

Praying the Psalms with Jesus

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PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

- Christmas, 2017

Chapter One

The psalms are human documents

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

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

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

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

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

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

The psalms are human documents

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The psalms are human documents

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

Jesus' Prayer

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus' Prayer

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

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

Monotheism

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

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

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

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

Jesus' intimate prayer-communion with God

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus' Prayer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus' Prayer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus' Prayer

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

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

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

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

Note on addressing or referring to God

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heading 1. Praying Psalm X with Jesus

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

Heading 2. Reflecting On Psalm X in Jesus' company

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

Praying Psalm 1 with Jesus

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

²Find your delight in the law of GOD.
Meditate on it night and day.

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

⁴Not so for those whose hearts are closed to God.
They are like chaff scattered by the wind.

⁵It will go ill with them at the judgment.
They will have no place among the just.

⁶GOD looks with love on the way of the just.
The way of sinners leads only to destruction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying excerpts from Psalm 2 with Jesus

¹My people, why do you resist my Anointed One?

⁶It is I who have established him on Zion, my holy mountain.

⁷This is what GOD said to me:

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

⁸Ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,
the ends of the earth for your possession.’

¹⁰Come to your senses, take heed.

¹¹Serve GOD, pay God your homage,

¹²Blessed and happy are all who take refuge in God.

Omitted verses

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

³‘Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast off their yoke.’

⁴God who sits enthroned in the heavens is mocking them.

⁵God confronts them in anger, and in fury strikes them with terror.

⁹You will break them with a sceptre of iron,
and dash them to pieces like a clay pot.’

¹¹Serve GOD with fear, with trembling kiss God’s feet,

¹²or God will be angry and you will perish in the way,
for God’s wrath is quickly kindled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalms 2

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

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

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

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

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

Isaiah portrays God as reluctant to express anger:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalms 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'The covenant love of GOD is not all past,
God's mercies are not exhausted;
every morning they are renewed;
great is your faithfulness.
"God is my portion", says my soul, "and so I will hope in God."
God is good to those who wait for God,
to the soul that searches for God.
It is good to wait in silence for GOD to save.'

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

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

Praying Psalm 3 with Jesus

¹O GOD, how daunting the forces massed against me!

²They jeer at me: 'God will not save you!'

³But you, O GOD, are my shield, my glory.

You hold my head high.

⁴When I call you answer me

from your holy mountain.

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

⁶I am not afraid of those ranged against me.

⁷Rise up, O GOD, and rescue me.

⁸Saving help is from YOU.

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

Omitted

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews assures us:

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 4 with Jesus

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

²How long, proud fools, will you insult me?
How long will you love what is false and chase after lies?

³GOD has set me apart, for I am faithful.
I belong to GOD, who always hears my call.

⁴Tremble with fear and stop your sinning.
Commune in your heart and be silent.

⁵Worship with integrity,
trusting always in GOD.

⁶Many ask themselves:
‘Who is going to enjoy a good life,
if the light of your face, O GOD,
does not shine upon us?’

⁷You give my heart more joy than all their grain and wine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus' prayer issued from his 'heart' and so ranged through all the moods of the human heart. At the Last Supper, with a broken heart, he said to his companions: 'You will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone.' He went straight on to add: 'Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me' (John 16:32). We have already reflected on Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross (see page 26).

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

Psalm 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let us join Jesus in praying this psalm.

Praying Psalm 5 with Jesus

¹O GOD, listen to my words, give heed to my groaning.

²Attend to the sound of my cry, my King and my God.

O GOD, it is to you I pray.

³In the morning hear my voice.

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

⁴You are not one who wills evil.

⁷Thanks to your great love, I have access to your house.

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

⁸In your justice, O GOD, guide me. Make clear your way before me.

⁹There is no truth in those who accuse me.

Inside they are only empty caverns.

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

¹¹Let all who take refuge in you sing for joy.

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

¹²You bless the just, O GOD; you cover them from above.

You surround them with the shield of your love.

Omitted

⁴The person who does evil is not your guest.

⁵The boastful will not stand before you; you detest those who do evil.

⁶You destroy those who lie. You abhor the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

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

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

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

Psalm 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let us join Jesus in praying this psalm.

Praying Psalm 6 with Jesus

¹O GOD, rebuke me, but not in anger;
discipline me, but not in wrath!]

²Be gracious to me, O GOD, for I am languishing.
Heal me, for I am shaking with terror.

³My whole being is racked with pain,
but you, O GOD – how long?

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

⁶I am exhausted with my groaning.
All night long I drench my pillow with tears,
I soak my couch with weeping.

⁷My eyes waste away with grief.
My life is ebbing away. Everything is against me.

⁸Depart from me, all you who do evil.
GOD has heard my weeping.

⁹GOD hears my pleading and welcomes my prayer.

¹⁰My enemies fall back, struck with terror,
foiled and suddenly confounded.

Omitted

⁴For in the realm of death no one calls on you;
in Sheol who can give you praise?

Psalm 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul writes to the community in Corinth:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 6

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

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

Praying Psalm 7 with Jesus

¹O GOD, in you I take refuge; save me from those who pursue me,
²lest like a lion they tear me to pieces,
and drag me off with no one to save me.

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

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

⁷An assembly of nations gathers around you.
Take your seat above them on high,
⁸O judge of the nations. Declare me innocent, O GOD.

⁹Uphold the just, you who test mind and heart.
¹⁰My shield is God, who saves the upright of heart,
¹¹who pronounces a judgment that is just.

¹⁴Look at them! They conceive evil.
They are pregnant with malice, and give birth to lies.
¹⁵They made a pit, dug it deep, but fell into the trap they made.
¹⁶Their wicked deeds recoil upon themselves.
On their own heads fall their cruel blows.

¹⁷I celebrate GOD's justice and sing in praise: 'GOD Most High.'

Omitted

¹¹God gives a verdict of condemnation every day.
¹²If they do not change their ways, God will whet the sword;
God will bend the bow, straight to the target;
¹³God is preparing for them deadly weapons, arrows barbed with fire.

Psalm 7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 8 with Jesus

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

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

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

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

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

⁶To us you have entrusted the earth.
You have made us responsible for all you have made:

⁷sheep and oxen,
wild beasts of the plain,

⁸birds of the air,
and fish that make their way through the waters.

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

Psalm 8

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 9 with Jesus

¹O GOD, with a full and grateful heart

I proclaim your wonderful deeds.

²In festive jubilation, I celebrate you,

singing your name to music, O Most High.

³As my enemies are turned back, they stumble and perish before you.

⁴From your throne, O just judge, you pass judgment in my favour.

⁷GOD sits enthroned forever, issuing judgment.

⁸Justly you judge the world and govern the nations.

⁹You are a stronghold for the oppressed.

You strengthen them in times of trouble.

¹⁰Those who know you put their trust in you.

You never forsake those who seek you.

¹¹Sing praises to GOD who dwells in Zion,

declare GOD's deeds to the people.

¹²God never neglects the cry of the afflicted.

¹³Pour your grace over me, O GOD. Look how oppressed I am.

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

¹⁴that I may recount your praises at the gates of Zion,

and celebrate your deliverance.

¹⁸The needy will not always be forgotten,

nor the hope of the poor be in vain.

Omitted

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

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

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

¹⁶God is revealed by executing judgment,
and the wicked are snared by what they themselves have done.

Psalm 9

¹⁷The wicