (like the destruction of the northern kingdom), God must have planned it, and since God is just, it must be a just punishment, and reveal God's anger (see the reflection on God's 'anger' in Psalm 2, pages 20-23). This contradicts all that Jesus revealed about God whose only response is Love. It is we human beings who are responsible for the consequences of our sin, not God. As we read these verses (and the subsequent ones that picture God as an angry Warrior Warlord, we should listen to Jesus as he says: 'It was said to you, but I say' (Matthew 5:43-44). The response of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is God's response to sin.

- ²¹Hearing this, GOD was filled with rage;
 God's anger flared against Israel,
²²because they had no faith in God.
 They did not trust God's power to save.

The psalmist reminds them of God's astonishing patience and loving care.

- ²³In spite of this, God commanded the skies,
 and opened the doors of heaven,
²⁴raining down manna for them to eat,
 giving them bread from heaven.
²⁵Mortal human beings ate the bread of angels.
 God sent them food in abundance. [Exodus 16]
²⁶A wind blew from heaven, scattering meat like driven dust.
²⁷God gave them winged birds, as many as the sands of the sea.
²⁸They fell in the middle of the camp, all around the tents.
²⁹The people ate and were satisfied,
 for God gave them what they craved.

The psalmist sees God running out of patience and punishing their ancestors to cause them to change their ways. Any signs of repentance were insincere: 'their heart was not steadfast towards God; they were not true to the covenant' (verse 37). They kept on sinning, forcing God to punish them. He reminds them of what happened when 'God's anger flared against Israel' (verse 21).

- ³⁰But before they had satisfied their craving,
 while the food was still in their mouths,
³¹God slew the strongest among them,
 struck down the flower of Israel.
³²Despite this they kept on sinning,
 blind to God's wonderful deeds.
³³So God cut their lives short;
 their days ended like a breath.
³⁴Surely now they would begin to pray.
 Surely now they would repent and seek God in earnest.
³⁵They would remember that God is their rock,
 the Most High God is their redeemer.
³⁶They spoke fine words to God,
 but their lives belied their words.
³⁷Their hearts were not steadfast toward God.
 They were not true to the covenant.

Reflecting on Psalm 78 (77) in Jesus' Company continued

The psalmist reminds them of God's amazing compassion and readiness to forgive.

³⁸Yet God, who is full of compassion,
forgave their sin, and they were spared.

³⁹Again and again God did not give way to wrath,
remembering that they were but flesh,
no more than a breath of air that passes, never to return.

He speaks again of the rebellion of their ancestors, who failed to remember all that God had done for them. Hence the psalmist's determination to see that his contemporaries do not forget, and make sure they hand the memory on to their children (verses 1-6).

⁴⁰How often they rebelled in the wilderness,
and caused God pain in the desert! [Numbers 16:41; 20:24]

⁴¹They tested God again and again,
and provoked the Holy One of Israel.

⁴²They did not remember God's deeds:
when God redeemed them from the foe.

He recalls the plagues of Egypt, God's glorious deeds for his chosen people, revealing God 'raging with fury' (verse 49) against those who were oppressing Israel.

⁴³God displayed signs in Egypt,
and worked miracles in the fields of Zoan: [Exodus 7-12]

⁴⁴turning rivers to blood,
so that the Egyptians could not drink of their streams;

⁴⁵sending among them swarms of flies,
and frogs to molest them;

⁴⁶giving their crops to the caterpillar,
and the fruit of their labour to the locust;

⁴⁷destroyed their vines by hail,
and their sycamores by frost;

⁴⁸hurling down hail on their cattle,
and lightning bolts on their flocks.

⁴⁹Seething, raging with fury,
God let loose strife and destruction.

⁵⁰These were messengers of doom,
for they were not spared even from death.

God abandoned them to the plague.

⁵¹and slew all the firstborn in Egypt.

The psalmist reminds his people that, in spite of their ancestors' repeated infidelity, God remained faithful, and brought them into the Promised land. The picture painted by the psalmist is traditional. It is important to know that archeology has established that Israel was formed in Canaan not by mass ethnic cleansing, but by the conversion of the inhabitants of the highlands to God.

⁵²Then God led his people in safety,
guiding them through the wilderness like a flock.

⁵³They were not afraid,
for the sea had overwhelmed their enemies. [Exodus 15:5, 10]

⁵⁴God led them to the holy land,
to the mountain won by God's arm. [Exodus 19]

⁵⁵God dislodged the nations, giving Israel their land,
settling the tribes in their tents.

The ancestors continued to be unfaithful.

⁵⁶Still they rebelled against the Most High,
testing their God, refusing to obey.

⁵⁷They turned away and were faithless like their ancestors,
like a bow on which the archer cannot rely.

⁵⁸They built shrines in high places,
and worshipped images they had carved. [Judges 10:6-7]

The psalmist recalls the destruction of the temple at Shiloh in the northern kingdom (see 1 Samuel 4 and Jeremiah 7:14).

⁵⁹God saw and was enraged, and utterly rejected Israel.

⁶⁰God deserted the shrine in Shiloh, [1 Samuel 4; Jeremiah 7:14]
and no longer dwelt with the people.

⁶¹God abandoned the ark,
letting it fall into the hands of the enemy.

Reflecting on Psalm 78 (77) in Jesus' Company continued

The destruction of Shiloh prepared the way for God's rejection of Israel, with the capture of Samaria in 721BC. In regard to God's 'anger' see the comment on verse 21.

⁶²Stirred with anger, God condemned Israel to the sword.

⁶³Fire devoured their young men.

There were no marriage songs for the maidens.

⁶⁴Their priests fell by the sword,
and their widows made no lamentation.

⁶⁵It was as though God* awoke from sleep,
shouting like a warrior affected by wine.

⁶⁶God attacked them like foes, heaping shame upon them.

⁶⁷God rejected Joseph, and turned his gaze from Ephraim.

God rejected Israel (Joseph). God has 'chosen the tribe of Judah', and 'looked with love on Mount Zion' where God has chosen to dwell in the sanctuary. The psalmist wants Judah to learn from what happened to their ancient ancestors and what has happened to Israel.

⁶⁸choosing the tribe of Judah, looking with love on Mount Zion.

⁶⁹There God built his sanctuary, exalted like the heavens,
securely established like the earth.

⁷⁰God chose David as servant,
and called him from tending the flocks.

⁷¹He was chosen to shepherd Jacob,
God's treasured possession.

⁷²He acted with an upright heart;
with a discerning mind he led them.

The psalm is rich in expressions for sin. When we sin we are being 'stubborn, rebellious, fickle and unfaithful' (verse 8). We 'refuse to obey God's law' (verse 10). We are 'unbelieving' (verses 8). Our 'hearts are not steadfast toward God. We are not true to the covenant' (verse 37). We 'fail to trust God's power to save' (verse 22). We 'put God to the test' (verses 18, 41 and 56). Our lives 'believe our words' (verse 36). We 'cause God pain' (verse 40). As we read this psalm with Jesus we are reminded that, like the people of Judah, we must learn to 'set our hopes in God, and never forget what God has done, but keep God's commandments' (verse 7).

Reflecting on Psalm 79 (78) in Jesus' Company

The Holy Land has been devastated by an invading army. The psalmist pleads with God to defend God's honour by intervening to save the people and punish the invaders. A likely setting for this psalm is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 587BC. This is not a psalm that Jesus could pray. Firstly, the psalmist sees the devastation of Jerusalem as proof of God's anger (verse 5; see the reflection on the 'anger' of God in Psalm 2, pages 20-23). Secondly, it is a plea for God to 'avenge the blood of your servants' (verse 10). Psalm 79 is not used in the Lectionary. It is found in the Prayer of the Church for the Prayer during the Day Thursday Week 3, but the most extreme sentiments of revenge (verses 6-7 and 12) are omitted. As disciples of Jesus we join the psalmist in turning to God when faced with a catastrophe, but hopefully with better sentiments.

¹O God, the nations invade your land.

They defile your holy temple, and destroy Jerusalem.

²They expose the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air,
the flesh of your faithful to scavengers.

The 'faithful' are the *hasidim*: those who are faithful to God's covenant. Verses two and three are quoted in 1Maccabees 7:17 in relation to the destruction brought about by the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, in 168BC.

³They pour out blood like water all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.

⁴We are a taunt to our neighbours,
mocked and derided by those around us.

⁵How long, O GOD? Will you be angry forever?
Will your jealous wrath continue to burn like fire?

Verses 6-7 are not in the liturgy

⁶Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you,
on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.

⁷For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation.

⁸Do not hold against us the guilt of our ancestors.
Let your tender compassion come speedily to meet us,
for we are brought very low.

⁹Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name.
Deliver us, and forgive our sins.

'Forgive' in verse nine translates the Hebrew *kipper*. The image is of the high priest on the Feast of Yom Kippur, seeking forgiveness for the people before the mercy-seat of GOD in the inner sanctuary.

¹⁰Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'

Let us see you punishing them,
avenging the blood of your servants.

¹¹Let the groans of the prisoners come before you.

According to your great power preserve those doomed to die.

Verse 12 is not in the liturgy

¹²Repay our neighbours seven times

for the way they taunted you, O God*!

There is a sharp contrast here with Jesus' insistence on forgiving 'seventy times seven times' (Matthew 18:22).

¹³We your people, the flock of your pasture,

will give you endless thanks.

From generation to generation

we will continue to praise you.

Praying Psalm 80 (79) with Jesus

¹Listen, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead the flock of Joseph.

Shine forth from your cherubim throne,

²upon Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.

Stir up your might! Come now and save us!

³Restore us, O God;

let your face shine on us and we will be saved.

⁴Mighty GOD, how long will you frown on your people's plea?

⁵For food you give us weeping,
an abundance of tears for our drink.

⁶You make us the taunt of our neighbours
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.

⁷Restore us, O God;

let your face shine on us and we will be saved.

⁸You brought a vine out of Egypt.

To plant it you drove out the nations.

⁹Before it you cleared the ground.

It took root and spread through the land.

¹⁰The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.

¹¹It sent out its branches to the sea,
its shoots even to the Euphrates.

¹²Why then have you broken down its walls?

It is plucked by all who pass by.

¹³It is ravaged by the boar from the forest,
devoured by the beasts of the field.

- ¹⁴**Turn again, O mighty God, we implore,
look down from heaven, and see.**
- ¹⁵**Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted.**
- ¹⁶**They have burned it with fire and destroyed it.
May they perish at the frown of your face.**
- ¹⁷**Let your right hand be upon the one you have chosen,
the one you have given your strength.**
- ¹⁸**And we will never again forsake you.
Give us life that we may call on your name.**
- ¹⁹*Restore us, O mighty GOD;
let your face shine on us and we will be saved.*

Psalm 80 was composed at a time of national military disaster in the northern kingdom. 'Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh' (verse 2) are the northern tribes that occupy the high country of Samaria. The occasion may have been the collapse of Samaria (721BC), though there are also echoes of the Philistine victories over Saul. Note mention of the Ark ('God's cherubim throne', verse 1) and God's 'right hand' (verse 17). Saul, Israel's first king, was of the tribe of Benjamin ('son of the right hand').

In keeping with the common assumption, the disaster is interpreted by the psalmist as a sign of God's punishment (verses 4-6 and verses 12-13). The psalmist is pleading with God not to forsake the people (verses 14-15). 'Then we will never again forsake you' (verse 18). He also wants the enemies to 'perish at the frown of God's face' (verse 16). Jesus wants us to love our enemies, and would want us to offer a different prayer (see Matthew 5:44).

God is called 'Shepherd of Israel' (verse 1), used as a title for God only here in the Hebrew Scriptures. Praying the psalm with Jesus, we think of him as 'the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11).

Verse three functions as a refrain (see verses seven and nineteen). Is the psalmist praying that the kingdom will be restored, or that the people may be restored from exile? Or is he praying that God will bring about repentance? The psalmist is praying that God will look favourably on the nation. See the reflection on 'Salvation' in Psalm 62, pages 189-190.

On God's 'face' see the reflection on Psalm 27, page 96. God's face shines upon us through the eyes of Jesus. 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). 'He is the reflection of God's glory' (Hebrews 1:3). 'While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white' (Luke 9:29). '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).

The psalmist sees the nation's 'tears' (verse 5) as the consequence of God's will to punish them so that they will repent. 'My tears have been my food by day and by night, as they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?' (Psalm 42:3). 'I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink' (Psalm 102:9).

Israel is likened to a vine planted by God (verse 8). Compare Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2-5; Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10; Ezekiel 17:5-10; 19:10-14. See the following from Exodus: 'You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O GOD, that you made your abode, the sanctuary that your hands have established' (Exodus 15:17; see Amos 9:15). Again we think of Jesus: 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower' (John 15:1).

Though archeology has shown otherwise, the biblical account portrays God as driving out the people of Canaan to make way for God's chosen people (verses 8-9; see Exodus 23:28-31; Joshua 24:12). In verse 19 GOD is named explicitly in the refrain.

Praying Psalm 81 (80) with Jesus

¹Sing aloud to God, our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.

²Raise a song, and sound the timbrel,
the sweet sounding harp and the lute.

³Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
and when the moon is full, on our feast.

⁴For it is a statute for Israel,
a command of the God of Jacob,
⁵who decreed it for the house of Joseph,
when we marched from Egypt.

⁶I hear a voice I had not known:

‘I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
your hands were freed from the load.
⁷You called in distress, and I rescued you.

I answered you, hidden within the thunder.
I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
⁸Hear, O my people, while I admonish you.
O Israel, if only you would heed!

⁹There are to be no strange gods among you;
you will not bow down to an alien god.

¹⁰I am your GOD. It was I who rescued you from Egypt,
I fed you when you were hungry.

¹¹But my people would not listen to my voice.
Israel, you would not obey.

¹²So I left you to your stubborn hearts,
to follow your own designs.

¹³O that my people would heed me.
Israel, if only you would walk in my ways!

¹⁴At once I would subdue your foes,
and use my power against your enemies.

¹⁵Those who hate me would cringe before you,
and their doom would last forever.

¹⁶And you, Israel, I would feed on the finest wheat,
and on honey from the rock.’

The psalmist, from the northern kingdom (‘the house of Joseph’, verse 5), calls on the assembly to celebrate the festival in obedience to God’s decree. Suddenly (verse 5), he is moved to utter an oracle from God, calling on the people to heed God’s word. To celebrate according to tradition is good, but we must listen to God and obey (verse 8).

The language of the exhortation is that of the covenant: ‘your GOD’ (verse 10); ‘my people’ (verses 8, 11 and 13).

In verse 7 the psalmist recalls how God tested the people at the ‘waters of Meribah’ (see Exodus 17:7). The people’s hearts were stubborn, and they followed their own designs. According to the understanding found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, this must mean that it was God who organised things that way: ‘I left you to your stubborn hearts, to follow your own designs’ (verse 12). Paul draws on this traditional language when he writes: ‘Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts: to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves ... For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. ... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done’ (Romans 1:24-28).

The opening words of the oracle are: ‘I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the load. You called in distress, and I rescued you’ (verse 7). They recall God’s liberating action in Egypt: ‘GOD said, “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).

The closing words remind God’s people that God is faithful to the covenant love. If they would walk in God’s ways: ‘At once I would subdue your foes, and use my power against your enemies. Those who hate GOD would cringe before you, and their doom would last forever. And you, Israel, I would feed on the finest wheat, and on honey from the rock’ (verses 14-16).

Jesus encourages us to love and pray for those who oppose us (see Matthew 5:43-48), not to want them to cringe before us, and not wanting their ‘doom to last forever’ (verse 15). The God Jesus knew is not defined by the way God is understood by any of the psalmists. We must keep this in mind whenever we pray a psalm. Jesus wants us to ‘be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48). He wants us to be perfect in compassion.

Praying Psalm 82 (81) with Jesus

¹God has taken his place in the council of the gods.

It is there God holds judgment:

²How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?

³Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
defend the lowly and the destitute.

⁴Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the power of the wicked.'

⁵The gods know nothing.
They grope in the dark, while the world falls to pieces.

⁶I say: 'Although you are gods,
all of you children of the Most High;
⁷nevertheless, you shall share the fate of humans,
and die like any prince.'

⁸Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for you rule all the nations.

Surrounded by lesser gods, the High God is holding court. We find this mythical language in other psalms: 'GOD is the High God, the Sovereign over all the gods' (Psalm 95:3). 'All gods bow down before him ... For you, GOD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods' (Psalm 97:7, 9). In monotheistic Judaism 'gods' and 'sons of the gods' was interpreted as referring to angelic beings: 'O heavenly beings ['sons of the gods'], acclaim the glory and might of GOD' (Psalm 29:1).

GOD condemns the lesser gods (and so the foreign governments that worship them) for not caring for the poor in their administration of justice: 'Give justice to the weak and the orphan; defend the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the power of the wicked' (verses 3-4).

The lesser gods are accused of 'groping in the dark' (verse 5). It is in the dark that injustice thrives. It is because of injustice that 'the world falls to pieces' (verse 5). The gods might think that their immortal status will save them (verse 6), but they will 'share the fate of humans and die like any prince' (verse 7).

The psalm stresses the importance of justice, and, since it is the poor who suffer most from injustice, it stresses the importance of concern for 'the weak and the orphan, the lowly and the destitute' (verse 3).

1. Justice

The Hebrew Scriptures show that the people of Israel were constantly struggling to free themselves from the many conflicting images of God that they had before they came to know GOD, images that prevailed in the surrounding polytheistic cultures. We find images of God in the Hebrew Scriptures that are not easily reconciled. However, among all the different ways of envisioning God, a fundamental one is that God is just, which is to say that God can be trusted to act always according to God's nature.

What is God's nature? The God of Israel is the God of Moses, the God of the Exodus, the God who liberates from slavery:

'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' (Exodus 3:7-8).

'GOD passed before Moses, and proclaimed, 'GOD, GOD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin' (Exodus 34:6-7).

Of course, since God is just, God must act not only according to who God is, but also according to who we are. God cannot turn a blind eye to sin. The above text continues:

'yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation' (Exodus 34:7).

Though God must judge sin for what it is, God never stops being a God of love:

'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath' (Hosea 11:8-9).

The psalmist cannot believe that 'God will always reject me, and will never again turn and grace me.' He cannot accept that 'God's kindness to me is exhausted', that 'God's promises have come to an end', that 'God can forget to be gracious' (Psalm 77:7-9).

'The covenant love of GOD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (Lamentations 3:22-23).

As the idea of God is purified, especially by Jesus, so is our understanding of God's justice. Since we know that God is love, we have come to see that God's initiative is always loving, and everything that God does expresses this love. God's justice is God acting always and only out of love. When we sin, we cut ourselves off from God, but we cannot stop God loving. Sometimes, the consequences of our sinful behaviour are seen as punishment from an angry God. Yet, even within this understanding, the aim of God's punishment is that we change and renew our communion with God. God wants us to repent and live.

‘Your Maker, the mighty God, is your husband. The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. God has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man’s youth when she is cast off, says your God. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says God, your Redeemer’ (Isaiah 54:5-8).

Jesus reveals God as a God of love. We find this truth expressed beautifully also in the Hebrew Scriptures. The difference is that Jesus’ revelation of God’s love is such that every other image of God has to be re-thought. We no longer think of God as controlling the world. God loves the world, and love does not control (see the reflection on Psalm 2, pages 20-22). God has made us free and respects our freedom. If we choose to reject God’s love, God will not stop loving us; but neither will God force this love upon us. Our rejection of God’s love, our choosing to live without this love, affects our lives and the lives of those around us. It blocks out the light. But if we change and genuinely turn to God, we will be immediately bathed in light. God’s love is unconditional. We can choose to reject God’s love. We can plunge ourselves into darkness, but we cannot alter God’s love. We no longer think of God as reacting to our sin with anger. What the ancient Israelites thought was a sign of divine anger, we see as the disruptive consequence of human sin.

God is just. God, therefore, cannot pretend that things are other than they in fact are. We are meant for light, not for darkness. We are created to live in God’s love. The darkness into which we plunge ourselves through sin is unnatural. We are ill at ease. The darkness itself can be a reminder that we are meant for the light. In this sense the effect of our sin can be spoken of as ‘punishment’, so long as we recognise that it is self-inflicted. It is not something which God inflicts upon us from the outside. The prodigal son in the parable of Jesus ended up in a pig yard as a consequence of his dissipation (see Luke 15:11-32). This was a ‘punishment’, but not something inflicted on him by anyone other than himself, certainly not by his father. If we speak of it as punishment ‘of God’, we are not saying that God is the cause; rather that it is a self-inflicted punishment that affects our relationship with God (it is ‘of God’). The Catholic Catechism has this to say: ‘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’ (n.1033).

The mystery is that we are able to resist love, and so can die an eternal death. However, we must remember that to do so we must break through the loving arms of Jesus extended on the cross, for Jesus ‘gave his life to save us from our sins’ (Galatians 1:4), whether it be through a last-minute promise to a dying thief (Luke 23:39-43), or a last-minute appeal to a desperate Judas (Luke 22:48). It is from these consequences that Jesus would save us, not by any suggestion that God overlooks our transgressions, but by the amazing truth that God offers us a love which offers to transform us, attracting us away from sin and towards the communion which alone can satisfy our hearts. The God of love and communion that Jesus shows us highlights that aspect of justice in the Hebrew scriptures that is concerned with being in right relationship with God and right relationship with each other.

That God is just is a theme found in many of the psalms. In Psalm 17, the psalmist prays: ‘O God, hear my appeal for justice. Attend to my cry. Listen to my plea’ (verse 1). In Psalm 31 he prays to God: ‘May your justice be my security’ (verse 1). In Psalm 51 the psalmist admits that he has sinned and pleads for forgiveness. He acknowledges God’s justice in judging him as a sinner: ‘You are just in your sentence, blameless when you pass judgment’ (verse 4). The psalmist goes on to focus on God’s justice in bringing salvation. God, being God, will always show mercy and re-create a sinner’s life, so that, freed from sin, we will be able to live beautifully from the heart. In Psalm 54, the psalmist appeals to the divine tribunal for the justice that his enemies are denying him. He appeals to God’s reputation as a just and faithful judge. In Psalm 85 the psalmist looks forward to the time when ‘covenant love and faithfulness will meet; justice and peace will embrace. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and justice will look down from the sky. God will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Justice clears a path for God. Justice points the way to peace’ (verses 10-13).

2. Justice for the poor

Justice, especially in regard to the poor, is central to Israel’s faith. Psalm 94 is a lament against those who perpetrate injustice, foolishly thinking that God does not notice. They ‘crush God’s people, and oppress God’s heritage. They kill the widow and the stranger, they murder the orphan, and they say “God does not see” (verses 5-6). In Psalm 140 the psalmist declares: ‘I know that God maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor’ (verse 12).

The Book of the Covenant is one of the oldest sections of the Law. It gives us an insight into the understanding of pre-monarchic Israel. Among its injunctions we find the following:

‘You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry ... If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down’ (Exodus 22:21-26).

We find the same teaching in the Book of Deuteronomy (15:1-15; 24:10-15) and in many other parts of the Law.

The prophetic scrolls reiterate the same message:

‘Thus says God: I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed’ (Amos 2:6-8).

‘Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!’ (Isaiah 5:8).

'Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!' (Isaiah 10:1-2).

'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of GOD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and GOD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am ... and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail' (Isaiah 58:6-11).

'Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,' and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father [King Josiah] eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says GOD. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practising oppression and violence' (Jeremiah 22:13-17; see also 34:8-22).

Jesus bears witness to God's justice, with special focus on the poor. In describing Jesus' Baptismal experience the Gospel writers point us to Isaiah 42.

'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth a just verdict to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth a just verdict. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established a just verdict in the earth' (Isaiah 42:1-4).

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Luke outlines Jesus' agenda in the scene where Jesus is preaching in the Nazareth synagogue.

'Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: The Spirit of GOD is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of GOD's favour. And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:17-21; Isaiah 61:1-2).

Again and again in the Gospel narratives we see Jesus caring for the poor, the oppressed, the needy, the marginalised, the neglected. As we watch him we are seeing God's concern. Jesus declared the poor 'blessed and happy' (Luke 6:20). The reign of God is a reign of love, and God was coming to free them from oppression, through Jesus' ministry and through the ministry of his disciples.

When John the Baptist sent his disciples to inquire whether Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah, Jesus replied:

'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them' (Luke 7:22).

Jesus challenged his contemporaries:

'When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind' (Luke 14:13).

For the poor to be released from their most crippling oppression they must open themselves to God's love. Matthew highlights this when he has Jesus say: 'Blessed and happy are the poor *in spirit*' (Matthew 5:3). To grasp what this means we must look at Jesus. Being 'poor in spirit' is presented by Matthew as the fundamental attitude of a person who is to receive the good news, only because it is a fundamental attitude of Jesus himself. The blessedness, the bliss, the profound delight of intimate communion with God which the poor are to experience is a sharing in the religious experience of Jesus.

The word 'poor' applies literally to those who do not have the resources to meet their own needs. We are 'poor in spirit', therefore, to the extent that we recognise that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God on whom we are totally dependent. Jesus is telling his disciples that we will be 'blessed'. That is to say, we will have that special happiness that flows from God's blessing. We will share Jesus' communion with God to the extent that we recognise our own powerlessness and complete dependence on God. This will mean giving up attempts to rely on ourselves without reference to God. It will mean looking to God as the source of our hope and salvation, trusting that God wants only to love us.

We should make an important clarification. It should be obvious from Jesus' own commitment to the poor and oppressed that he is in no way justifying material, economic poverty, nor is he saying that there is anything good about any of the deprivations experienced by the oppressed poor. One point he is making is that when our lack of resources to meet our pressing needs is obvious, we are less likely to think of ourselves as self-sufficient than when our material welfare is secured. The deceptive and superficial self-reliance that goes with wealth is a trap that caused Jesus to say: 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God' (Luke 18:24). However, it can be hard for the materially poor too because of the temptation to envy and despair.

The 'poor' are those who recognise their need and cry out to God in their distress. As we watch Jesus, we see that he cannot resist the cry of the poor. When he meets a person who wants to be his disciple and who has resources to help the poor, he asks him to rid himself of his possessions — of the riches that burden and 'possess' him — and to give them to those who need them. Only then will he be free to follow Jesus (Luke 18:22).

Jesus, therefore, is not praising poverty. He is calling his disciples to recognise that we are not independent, that we do not have the resources in ourselves to be or to do anything, but that we are totally dependent upon God. He is assuring us that, if we place our trust in God and act accordingly, we will experience now the communion with God that will satisfy our deepest need and longing.

A perfect image for the 'poor' is found in Psalm 131. Here, the psalmist places before us a little child, utterly dependent, simply and totally looking to the mother, and doing so joyfully, because of the security provided by the mother's love.

'O GOD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in GOD from this time on and forever more.'

For this reason, Jesus says to his disciples: 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Luke 18:17).

The 'poor' are those who recognise their dependence. The 'poor' are open to hear the good news. They believe that God who delights in Jesus delights also in them. They believe that it is God's purpose to save them from all that hinders their full communion with God and thus limits their freedom to live full human lives.

Perhaps Jesus' most powerful statement on justice and care for the poor is when he tells us how our lives will ultimately be judged:

'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me' (Matthew 25:34-36).

Luke is a realist. The poor will experience hunger; they will weep; and they will be rejected, as Jesus and the prophets were rejected (Luke 6:21-23). It is one thing for a child to trust. It is another for an adult, in a world of sin, oppression and suffering, to maintain this same loving trust in God while being committed to do God's will. The challenge presented by Jesus to his disciples is to remain 'poor' under persecution. We will see Jesus living with this childlike trust in his own public ministry and especially in his suffering and death. In the face of a cruel death Jesus can still say to God: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46; see Psalm 31:5). As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us pray to share his trust in God.

Reflecting on Psalm 83 (82) in Jesus' Company

Psalm 83 is not included in the Liturgy. Foreign nations are conspiring to wipe out Israel. The psalmist assumes that because they are Israel's enemies they are God's enemies (verse 2). He is pleading with God to destroy them the way he destroyed Israel's enemies at the time of the Judges. Note the absence of any mention of Babylon or Egypt. He wants God to intervene and reduce the enemies to 'dung on the ground' (verse 10). This way they will be forced to acknowledge GOD 'as the Most High God over all the earth' (verse 18).

Verse 13 is a typical curse formula. Psalm 83 is not a Christian prayer. We should recall that Jesus reveals a very different God, one who lets his sun and rain nurture all, the just and the unjust alike (see Matthew 5:45).

¹O God, do not remain silent;

do not hold your peace and do nothing!

²Even now your enemies are in an uproar.

Those who hate you are confident in victory.

³They lay crafty plans against your people.

They consult together against those you protect.

⁴They say, 'Come, let us wipe out this nation;

let the name of Israel be remembered no more.'

⁵They conspire together. Against you they make a pact:

⁶Edom and Ishmael, Moab and Hagar,

⁷Gabal, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia and Tyre.

⁸Even Assyria has joined them

to increase the forces of the children of Lot.

⁹Do to them as you did to Midian, [Judges 6-8]

as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the Wadi Kishon. [Judges 4-5]

¹⁰Destroyed at En-dor, they became dung for the ground.

¹¹Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, [Judges 7:25; 8:31]

their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, [Judges 8:5ff]

¹²who said, 'Let us take the pastures of God for our own possession.'

¹³O my God, make them like whirling dust,

like chaff before the wind.

¹⁴As fire consumes the forest, as flame sets the mountains ablaze,
¹⁵so pursue them closely with your tempest
and terrify them with your hurricane.

¹⁶GOD, cover their faces with shame,
so that they may seek your name.

¹⁷Let them be forever put to shame and dismayed.
Let them perish in disgrace.

¹⁸Let them know that you alone, O GOD,
are the Most High over all the earth.

Praying Psalm 84 (83) with Jesus

¹How lovely is your dwelling place, O mighty GOD!
²How I long, how I am yearning, for the courts of GOD.
My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

O mighty GOD, my king and my God!

³Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for her brood,
where she may lay her young by your altars.

⁴Blessed and happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

⁵Blessed and happy are those who draw their strength from you
as they resolve to go to you on pilgrimage.

⁶As they go through the Baka' valley
they enjoy a place of springs;
the early rains cover it with pools.

⁷They go from garrison to garrison.
In Zion they will see the God of gods.

⁸O mighty GOD, hear my prayer;
listen, O God of Jacob!

⁹God, our shield,
look upon the face of your anointed.

¹⁰One day in your courts
is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of the wicked.

¹¹For GOD is our sun and shield,
bestowing favour and glory.
GOD never fails to bless
those who walk with integrity.

¹²O mighty GOD, blessed and happy are they
who place their trust in you.

The psalmist expresses his longing, his 'yearning for the courts of GOD' (verse 2). See a reflection on longing in Psalm 42, pages 132-134, and Psalm 63, pages 193-196. The psalmist reflects on the happiness of those who make the pilgrimage to encounter God in his dwelling place. 'In Zion they will see the God of gods' (verse 7). 'I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory' (Psalm 63:2). See a reflection on the 'Face of God' (Psalm 31, pages 104-105), and on seeking God's face (Psalm 27, page 96).

'One day in your courts is worth a thousand elsewhere' (verse 10). Being in the temple is being in communion with God. Nothing matters more than this!

'Blessed and happy the person whom you choose to bring near to live in your courts. We are filled with the goodness of your house, with the holy gifts of your temple' (Psalm 65:4).

'You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shade of the Almighty, will say to GOD, 'My refuge, my fortress; my God, I place my trust in you' (Psalm 91:1-2).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his love for Jerusalem and the temple (see reflection on Psalm 2, page 23).

We see Jesus as the new temple (John 2:19, 21; Apocalypse 21:22-23). We dwell in him as he dwells in us: 'Abide in me as I abide in you' (John 15:4).

We see the Church community as the new temple (see Psalm 48, pages 148-150).

'You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God' (Ephesians 2:21-22).

'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).

The ultimate temple is heaven (See Psalm 48, pages 147-149).

'We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens ... He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee' (2 Corinthians 5:1, 5).

'God never fails those who walk with integrity' (verse 11). External action (pilgrimage) is not enough. We must live in a way that is in accordance with God's will.

In his commentary on this psalm, Saint Augustine writes:

'There remains nothing to desire apart from God. They no longer love the earth; they love the One who created the heavens and the earth. They love Him, but they are not yet with him. From this arises their desire, a desire that is not immediately satisfied, and so it grows so that it can hold as much as it desires. It will not be little what God will give to those who nurture such a desire, nor will the food be scarce for those who are determined to make themselves capable of receiving such a great good. God will not give to his creatures anything less than Himself, the Creator of everything. Train yourself, therefore, to welcome God. Long from afar for the Good that you are destined to possess for ever ...

Let us not tire of giving praise to God. If you lack love, you lack praise. However, if love is eternal, because the beauty of God is inexhaustible, then do not fear, because you will be able to praise forever the One whom you can love forever ...

People desire myriads of days and want to live long lives here below. Have scant regard for these myriads of days and long only for that day which knows no beginning and no end; that unique day, that eternal day, not issuing from a yesterday, and not leading into a tomorrow. May our desire be for that unique day.'

Praying Psalm 85 (84) with Jesus

¹O GOD, you favoured your land;
you revived the fortunes of Jacob.

²You wiped away the guilt of your people.
You covered over all their sins.

⁴Revive us, O God our Saviour,
⁷Show us your covenant love, O GOD,
and grant us your salvation.

⁸Let me hear what GOD has to say,
a voice that speaks of peace:
peace to the people who turn to God in their hearts.

⁹Surely God's salvation is at hand for the faithful,
and God's glory will fill our land.

¹⁰Covenant love and faithfulness have met;
justice and peace have embraced.

¹¹Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and justice looks down from heaven.

¹²GOD will give prosperity,
and our land will yield its harvest.

¹³Justice clears a path for God.
Justice points the way to peace.

Omitted

³You withdrew all your wrath, you turned from the heat of your anger.

⁴End your grievance against us.

⁵Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger generation after generation?

⁶Will you not change and give us life again,
so that your people may rejoice in you?

It is we who need to change, not God. See the reflection on the 'Anger of God' in Psalm 2, pages 20-23.

1. Forgiveness

The psalmist recalls God's grace poured out on his people in the past, especially God's readiness to forgive (verse 2). Sin blocks our receiving God's grace, but it does not stop God offering grace, for God is always ready to 'wipe away our guilt', and 'cover over' our sins (verse 2). Sin does not stop us from being God's people. See the reflection on forgiveness in Psalm 65, page 200.

'Blessed and happy are they whose sins are forgiven. Blessed and happy are they to whom GOD imputes no guilt, whose spirit is no longer darkened by sin. If you remain silent, you will waste away, weighed down by sin day and night, your strength dried up as in a summer drought. 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' (Psalm 32:1-5).

2. Anger

As the community prayed this psalm after the return from exile they saw their difficulties as a sign of God's disapproval (verses 3-5). See the reflection on God's 'anger' in Psalm 2, pages 20-23.

3. Covenant Love

The Psalmist prays to God: 'show us your covenant love' (verse 7). He goes on to declare that 'covenant love and faithfulness have met' (verse 10). The Hebrew word *hesed* is found 127 times in the psalms. Its primary reference is to the basic relationship that binds a family or clan together. Outside the family or clan it is supported by a treaty or an oath. Hence the translation 'covenant love.'

It is used of GOD who is committed to love God's people.

'I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in covenant love (*hesed*), and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know GOD' (Hosea 2:19-20).

hesed is often linked with *'emet* (see Exodus 34:6; Psalm 25:10; 4:11-12; 57:4; 61:8; 85:11; 86:15; 89:15; 115:1; 117:2; 138:2), where *'emet* emphasizes the permanency, certainty and lasting validity of the *hesed* of GOD. Being 'full of covenant love' is one of the qualities attributed to God in the credal formula that recurs throughout the Bible.

'GOD, GOD, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in covenant love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6).

'Return to GOD, your God, for he is gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in covenant love' (Joel 2:13).

'I knew that you are a gracious God and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in covenant love' (Jonah 4:2).

'You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in covenant love' (Nehemiah 9:17).

We find this creedal formula a number of times in the psalms:

‘You, O God*, are a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in covenant love and faithfulness’ (Psalm 86:15).

‘GOD is tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in covenant love’ (Psalm 103:8).

‘GOD is gracious and tenderly compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness’ (Psalm 145:8).

The Bible uses an abundance of words to speak of God’s covenant love. God ‘sends’ covenant love (Psalm 57:3); ‘remembers’ covenant love (Psalm 25:6); ‘shows’ covenant love (Psalm 85:7); ‘keeps’ covenant love (Psalm 89:28); ‘surrounds’ with covenant love (Psalm 32:10) are just a few examples.

GOD’s covenant love to us requires that we show this love to others:

‘What does GOD require of you but to do justice, and to show covenant love, and to walk humbly with your God?’ (Micah 6:8).

Return to your God, hold fast to covenant love and justice, and wait continually for your God’ (Hosea 12:6).

‘A throne shall be established in kindness in the tent of David, and on it shall sit in faithfulness a ruler who seeks justice and is swift to do what is right’ (Isaiah 16:5).

‘Thus says Mighty GOD: Render true judgments, show covenant love and mercy to one another’ (Zechariah 7:9).

3. Salvation

In verse 9 the psalmist expresses his faith: ‘Surely God’s salvation is at hand for the faithful, and God’s glory will fill our land.’ God’s ‘faithful ones’ (verse 9; *hasidim*) are those who welcome God’s covenant love to them and who are faithful to the covenant. On salvation see the reflection on Psalm 62, pages 189-190. The salvation that is ‘at hand’ was revealed finally in Jesus. Holding the child Jesus to his heart, Simeon declared: ‘My eyes have seen your salvation’ (Luke 2:30). Under house arrest in Rome, Paul says to the Jewish leaders: ‘Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen’ (Acts 28:28). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews states: ‘Having been made perfect, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’ (Hebrews 5:9).

4. Glory

In Jesus, God’s glory ‘fills the land’ (verse 9).

‘God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory’ (Colossians 1:27).

‘The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God’ (2 Corinthians 4:4).

5. Justice

‘Justice and peace have embraced.

Justice looks down from heaven.

Justice clears a path for God.

Justice points the way to peace’ (verses 10-11, 13).

See the reflection on justice in Psalm 82, pages 249-251.

‘Just’ is sometimes translated ‘righteous’, which combines two words: ‘right’ and ‘wise’ (eous). To be ‘righteous’ one must be wise as to what is right and behave accordingly. This means doing the will of God. ‘The kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 14:17).

6. Peace

‘Let me hear what God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace, peace to God’s faithful ones, to those who turn to God in their hearts’ (verse 8).

‘Justice and peace have embraced’ (verse 10).

The Hebrew shalom means ‘peace’, but much more than the absence of war. It includes growth, prosperity, completeness, wholeness, and harmony. It is the result of God’s blessing. This is expressed beautifully in the priestly blessing:

‘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).

It is our responsibility to welcome God’s grace, and so this divine blessing of ‘peace’ is conditional upon our living a righteous life:

‘The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever’ (Isaiah 32:17).

Speaking of Jesus who brought together the Jews and the non-Jews into one family of love, Paul writes:

‘He is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us’ (Ephesians 2:14).

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favours!’ (Luke 2:14).

‘Jesus stood among them and said to them: Peace be with you’ (Luke 24:36).

Paul prays: ‘Peace be upon them, and mercy’ (Galatians 6:16).

Praying Psalm 86 (85) with Jesus

- ¹Listen closely to me, O GOD,
answer me, for I am poor and needy.
- ²Watch over me, for to you I am devoted.
Save your servant, for I put my trust in you.
- You are my God.
- ³Be gracious to me for to you I cry all day long.
- ⁴Give joy to your servant,
for to you, God*, I lift up my soul.
- ⁵You, my God*, are good and forgiving,
abounding in covenant love to all who call.
- ⁶Listen to my prayer; attend to my cry.
⁷In the day of my trouble I call on you,
knowing you will answer me.
- ⁸There is none like you among the gods, O God*.
There are no deeds like yours.
- ⁹All the nations you formed will come
and bow down before you.
They will glorify your name.
- ¹⁰For indeed you are great.
You do wondrous things; you who alone are God.
- ¹¹Teach me your way, O GOD,
that I may walk in your truth.
Give me an undivided heart
that I may revere your name.
- ¹²I thank you, my God, with all my heart,
and I will honour you forever.
- ¹³For great is your covenant love toward me.
You have rescued me from the grave.

- ¹⁴The insolent rise up against me;
a band of ruffians seeks my life.
They give no thought to you.
- ¹⁵But you are God.
You are tenderly compassionate. You are gracious.
You are slow to anger,
abounding in covenant love and faithfulness.
- ¹⁶Turn to me and be gracious.
Give your strength to your servant.
Save the child of your serving girl.
- ¹⁷Show me a sign of your favour.
So that those who hate me may see and be put to shame,
because you, O GOD, are my salvation and my comfort.

The psalmist sings of his tender devotion to, and trust in, God (verse 2). It is a particularly beautiful psalm. We can hear Jesus praying it, and are invited to join him. The Church has chosen Psalm 86 for the Prayer of the Church, Night Prayer for Mondays. It is also included in the Morning Prayer for Wednesday Week 3. In the Lectionary it is chosen as the Responsorial Psalm for the 16th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A.

There are people who are wanting to kill the psalmist. They could not care less about God (verse 14). God has already saved the psalmist from death (verse 13). The psalmist is asking for another sign of God's favour (verse 7).

Verse 5 is the only occurrence in the Hebrew Scriptures of the adjective *sallah* (forgiving). The verb occurs 31 times and always with God as subject. The noun is also found: 'If you, O GOD, should mark our guilt, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness (*s^elihâ*). For this we revere you' (Psalm 130:3-4). For a reflection on forgiveness see Psalm 65, page 200.

The psalmist speaks of God's 'covenant love' (*hesed*, verse 5, 13 and 15). Verse 15 repeats the creedal formula of Exodus 34:6. See the reflection on 'covenant love' and the creedal formula in Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

The psalmist does not deny the existence of other gods, but his claim is that none of them is like the God of Israel (verse 8). We find this claim in other psalms.

'How many wonderful things you have done, GOD, my God, how many things you have thought up to favour us. There is no one like you' (Psalm 40:5).

'You have done great things, O God, who can compare with you?' (Psalm 71:19).

‘Who in the skies can be compared to GOD? Who is like GOD among the heavenly beings? God is feared in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome throughout his court’ (Psalm 89:6-7).

The psalmist claims that all nations are formed by GOD. He looks forward to the day when all nations will recognise GOD, and ‘will bow down before you God*, and glorify your name’ (verse 9).

Only GOD is really God: ‘You who alone are God’ (verse 10). We find the same claim elsewhere in the psalms.

‘Let them know that you alone, O GOD, are the Most High over all the earth’ (Psalm 83:18).

In verse 11 the psalmist prays for ‘an undivided heart’. He wants to do God’s will. He is confident that he will walk securely because of God’s faithfulness to him, and he is praying that he will be faithful to God.

The prayer ends with the psalmist’s assertion: ‘You, O GOD, are my salvation and comfort.’ See Psalm 62, pages 189-190 for a reflection on ‘Salvation’. The word ‘comfort’ (Hebrew *nham*) is found in 5 other psalms.

‘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’ (Psalm 23:4).

‘Insults have broken my heart. I have reached the end of my strength.
I looked in vain for compassion, for comforters, but none could I find’ (Psalm 69:20).

‘You will comfort me once again’ (Psalm 71:21).

‘In my anguish, I search for you, my God*.
My hands are raised at night without ceasing;
my soul refuses to be comforted’ (Psalm 77:2).

‘This is my comfort in my distress,
that your promise gives me life’ (Psalm 119:50).

‘Let your covenant love become my comfort
according to your promise to your servant’ (Psalm 119:76).

The Septuagint Greek Version of the Bible translates *nham* as *parakaleô*.

‘I am he who comforts you’ (Isaiah 51:12).

‘As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you;
you will be comforted in Jerusalem’ (Isaiah 66:13).

Jesus assures his disciples that those who mourn now will be comforted (Matthew 5:4). At the Last Supper he promises his disciples:

‘I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Comforter (Greek: *paraklesis*), to be with you forever ... You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you ... You will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you’ (John 14:16-20).

See the reflection in Psalm 16, pages 59-60, on our sharing Jesus’ intimate communion with God – the communion that is the Holy Spirit.

Luke records that the Church increased in numbers ‘in the comfort of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 9:31).

Paul exhorts the Christian community in Philippi: ‘If there is any appeal in Christ, any comfort 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).

Praying Psalm 87 (86) with Jesus

¹Zion is established on the holy mountain cherished by GOD,

²who prefers her gates to all the dwellings of Jacob.

³Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.

⁴Egypt and Babylon I will count among her citizens;

Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia are registered among her children.

⁵Zion will be called 'mother', for all will be her children.

It is the Most High who assigns each their place.

⁶GOD inscribes in the register of peoples:

'These are her children.'

⁷While they dance, they will sing:

'In you all find their home.'

The psalmist delights in Jerusalem (Zion). God established it and cherishes it above 'all the dwellings of Jacob' (Israel). This is demonstrated by the fact that God chose to dwell 'on the holy mountain' (verse 1). Because God has set up his abode there, Jerusalem is portrayed by the psalmist as the mother city of even traditional enemies, including Egypt, Babylon and Philistia, who are 'registered among her children' (verse 4). This is an extraordinary psalm. We are accustomed to hearing the psalms wanting Israel's enemies to be wiped out. Here Jerusalem is pictured as a mother welcoming all God's children: 'In you all will find their home' (verse 7).

Other texts agree that God has chosen Jerusalem for a special mission in the world

'Great is GOD and most worthy of praise in the city of our God.

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 ...

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.

In your temple, O God, we ponder your love.

Your praise, O God, like your reputation,

reaches to the ends of the earth' (Psalm 48:1-2, 8-10).

'In days to come the mountain of GOD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to GOD's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths' (Isaiah 2:2-3).

'I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory ... all flesh shall come to worship before me, says GOD' (Isaiah 66:18, 23).

'GOD's reputation will spread throughout Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem, when peoples and kingdoms gather together to worship GOD' (Psalm 102:21-22).

'Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Mighty GOD in Jerusalem, and to entreat GOD's favour' (Zechariah 8:22).

An even more extraordinary passage is the following from the Isaiah scroll. It is a late text, referring to the Egypt of the Ptolemies and Seleucid Assyria:

'On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom our Mighty GOD has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage' (Isaiah 19:23-25).

So extraordinary was this text that we find it 'watered down' in the Greek and Aramaic Versions.

1. Hebrew [MT]

Blessed be Egypt my people,
and Assyria the work of my hands,
and Israel my heritage.

2. Greek [LXX: Septuagint]

Blessed be my people who are in Egypt,
and who are in Assyria,
and Israel my heritage.

3. Aramaic Targum

Blessed be my people whom I brought out of Egypt. Because they sinned before me I carried them into exile to Assyria, but now that they have repented, they shall be called My People, and My Inheritance, even Israel.

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall the following conversation between a Samaritan woman and Jesus:

‘The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” ’ (John 4:19-26).

We recall also Jesus’ words in response to the words of the centurion:

‘When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” ’ (Matthew 8:10-11).

Jesus instructed his disciples:

‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:18-20).

On the first Pentecost after Jesus’ death and resurrection Peter spoke of Jesus to Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast: ‘Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs’ (Acts 2:9-11). The all-embracing (‘catholic’) dimension of the Church is seen from its beginning, when ‘about three thousand’ (Acts 2:41) joined the Christian community.

Paul expresses the universal scope of God’s love in his letter of farewell to the Gentile churches of the East:

‘Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the

cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God’ (Ephesians 2:12-19).

Paul states: ‘God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4).

In the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* the Second Vatican Council quotes this text and insists that the grace of salvation is offered to everyone:

‘God is not far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is this God who gives to all people life and breath and every other gift, and who as saviour wills that all people be saved. Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do God’s will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to God’s grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the church as a preparation for the gospel. The church regards such qualities as given by him who enlightens all people so that they may finally have life’ (n. 16).

The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* opens with these words:

‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts, for theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone’ (n.1).

The teaching of the universal call to salvation is reiterated by Pope John-Paul II. In his *The Mission of the Redeemer* (1990), he writes

‘The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. But it is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ ... It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation (he then quotes GS 22)’ (n. 10).

'The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the "seeds of the Word", to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones – and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness and God himself ... The Spirit is at the very source of people's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of what it is to be human ... "The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby 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"(GS 38). It is the Spirit who sows the 'seeds of the Word' present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ' (n. 28).

'We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people ... Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart' (n. 29).

'God does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors ... The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people' (n. 55).

'Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills' (n. 56).

Pope Paul VI has the same teaching. In his *Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World* (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1975), Pope Paul VI reminds us of the privilege and responsibility we have as Christians:

'It would be useful if every Christian and every evangeliser were to pray about the following thought: people can gain salvation also in other ways by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame – what Saint Paul called "blushing for the Gospel"(Romans 1:16) – or as a result of false ideas we fail to preach it? For that would be to betray the call of God, who wishes the seed to bear fruit through the voice of the ministers of the Gospel; and it will depend on us whether this grows into trees and produces its full fruit' (n. 80).

Jesus promised: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32). Jesus is drawing every person to himself in order to draw each one to his Father, so that 'they may live and live to the full' (John 10:10). It is our privilege and responsibility to draw everyone to Jesus by building a Christian community that will attract people to him. 'While they dance, they will sing: "In you all find their home" ' (verse 7).

Praying excerpts from Psalm 88 (87) with Jesus

¹**O GOD, my God, by day I plead for your help,
by night, I cry out in your presence.**

²**Let my prayer reach you; heed my cry.**

³**I am steeped in trouble, on the brink of the grave.**

⁴**I am numbered among those who go down to the pit.**

⁵**My time is up and I am left to die,
like the slain that lie in the field.**

⁸**I am shut in so that I cannot escape.**

⁹**My eyes are sunken with grief.**

**All day long I call on you, O GOD,
straining my hands towards you.**

¹³**O GOD, I cry to you for help;
in the morning my plea comes before you.**

¹⁴**Why do you cast me off?**

Why do you hide your face?

Psalm 88 is a cry from a person who is about to die. Feeling utterly deserted by God, the psalmist is desperate. We recall Psalm 55.

'My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me' (Psalm 55:4-5).

We can hear Jesus praying this prayer in the Agony, during the long night before his trial and from the cross. However, to be a prayer for Jesus many verses need to be omitted.

Omitted

⁵like those you remember no more,
for they are cut off from you forever.

⁶You have lowered me into the pit,
into the darkness of the Abyss.

⁷Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
wave after wave overwhelms me.

Omitted

- ⁸You have caused my companions to shun me;
for them you have made me a thing of horror.
- ¹⁰Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do they rise up to praise you?
- ¹¹Is your covenant love known in the grave,
or your faithfulness among the dead?
- ¹²Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your saving help in the land of oblivion?
- ¹⁵I have been wretched and sickly since my youth.
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.
- ¹⁶Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.
- ¹⁷They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.
- ¹⁸You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me;
my only companion is darkness.

There are three assumptions in this psalm that Jesus does not share with the psalmist. We cannot hear the omitted verses being prayed by Jesus, nor are they fitting as Christian prayer.

The first assumption that is behind much of the psalm is that God is responsible for everything that is happening to the psalmist. For a reflection on God loving and not controlling see Psalm 2, pages 20-22.

The second assumption is a consequence of the first. The psalmist assumes that his condition is a sign that God is angry with him (verses 7 and 16). For a reflection on God's anger see Psalm 2, pages 20-23.

The third assumption is that death is the end of life (verses 10-12), the end of communion with God, and that God does not remember the dead 'for they are cut off from you forever' (verse 5). We find this idea throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

'In the realm of death no one calls on you; in Sheol who can give you praise? I am exhausted with my groaning; all night long I drench my pillow with tears; I soak my couch with weeping' (Psalm 6:5-6).

'What profit is there in my death, in my going down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?' (Psalm 30:9).

'The dead do not praise GOD, nor do those who go down into silence' (Psalm 115:17).

Because of his experience of God, Jesus believed that his communion with God would continue beyond his physical death. He promised those who opened their hearts to welcome him and his revelation that they would join him in the risen life (see John 6:37-40): 'whoever believes has eternal life' (John 6:47). At the Last Supper Jesus said: '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 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 14:1-3).

The Sadducees refused to accept any beliefs that were not taught in the Torah. On one occasion they made fun of belief in life after death, and tried to show Jesus up as a fool for espousing the belief (see Mark 12:18-27). Jesus declared them wrong 'because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God' (Mark 12:24). Jesus drew their attention to one of the foundational passages of the Torah acknowledged by the Sadducees:

'As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living' (Mark 12:26-27; quoting Exodus 3:6).

Belief in resurrection and sharing in Jesus' communion with God after physical death is a central belief of the Christian community. See Psalm 30, page 101. Paul devotes a whole chapter to this in his First Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 15).

'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.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' (1 Corinthians 15:54-55).

Praying Psalm 89 (88) with Jesus

- ¹I will sing for ever of your covenant love, O GOD.
I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
- ²I declare that your covenant love is as established as the heavens.
- ³You said: 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
⁴"I will establish your dynasty for ever.
I will ensure your throne throughout the ages.'"
- ⁵The heavens proclaim your wonders, O GOD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of your holy ones.
- ⁶For who in the skies can be compared to you?
Who is like you, O GOD, among the beings of heaven?
- ⁷You are feared in the council of the holy ones,
great and awesome throughout the court.
- ⁸O Mighty GOD, who is your equal?
You are clothed in power and faithfulness.
- ⁹You rule over the raging of the sea; you tame its swelling waves.
- ¹⁰You pierced and crushed the sea monster.
- ¹¹The heavens are yours; yours is the earth;
the world and all that is in it – you have established it all!
- ¹²You created the north and the south.
Tabor and Hermon joyously acclaim your name.
- ¹⁴Justice and right judgment are the foundation of your throne;
covenant love and faithfulness go before you.
- Omitted [God portrayed as a Warrior Warlord]
- ¹⁰You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
- ¹³You have a mighty arm, raised in triumph.

- ¹⁵Blessed and happy are your people in their rejoicing!
You summon us into the light.
- ¹⁶Your name is our constant joy,
your justice is the subject of our boast.
- ¹⁷For you are our glory and our strength.
It is through your grace that we are exalted.
- ¹⁸For you, O GOD, are our shield.
You, the Holy One of Israel, are our king.
- ¹⁹You spoke in a vision. Of your faithful one, you said:
'I have set a royal crown on one who is mighty,
I have exalted a soldier from the troop.
- ²⁰I have found in David a servant,
and anointed him with my holy oil.
- ²¹My hand will remain with him always
and my arm will strengthen him.
- ²²The enemy will not outwit him,
the wicked will not humble him.
- ²⁴My faithfulness and covenant love will escort him.
In my name he will be victorious.
- ²⁵I will extend his power from the Western Sea
as far east as the mighty Euphrates.
- ²⁶He will call to me: "You are my Father, my God, my rock of safety!"
- ²⁷I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings.
- ²⁸I will honour my pledge of love,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.
- ²⁹I will establish his line forever,
and his throne will endure like the heavens.
- Omitted [God portrayed as a Warrior Warlord]
- ²³I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who oppose him.

³⁰**If his children forsake my law
and do not live according to my ordinances,
³¹if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
³²then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their guilt with scourges.**

³³**but I will not remove from him my covenant love,
or be false to my faithfulness.**

³⁴**I will not violate my covenant,
or go back on the word I have spoken.**

³⁵**Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness
that I will not fall short of what I have promised to David.**

³⁶**His line will continue forever,
his throne will endure before me like the sun.**

³⁷**It shall be established forever like the moon,
an enduring witness in the skies.'**

* * * * *

Verses 38-46 assume that the humiliation of the king is God's doing

³⁸But now, O God, you have spurned and rejected him;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.

³⁹You have broken your covenant with your servant.
You have defiled his crown in the dust.

⁴⁰You have made a breach in his walls;
you have reduced his strongholds to ruins.

⁴¹He is plundered by all who pass by.
He has become the taunt of his neighbours.

⁴²You have exalted the power of his foes.
You have given his enemies reason to rejoice.

⁴³You have blunted his sword,
you have not upheld him in battle.

⁴⁴You have removed the sceptre from his hand,
and hurled his throne to the ground.

⁴⁵You have cut short the days of his youth.
You have covered him with shame.

⁴⁶How long, O GOD? Must you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?

* * * * *

⁴⁷**Remember me. How short is my life!
Do you create people for no reason?**

⁴⁸**Who can live and never die?
Who can escape the power of death?**

⁴⁹**God*, where is the covenant love you showed of old,
the faithfulness you swore to David?**

⁵⁰**See how your servant is taunted;
how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples.**

⁵¹**How your enemies taunt me, O GOD,
mocking your anointed at every turn.**

⁵²**Blessed be GOD for ever. Amen. Amen.**

At a tragic time for the Davidic dynasty (see verses 38-46) – perhaps the death of Josiah in 609 (2 Kings 23:28-30), or the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 – the psalmist expresses his faith in God's mighty deeds as Creator (verses 5-14) and in the commitment made to David (verses 3-4 and 19-29, 33-37). This leads into a prayer of supplication (verses 47-51).

The words 'covenant love' (*hesed*) and 'faithfulness' (*'emunah*) recur throughout the psalm (verses 1-2, 14, 24 and 33). See the reflection on covenant love in Psalm 85, pages 261-262. The basis of faith in God is God's promise ('covenant', verses 3, 28, 34 and 39). God rules heaven and has promised that this power will be exercised on earth through God's anointed king, David (verses 3, 20, 35 and 49), the beneficiary of God's loving choice (verses 3, 28, 34 and 39). David's reign would continue through his descendants (verses 4, 14, 29, 36 and 44). The dynasty would be stable (verses 2, 4, 21 and 27) and would last for ever (verses 1, 2, 4, 28, 36 and 37).

The psalmist does not doubt God's faithfulness (verses 33-37). He pleads: how long will it be before God intervenes on behalf of the Davidic king? (verse 46).

The 'holy ones' (verse 5) are divine beings. Psalm 82 reflects the same mentality. As monotheism strengthened the 'gods' were thought of more as 'angels.'

'You rule over the raging of the sea; you tame its swelling waves' (verse 9). Praying this verse as Christians, we think of Jesus calming the sea (Mark 4:39-41). The point of the Gospel story is to recall this statement of Psalm 89 (and a number of other passages), and to draw us to see God working in the ministry of Jesus to bring order to our chaotic world.

In verses 5-14 we have been contemplating the lordship of God in creation. In verses 15-18 we look at the people's response. Compare 'Blessed and happy are the people to whom such blessings fall; blessed and happy are the people whose God is God' (Psalm 144:15).

In verses 19-37, the psalmist picks up the theme introduced in verses 3-4: God's choice of and commitment to David. Verse 20 is quoted in Acts 13:22.

'He will call to me: "You are my Father, my God, my rock of safety!" I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings' (verses 26-27). Compare: 'You are my son; today I have begotten you' (Psalm 2:7). The only individual in the Hebrew Scriptures to be called 'son of God' is the king, from the moment of his anointing.

'I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings' (verse 27). This verse is quoted in the Book of Revelation 1:5, where it is applied to Jesus.

God's love is offered unconditionally (verses 28-29). However, as the following verses indicate, God's love is not forced upon anyone. We are free to welcome it in faith, or to reject it. The consequences of rejection are now spelt out as though they are divine punishment, and expressions of God's 'anger' (verses 38 and 46). For a reflection on God's anger see Psalm 2, pages 20-23. It is not God who organises the rejection. It is the consequence of the abuse of human free will.

Verses 30-32 point out the consequences of the failure of David's heirs to be faithful to the covenant. In keeping with the mentality of the time, these consequences are seen as divine punishment. The psalmist introduces the idea here only to lead on to a statement of God's fidelity. However unfaithful a king may be, God will never go back on God's commitment:

'I will not remove from him my covenant love, or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant, or go back on the word I have spoken. Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness that I will not fall short of what I have promised to David. His line will continue forever, his throne will endure before me like the sun. It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies'(verses 33-37).

It is the hope expressed in these verses that led to the longing for a Messiah, once the Davidic line had come to an end after the destruction of Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 33:15-21). Different Jewish groups had different ways of envisioning the promised Messiah. Jesus' disciples saw Jesus as the fulfilment of these hopes. They called Jesus 'the Christ' (the Messiah), and Jesus' disciples were called 'Christians': followers of the Messiah.

Many of the expressions used in this psalm of the king are used in the New Testament of Jesus: 'Christ' (verse 52; Matthew 16:16); 'Chosen One' (verse 3; Luke 9:35); 'Servant' (verses 3 and 20; Acts 3:13,26; 4:27,30); 'Anointed' (verse 20; Luke 4:8; Acts 10:38); 'First born' (verse 27; Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15,18; Revelation 1:5; Hebrews 1:6).

Paul, too, speaks of God's promises and faithfulness:

'Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy' (Romans 15:8-9).

'If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself' (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

Verse 52 marks the end of Book III of the psalms.

Praying Psalm 90 (89) with Jesus

¹O God*, you have been our refuge
from one generation to the next.

²Before there were mountains,
before you formed the earth and its continents,
you are our God, without beginning or end.

³You return us back to dust, children of earth back to earth.
⁴For you a thousand years are like yesterday come and gone,
passing like a watch in the night.

⁵You sweep away the years.
They pass like a dream upon awakening.

⁶They are like grass that springs up in the morning,
to wither and fade by the evening.

⁸You lay bare our guilt,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

⁹Our years come to an end like a sigh.

¹⁰Even if we live seventy years, or eighty if we are strong,
life is toil and trouble;
the years soon pass, and we are gone.

¹²Teach us to make use of our days
that we may gain wisdom of heart.

¹³How long, O GOD, before you turn back to us?
Have compassion on your servants!

¹⁴Fill us in the morning with your covenant love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

¹⁵Give us joy to balance our affliction,
for the years when we have suffered misfortune.

¹⁶Let your servants, young and old,
witness the splendour of your action in our lives.

¹⁷Let the favour of our God, be upon us.
Give success to the work of our hands.
Give success to the work of our hands.

Omitted

⁷We are consumed by your anger, overwhelmed by your wrath.

⁹All our days wither beneath your glance.

¹¹Who can grasp the power of your anger?
Who appreciates the force of your wrath?

Basic to this psalm is the assumption that suffering is willed by God. Since God is just, suffering is seen as punishment for sin. This accounts for the references to God's 'anger' in the verses we have omitted. For a reflection on God's 'anger' see Psalm 2, pages 20-23.

Reflecting on the amount of suffering human beings endure in our all too brief life (verse 10), the psalmist prays that God will desist from punishing us for our sins and look upon us with love so that we may prosper and experience happiness (verses 13-17).

On the shortness of life see also Psalm 39:4-13

'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.
We amass possessions, not knowing who will enjoy them.
So what am I waiting for, my God*? My hope is in you.
Free me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the taunt of the fool.
I am silent. I do not open my mouth, since this is all your doing.
Stop tormenting me. I am worn down by the blows of your hand.
You chastise us in our guilt,
like a moth consuming what we treasure.
We human beings are no more than a breath.
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.
Look away that I may breathe again,
before I depart and am no more.'

Peter, too, reminds us that God does not fit into time as we know it:

‘Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance’ (2 Peter 3:8-9).

Since our life is so brief, the psalmist prays:

¹²Teach us to make use of our days that we may gain wisdom of heart.

For a reflection on wisdom see Psalm 51, page 160.

The psalmist invites us to pray that God will reveal God’s Self, and through what God does will give meaning and value to what we do, however brief our life. Compare Psalm 138:

‘GOD will fulfil his purpose for me.
Your covenant love, O GOD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands’ (Psalm 138:8).

Paul writes:

‘It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (Philippians 2:13).

‘God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us [Jews and Gentiles] alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus’ (Ephesians 2:4-7).

For disciples of Jesus the measure of the value of life is not terminated by physical death. Thanks to Jesus’ resurrection, and his promise that we, too, will be raised into God’s embrace for ever, we must entrust ourselves to God’s love. When we pray ‘Give success to the work of our hands’ (verse 17) we are not limiting our hopes to this life.

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).

John writes:

‘I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them’ (Revelation 14:13).

Praying Psalm 91 (90) with Jesus

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shade of the Almighty,
²say to GOD, ‘My refuge, my fortress, my God in whom I trust.’

³Yes, God will deliver you from the snare of the hunter
and from the deadly pestilence.

⁴God will cover you as a bird covers its young.
God’s wings will shelter you.
God’s faithfulness is your armour.

⁵You will not fear the terrors of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
⁶or the pestilence that stalks in the dark,
or the destruction that strikes at noon.

⁷A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right,
but you, you will not be harmed.

⁸You have only to open your eyes
to see how the wicked are punished.
⁹You have made GOD your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling.

¹⁰No evil will befall you, no scourge come near your tent.
¹¹For God will command the angels to guard you in all your ways.

¹²They will bear you up on their hands
lest you dash your foot against a stone.
¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder.
You will trample on the young lion and the serpent.

¹⁴‘I rescue those who cling to me in love. I protect those who know me.
¹⁵When I hear their cry, I answer, ‘I am with you.’
I am with them in trouble, I rescue them and bring them glory.
¹⁶With a long life I satisfy them, and show them my power to save.’

The liturgical leader is encouraging the community to trust in God, whom he calls 'The Most High', 'The Almighty', 'GOD', and 'my God' (verses 1-2).

The wings of the cherubim covered the space over the cover of the ark which GOD had chosen to make his throne (verse 4). God invites us into communion with God's own life. Sharing the sacred space we find protection.

Verses 11 and 12 are quoted by Matthew in the scene where he speaks of Jesus being tempted (Matthew 4:6). Compare the following:

'I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared' (Exodus 23:20).

'I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites' (Exodus 33:2).

'The angel of GOD encamps around those who revere GOD' (Psalm 34:7).

In reference to his disciples Jesus said: 'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 18:10).

God's protection is expressed in terms of protecting from lion and serpent (verse 13). Compare the following from the gospels:

'See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you' (Luke 10:10).

'These signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons ... they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them' (Mark 16:17-18).

Up to verse 13 the psalmist has been speaking about God. In verses 14-16 we have an oracle from God. God will care for those who love God, who know God intimately and who enter into dialogue with God.

'I rescue those who cling to me in love. I protect those who know me.

When I hear their cry, I answer: I am with you.

I am with them in trouble, I rescue them and bring them glory.

With a long life I satisfy them, and show them my power to save.'

See a reflection on 'glory' in Psalm 57, pages 177-179. For a reflection on 'salvation' see Psalm 62, pages 189-190. For a reflection on 'Sharing Jesus' intimacy with God' see Psalm 16, pages 59-60.

See the following from the New Testament:

'Keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you' (1 Peter 5:8-10).

Praying Psalm 92 (91) with Jesus

¹How good it is to give you thanks, O GOD,
to make music in your honour, O Most High,
²to proclaim your covenant love in the morning,
and in the night your faithfulness,
³to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the strumming of the lyre.

⁴Your deeds, O GOD, make me glad.
I sing for joy at the works of your hands.
⁵How great are your works!
How deep your designs!

⁶The foolish cannot understand
that though the wicked sprout like grass,
⁷though evildoers flourish,
they are doomed to final destruction.

⁸You, O GOD, are for ever on high.
⁹Your enemies perish; all who do evil are scattered.

¹⁰To me you give the wild ox's strength.
You anoint me with the purest oil.
¹¹I have seen the downfall of my enemies.
I have heard the doom of my evil assailants.

¹²The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a Lebanon cedar.
¹³They are planted in the house of GOD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.

¹⁴In old age the righteous still bear fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,
¹⁵proclaiming that GOD is upright;
my rock, in whom there is no wrong.

The psalmist is bursting with joy. For a reflection on joy see Psalm 65, page 201. He takes delight in thanking GOD for the way God acts in history, including the way God has made the psalmist prevail over his enemies (verse 11). People who lack wisdom are impressed by the fact that godless people are seen to flourish. The psalmist knows that those who do evil will finally be destroyed (verse 7), for 'there is no wrong (no unrighteousness)' in GOD' (verse 15).

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. Now in old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, so that I can proclaim your might and your power to the next generation: your power and your justice, O God, which reach to the heavens, and the great things that you have done. O God, who can compare with you?' (Psalm 71:17-19).

'I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.

I have always trusted in the covenant love of God' (Psalm 52:8).

'Those who are wise understand these things; those who are discerning know them. For the ways of GOD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them' (Hosea 14:9).

'They do not know the thoughts of GOD; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor' (Micah 4:12).

'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' (Matthew 11:25).

'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!' (Revelation 15:3).

Peter reminds us that not all our enemies are outside. He speaks of 'the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul' (1 Peter 2:11). We recall Jesus' words: 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person' (Mark 7:20-23).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we thank God that we, too, are 'planted in the house of GOD' (verse 13), as members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

Praying Psalm 93 (92) with Jesus

¹**GOD is king, with majesty enrobed,
robed with might, girded with power.**

The world you established, not to be moved.

²**Your throne, O GOD, has stood firm from of old.
You are from all eternity.**

³**The torrents swell, the waters roar.
Hear the crashing of their waves.**

⁴**More majestic than the roar of mighty waters,
more glorious than the surging of the sea,
GOD is glorious on high.**

⁵**Truly your decrees are to be trusted.**

Holiness is fitting to your house, O GOD, until the end of time.

This is a hymn to celebrate GOD's majesty and might. It is the first of seven psalms celebrating God's reign. It may have been composed to be sung on the occasion of a New Year re-enactment of God's act of creation.

Say among the nations, 'GOD is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved' (Psalm 96:10).

As Christians we reflect on the reign of God through the power and glory of the risen Christ.

'What is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. 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 above every name that is named' (Ephesians 1:19-21).

'We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign' (Revelation 11:17).

For a reflection on holiness (verse 5) see Psalm 99.

Many of Jesus' parables speak of the 'kingdom of heaven'. They describe the 'reign of God': what the world would be like if we opened our hearts and our lives to God's love as revealed by Jesus. In this sense we can speak of Jesus as a 'king' who is committed to bring about the reign of God's love in the world. As Jesus' disciples it is our privilege to be instruments of Jesus in bringing about this reign.

- a kingdom of one who lives: 'I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever' (Revelation 1:18). 'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him' (Romans 6:9).
- an everlasting kingdom: 'He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end' (Luke 1:33).
- a kingdom of justice and peace (see the beatitudes, Matthew 5:6,9). 'The kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Romans 14:17). 'Christ Jesus became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1 Corinthians 1:30). 'A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace' (James 3:18).
- a kingdom of victory over oppression: 'When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder' (Luke 11:21-22). 'They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings' (Revelation 17:14).
- a kingdom in favour of the poor: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:3). 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free' (Luke 4:18). 'The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them' (Luke 7:22).
- a kingdom of liberation: 'He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds' (Titus 2:14). 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28).
- a universal, all-embracing, kingdom. This is the point behind the story of the Magi in Matthew chapter two. It is also dramatised in the Pentecost scene in Acts chapter two.
- a kingdom to be acknowledged by all: 'At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth' (Philippians 2:10). 'I saw an angel flying in mid heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth – to every nation and tribe and language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Revelation 14:6-7). 'All nations will come and worship you' (Revelation 15:4).

Reflecting on Psalm 94 (93) in Jesus' Company

¹O GOD, reveal yourself, our avenging God!

²Rise up, O judge of the earth.

Give to the arrogant what they deserve!

³How long, O GOD, how long will the wicked strut around?

⁴They bluster and boast, flaunting their evil behaviour.

⁵They crush your people. They oppress your land.

⁶They kill the widow and the stranger. They murder the orphan.

⁷'The Lord is blind,' they say. 'The God of Jacob sees nothing.'

⁸Pay attention you fools, you stupid people!

When will you understand?

⁹Does God who made the ear not hear?

Does God who made the eye not see?

¹⁰Does God who corrects the nations not punish?

Does God who teaches humankind lack knowledge?

¹¹GOD knows our thoughts, how empty they are.

¹²Blessed and happy are those whom you discipline, O GOD,
those to whom you give your law.

¹³They find comfort when times are bad,
while a grave is being dug for the wicked.

¹⁴O GOD, you do not forsake your people.

You do not abandon your heritage.

¹⁵The innocent will win back their rights.

There will be a future for the righteous of heart.

¹⁶Who rises up for me against the wicked?

Who sides with me against those who do evil?

¹⁷Without your help, O GOD,

I would be lying silent in the grave.

¹⁸When I feel myself slipping,
your covenant love, O GOD, supports me.

¹⁹When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations lift my spirit.

²⁰Can they claim you for their side,
corrupt officials who do injustice under cover of law?

²¹They band together against the just,
condemning the innocent to death.

²²You, O GOD, are my strength, my God, my rock of refuge.

²³It is your will to wipe them out for the evil they do.
GOD, our God, will wipe them out.

This is a lament against those who perpetrate injustice (verses 5-6 and 21), foolishly thinking that God does not notice (verses 7-9). The psalmist is pleading with God to intervene to protect the innocent (verses 5-6 and 15) and wipe out the wicked (verse 23). The king has two main functions: to protect the people (symbolised by the sword) and to administer justice (symbolised by the sceptre). Human rulers may fail to act justly; not so GOD.

‘Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ (Genesis 18:25).

1. An avenging God (verse 1)

In ancient Israel there was an obligation to avenge the killing of a member of one’s clan. This obligation persists even when the killer seeks asylum:

‘If someone at enmity with another lies in wait and attacks and takes the life of that person, and flees into one of these cities, then the elders of the killer’s city shall send to have the culprit taken from there and handed over to the avenger of blood to be put to death’ (Deuteronomy 19:11-12).

In God’s blessing of Noah, we hear God say:

‘I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human being by a human being shall that person’s blood be shed, for in God’s own image God made humankind’ (Genesis 9:5-6).

On one hand this highlights the sacredness of human life. But on the other it requires a form of revenge. It is not surprising that seeing revenge as a form of justice led to it being projected onto the just God, extending the image of an angry God who punishes bad behaviour, and especially Israel’s enemies. Apart from a few verses we cannot hear this psalm coming from Jesus’ prayerful heart.

The prophet Nahum writes:

‘A jealous and avenging God is GOD, GOD is avenging and wrathful; GOD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. GOD is slow to anger but great in power, and GOD will by no means clear the guilty’ (Nahum verses 2-3).

This is a far cry from Jesus’ image of God as one who challenges and inspires us not to react violently to violence, and to love our enemies, because God loves them:

‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you’ (Matthew 5:38-42).

‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall 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).

‘The Lord knows our thoughts, how empty they are’ (verse 11). Paul quotes this verse in 1 Corinthians 3:20.

‘Your covenant love, O GOD, supports me’ (verse 18). Compare:

‘You shall be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees’ (Isaiah 66:12).

‘Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says GOD’ (Jeremiah 31:20).

‘When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations lift my spirit’ (verse 19). See Psalm 86, pages 216-217 for a reflection on consolation (‘comfort’).

The psalmist complains about ‘corrupt officials who do injustice under cover of law’ (verse 20). The prophets speak out against injustice, especially the injustice that hides behind the law, giving it the semblance of being just. Isaiah speaks out against those ‘who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes’ (Isaiah 10:1). Similarly Jeremiah: ‘How can you say, “We are wise, and the law of GOD is with us,” when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie?’ (Jeremiah 8:8).

Praying Psalm 95 (94) with Jesus

- ¹Come, let us sing joyfully to GOD;
let us shout with joy to the Rock who saves us!
- ²Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving,
singing joyfully to the sound of music!
- ³For GOD is the High God, Sovereign over all the gods.
- ⁴God's hand holds the depths of the earth,
and the heights of the mountain peaks.
- ⁵The ocean belongs to the One who shaped it,
and the dry land to the One who formed it.
- ⁶Come, let us worship and bow low,
let us kneel before GOD, our Maker!
- ⁷This is our God, our Shepherd.
We are the sheep fed by God's hand.
- O that today you would listen to God's voice!
- ⁸Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on that day at Massah in the wilderness.
- ⁹There your ancestors tested me,
though they had seen my deeds.
- ¹⁰For forty years I was sickened by that generation
and I said, 'They are a people whose hearts are astray,
they pay no regard to my ways.'
- ¹¹I took an oath that they would never enter my rest.

This is the third in a series of psalms dedicated to the kingship of God. Psalm 93 celebrates in song God's victory and reign. Psalm 94 celebrates God's activity as judge. Psalm 95 is in two parts. In the first part (verses 1-7) the psalmist invites us to join in praise of God, the great King, Creator of the Universe. Then comes a warning (verses 7-11). Those who were freed from slavery in Egypt failed to enter the Promised Land because they failed to heed God's word. Let not the same happen to us. If we think that we can engage in the liturgy without listening to God, we are putting God to the test in failing, once again, to place our trust in God. We may be entering the physical building of the temple, but we are not entering the promised land or true rest and we could once again lose what God is offering us as a gift: the rest that consists in living in communion with God.

This psalm opens the Divine Office (the Prayer of the Church) each day. The same warning holds. We are entering into God's presence. It is imperative that we listen to God's voice, or our 'prayer' is empty and profitless.

'God is the High God, Sovereign over all the gods' (verse 3).

'Great is God, and greatly to be praised;
to be revered above all the gods' (Psalm 96:4).

'All gods bow down before him' (Psalm 97:7).

'This is our God, our Shepherd. We are the sheep fed by God's hand' (verse 7).

'Know that God is God. It is God who made us. We belong to God.
We are God's people, the sheep of God's fold' (Psalm 100:3).

'O that today you would listen to God's voice!' (verse 7).

'O that my people would listen to me,
that Israel would walk in my ways!' (Psalm 81:13).

'I took an oath that they would never enter my rest' (verse 11). God's rest is the model and the guarantee of the rest experienced by those who are in communion with God:

'You have not yet come into the rest and the possession that God, your God, is giving you' (Deuteronomy 12:9).

'Blessed be God, who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised' (1Kings 8:56).

'Thus says God: "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls." But they said, "We will not walk in it" (Jeremiah 6:16).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him say:

'Come to me all you who labour 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).

Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord. 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them' (Revelation 14:13).

There is a commentary on Psalm 95:7-11 in the Letter to the Hebrews 3:7 - 4:11. The author sees the failure of the people as a failure to believe: 'They were unable to enter because of unbelief' (Hebrews 3:19). He exhorts his fellow Christians: 'Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God' (Hebrews 3:12). He concludes his reflections with the exhortation: 'Let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs' (Hebrews 4:11).

Praying Psalm 96 (95) with Jesus

¹Sing to GOD a new song! Sing to GOD, all the earth.

²Bless GOD's holy name!

Proclaim God's saving presence from day to day.

³Tell among the nations God's glory,

God's marvellous deeds all over the world.

⁴Great is GOD, and greatly to be praised;

to be revered above all the gods.

⁵Yes, the gods of the world are idols.

It was GOD who made the heavens.

⁶It is the same GOD of majestic light

who fills the temple with beauty.

⁷Acknowledge GOD, you nations,

acknowledge GOD's glory and might.

⁸Acknowledge the glory due to GOD!

Bring an offering. Enter the courts.

⁹Worship GOD in holy splendour.

Tremble before God, all the earth.

¹⁰Say among the nations, 'GOD is king!'

The world is firmly established.

God will judge the peoples with equity.

¹¹Let the heavens rejoice and be glad,

let the sea and all within it roar.

¹²Let the field and all it bears rejoice.

Then will all the trees of the forest sing for joy

¹³before GOD, who is coming to judge the nations.

God rules the world with justice,

and judges the nations in accord with the truth.

This is the fourth in a series of psalms to GOD as king. The psalmist calls the heavens and the earth and all peoples to acclaim GOD the Creator who is coming to judge the world. God's reign is universal, serene and secure.

The psalmist is calling on the nations to worship GOD: 'Acknowledge GOD, you nations' (verse 7).

'All the nations you formed will come and bow down before you God*. They will glorify your name' (Psalm 86:9).

'Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

Praise the name of GOD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven' (Psalm 148:11, 13).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall that we are to be judged by how our lives are in accordance with his.

'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son' (John 5:22).

'The Father has given the Son authority to execute judgment' (John 5:27).

'The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge' (John 12:48).

Preaching in Athens, Paul states:

'God has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:31).

Paul writes of 'Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead' (2 Timothy 4:1).

'He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Corinthians 15:25).

'God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Colossians 1:13).

In the Book of Revelation we read:

'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever' (Revelation 11:15).

For a reflection on the Kingdom of God see Psalm 72, pages 218-219.

Praying Psalm 97 (96) with Jesus

¹**GOD is king! Let the earth rejoice.**

Let all the coastlands be glad.

²**Cloud and darkness are God's raiment,**

Justice and right are the foundations of God's kingdom.

³**Fire consumes all resistance.**

⁴**God's lightning lights up the world.**

The earth sees and trembles.

⁵**Mountains melt like wax before GOD,**

before the God* of all the earth.

⁶**The heavens proclaim the justice of God.**

All the peoples behold God's glory.

⁷**Worshippers of images are put to shame,**

those who boast of their worthless idols.

You gods, bow down before GOD!

⁸**Zion hears and is glad,**

the towns of Judah rejoice

because of your judgments, O God.

⁹**For you indeed are GOD,**

Most High over all the earth;

exalted far above any god.

¹⁰**GOD loves those who hate evil,**

guards the lives of the faithful,

and rescues them from the power of the wicked.

¹¹**Light dawns for the righteous,**

and joy for the upright of heart.

¹²**Rejoice in GOD! Praise God's holy name.**

This is the fifth of a series of psalms celebrating God's kingship. It celebrates God's justice which vindicates those who are loyal to the covenant. All other gods and all those who do evil cower before the manifestation of God the judge.

Other psalms also see in the power of nature a manifestation of God's presence.

'God, you tore open the heavens, and came down;
a black cloud under your feet.

You rode on the back of a cherub

and came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.

You made darkness your covering,

wrapped in a canopy of thick black stormclouds.

Lightning announced God's presence, with hailstones and flashes of fire.

GOD thundered in the heavens,

the voice of the Most High resounded' (Psalm 18:9-13).

'Your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook' (Psalm 77:18).

'The mighty God, the High GOD, speaks, summoning the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

Our God is coming and will not be silent.

First comes a devouring fire; then a mighty tempest.

From on high God summons the heavens and the earth

to witness the judgment of the people' (Psalm 50:1-4).

'Justice and right are the foundations of God's kingdom' (verse 2).

'Justice and right judgment are the foundation of your throne; kindness and faithfulness go before you. Blessed and happy are the people who acclaim you. O GOD, they will walk in the light of your countenance' (Psalm 89:14-15).

Hebrews 1:6 quotes the last part of verse 7, following the Septuagint Greek version: 'Let all God's angels bow down before him.'

Jerusalem rejoices to witness the judgments of the Most High (verses 8-9).

'Let Mount Zion be glad, let the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments' (Psalm 48:11).

'Let them know that you alone, whose name is GOD, are the Most High over all the earth' (Psalm 83:18).

Praying the psalm with Jesus we think of him who is:

'A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 2:32).

For a reflection on the Kingdom of God in Jesus' preaching see Psalm 93, page 290.

Praying Psalm 98 (97) with Jesus

¹Sing a new song to GOD.

Celebrate the wonderful deeds wrought by God's hand.
God's holy arm has achieved victory.

²You, O GOD, make known your saving action,
revealing justice to the nations,

³remembering your covenant love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.

The ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

⁴Shout with joy to GOD, all the earth!
Break forth into joyous songs of praise!

⁵Sing praises to GOD with the lyre,
with the sound of instruments.

⁶With trumpets and the sound of the horn
shout with joy before GOD, our king.

⁷Let the sea roar, and all that fills it,
the world and those who live in it.

⁸Rivers clap your hands! Hills ring out your joy!

⁹For GOD is coming, coming to judge the earth,
to rule the world justly, to govern the peoples with equity.

This is the sixth in a series of psalms celebrating the reign of God. Psalm 98 was perhaps composed to celebrate the restoration of Judah after the Babylonian Exile. God is returning to his city for all the world to see, to inaugurate his universal reign.

'You, O GOD, make known your saving action, revealing justice to the nations' (verse 2). For a reflection on salvation see psalm 62, pages 189-190. For a reflection on justice see Psalm 82, pages 249-251.

Verse 3 reads: 'remembering your covenant love and faithfulness.' For a reflection on covenant love and faithfulness see Psalm 61, page 187, and Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

'The ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God' (verse 3). GOD came to the help of Israel and achieved victory. God's faithful love for Israel has revealed God's justice for all the world to see.

The call to celebration (verses 1 and 4-6) is echoed in many psalms.

'Good it is to give thanks to GOD, to make music in your honour, O Most High; to proclaim your kindness in the morning, and in the night your faithfulness, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the strumming of the lyre' (Psalm 92:1-3).

'I want to sing of kindness and right judgment.
To you, GOD, I will make music' (Psalm 101:1).

Praise GOD [Alleluia]! How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting' (Psalm 147:1).

Praise GOD [Alleluia]! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him for his surpassing greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise God! Praise God [Alleluia]!' (Psalm 150).

We reflect on the reign of Christ who said: 'I have overcome the world' (John 16:33; see 1 John 5:4). We think of Jesus' resurrection and the fruits of Christ's victory for the blessed.

'And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!' (Revelation 15:3).

They sing a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation' (Revelation 5:9).

'I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth' (Revelation 14:2-3).

Praying Psalm 99 (98) with Jesus

¹GOD is king; let the nations tremble!
GOD sits enthroned upon the cherubim;
let the earth quake!

²YOU are great in Zion, exalted over all the peoples.

³Let them praise your great and awesome name!
'GOD is Holy!'

⁴Mighty King, lover of right judgment,
you have established equity.
You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

⁵Praise GOD, our God.
Bow down before Zion, God's footstool.
'GOD is Holy!'

⁶Moses and Aaron were GOD's priests.
Samuel was among those who called on GOD's name.
They cried to GOD, and were answered.

⁷GOD spoke in the pillar of cloud.
They kept the decrees and statutes,
given them by GOD.

⁸O GOD, you answered them.
For them you were a God who forgives;
Yet you punished all their offences.

⁹Praise GOD and worship at his holy mountain.
For GOD, our God, is holy.

This is the last in series of seven psalms celebrating the kingship of God. The key theme of Psalm 99 is God's holiness. The appropriate response to the transcendent God is one of awe.

1. Holiness

'GOD is Holy!' (verse 3). This refrain is repeated in verses 5 and 9.

Let us reflect on some texts from the Hebrew Bible that speak of God's holiness.

'The Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness' (Isaiah 5:16).

'Thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite' (Isaiah 57:15).

'I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am GOD' (Ezekiel 38:23).

'I am God, the Holy One in your midst' (Hosea 11:9).

'Holy and awesome is God's name' (Psalm 111:9).

'Through those who are near me I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified' (Leviticus 10:3).

To understand holiness properly we must see that only God is holy. We recall the vision of Isaiah:

'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory"' (Isaiah 6:1-3).

The word 'holy' speaks of God's transcendence. The people are told that they may not approach the mountain where God has chosen to reveal himself (Exodus 24:2). For the same reason the tent of meeting is to be pitched outside the camp (Exodus 33:7-11). The inner sanctuary in the temple, the 'holy of holies', is out of bounds for all but the high priest, and even his entry is severely restricted (Leviticus 16:2).

All this changed when 'the Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us' (John 1:14). In Jesus we see that God wanted us to draw close. Jesus is 'the holy one of God' (Mark 1:24, John 6:69). He is the tent of meeting (John 2:21). People had always recognised the immanence of God in creation and in history, but those who experienced Jesus came to see that we are drawn into communion with the Holy One not by withdrawal from the body, from the mind, from thoughts and feelings, but by allowing the Holy One to draw us into the heart of the created world where God will transform us. In the light of the Incarnation, we came to the astonishing insight that, in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, God is indeed the 'heart' as well as the 'beyond' of everything.

Jesus also astonished us by showing that this is true of sinners and that we sinners are invited to enjoy God's embrace:

'All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"' (Luke 15:1-2).

We sinners are called to be in communion with Jesus and so with the Holy One:

'For their sakes I sanctify ['make holy'] myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth' (John 17:19).

'It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Hebrews 10:10).

'Jesus suffered in order to sanctify the people by his own blood' (Hebrews 13:12).

'This is the will of God, your sanctification' (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

'May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless' (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

'God's temple is holy, and you are that temple' (1 Corinthians 3:17).

'I appeal to you therefore, 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).

'God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love' (Ephesians 1:4).

'As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct' (1 Peter 1:15).

We are made in God's image for God creates us to be in communion with him. God, 'the fountain of all holiness' (Second Eucharistic Prayer) is constantly pouring the Spirit of love into our hearts, drawing us into God's own life and so sharing God's holiness with us. Especially significant for this intimacy are times of prayer when our mind and heart are turned to God in loving attentiveness. It is in prayer that we say Yes to the communion which God is offering us. It is in prayer that we open our souls to receive God's offer of God's Self. It is in prayer that we grow in holiness – a holiness that is expressed in every aspect of our lives.

To be holy is to be in communion with God. It is a communion of the real self with the real God. Since God is love, it is obvious that holiness is intimately related to love.

The Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964] reminds us that we are all called to a life of holiness: 'The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful. And so it must be. It is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love' (LG n.43).

Since holiness consists in tending to the perfection of love and since prayer is this experience of being in communion with the all-holy God who is love, the link between prayer and holiness should be obvious. To understand the place of prayer in our lives it is important to understand that we are called and graced to share in Jesus' holiness, and so in the holiness of God.

When we speak of someone as being holy, or when we describe some place as a holy place (a 'sanctuary'), we are not speaking of a characteristic that is inherent in the person or place, or of something that can be acquired by endeavour or discipline. We are not the initiator of any attitude or action that can result in holiness. We are holy to the degree that God, the one who alone is holy, is dwelling in us in a communion of love which is transforming us into an ever more profound participation in the divine life. It is because God, the One who alone is holy, is present uniting us to Himself, that we are living in this divine communion. In prayer we consciously focus on this most profound dimension of our lives. In prayer we become holy.

In words spoken from her deathbed Therese of Lisieux (d.1897) tells us: 'Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father's goodness.'

Jesus was speaking of holiness when he invited the Samaritan woman to drink from the well of his love: '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).

To grow in holiness we must cooperate with grace. Since God is love, God's gracious initiative comes to us as an offering, an invitation. Since we are created by God and created precisely for this divine communion, the invitation finds an echo in our longing. However, we are free to reject or to accept God's loving invitation. The transformation which we call holiness and which is union with God occurs only to the extent that we welcome God's grace and open our minds and hearts and wills and bodies to the transforming action of God's Spirit - the Spirit of love.

Endeavour and discipline are needed if we are to remain attentive to grace and to allow God's grace to transform us. We must be careful to be attentive to grace so that our endeavour and discipline is indeed in response to grace and not coming from our own ego. The spring of divine life (the spring of holiness) issues from the Heart of God alone. We need to allow God the vine-grower to prune away whatever is dead wood, as well as whatever is bearing fruit, that it may bear more. We need to cooperate as God the gardener clears away whatever is blocking the spring or hindering the flow of water.

We need to keep responding to grace by cooperating in keeping the channels open and clear. We need to allow the water of life to penetrate the soil of our lives. But we do not hold the shears; we do not do the pruning; we do not create the water or initiate its flow. A holy person is not a humanly perfect person. A holy person is one who has allowed him/her self to be transformed by communion in love with God – a communion initiated and sustained by God.

Herein lies the challenge of becoming holy. We have to learn that we cannot initiate holiness. No amount of control exercised by ourselves can produce or achieve holiness. God is holy. God is utterly transcendent, utterly beyond anything we can initiate. God, however, can and does directly act in our lives. We have to allow the self-as-initiator to be 'lost'. 'Those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 10:39). We have to let go control. We have to become like a little child and allow to happen whatever God wants to happen as a result of His love. 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:15).

This self-denial is a denial or negating of the self (the ego): 'If you want to become my followers, you must deny yourself' (Mark 8:34). It is not a denial or negating *by* the self. It is allowing God to initiate. It is allowing grace to transform. It is accepting to be loved and to love only insofar as loving flows from the transformation. This requires attentive discipline of our natural tendency to take control. We must resist the temptation to want to 'possess' or 'achieve' holiness.

This is what it means to be 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3). This is what it means to be detached, to be humble. This is what it means to be a child of God. This is what it means to cry out in childlike trust 'Abba!' – a cry that can be made only because the Spirit of Jesus has been poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5). Saying Yes to God's gracious offer to transform us into God's Self through divine communion, we allow God to penetrate to the heart of our lives, and in so doing discover that God has drawn us to penetrate to the heart of God's life. Prayer is making space for God's transforming action in our lives. Prayer is giving ourselves, like a child, into his hands. Love will lead us along the path of holiness, for Love will take us ever more closely to God's heart.

Jesus is the mediator who shows us how to walk this journey. Through giving us his love, the Spirit of love which he shares with the Father, he draws us to his heart and so to the heart of God. The journey of becoming holy is a journey of being transformed into Jesus: 'All are called to union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our whole life is directed' (Vatican II, LG n.3).

'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Teresa of Avila (d.1582) insists that the path to holiness and so the journey of prayer is to be in the company of Jesus: 'It is for you to look at him. He never takes his eyes off you' (Way of Perfection 26,3). 'Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us' (Life 8.5).

Praying Psalm 99 with Jesus we reflect on the holiness of the Most Holy Trinity. Jesus addresses God as 'Holy Father' (John 17:11). In the Book of Revelation we hear the hymn: 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come' (Revelation 4:8).

The song of the crucified and risen Jesus includes the words: 'You alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed' (Revelation 15:4). In a later hymn we hear: 'You are just, O Holy One, who are and were, for you have judged these things' (Revelation 16:5).

Jesus is acknowledged as holy: 'The child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God' (Luke 1:35). Peter says of Jesus: 'We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' (John 6:69). The Letter to the Hebrews presents Jesus as a high priest who is 'holy' (Hebrews 7:26).

The Spirit of love that is the communion between Jesus and his Father is called the 'Holy Spirit' 89 times in the New Testament, and many times as the Spirit who makes holy ('sanctifies'). Peter addresses his First Letter to:

'you who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance' (1 Peter 1:2).

Consequently those who are united to Jesus are drawn into this holiness and are regularly spoken of as holy ('saints'; see John 17:19; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 3:7; Ephesians 1:1 and 2:21; Colossians 1:2,12).

To quote again from Peter:

'As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Paul writes:

'Now that you have been freed from sin and have accepted God as your Master, the advantage you get is sanctification [being made holy]. The end is eternal life' (Romans 6:22).

2. Justice

'Mighty King, lover of right judgment, you have established equity. You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob' (verse 4).

'You love justice and hate wickedness' (Psalm 45:7).

God establishes a system of justice on the earth.

'Your throne is God's throne; it endures forever.
Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity' (Psalm 45:6).

God does this through the government of Israel.

Give the king your judgments, O God, and your justice to the king's son,
that he may judge your people with justice,
and your poor with right judgment' (Psalm 72:1-2).

Praying Psalm 100 (99) with Jesus

¹Cry out with joy to GOD all the earth.

²Serve GOD with gladness.

Come into the Presence singing for joy.

³Know that GOD is God,

our maker, to whom we belong.

We are the flock. GOD is our shepherd.

⁴Enter the temple gates with thanksgiving,

Enter the courts with songs of praise.

Give thanks and bless GOD's name.

⁵Indeed how good is GOD,

whose covenant love is eternal,

who is faithful from age to age.

The psalmist is overwhelmed with a joy that is beyond words. Compare the following:

'Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy' (1 Peter 1:8).

'We give thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light' (Colossians 1:12).

'Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope' (Romans 12:11-12).

God is our Maker, our Shepherd (verse 3).

'Come, let us worship and bow low, let us kneel before GOD, our Maker! This is our God, our Shepherd. We are the sheep fed by God's hand' (Psalm 95:6-7).

'From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth' (Acts 17:26).

'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd' (John 10:14-16).

'How good is GOD' (verse 5)

'Jesus said to the man: No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10:18).

'You may grow into salvation, if you have tasted that God is good' (1 Peter 2:3).

Praying the psalm with Jesus we share his joy in knowing how good God is, in knowing that God is Love.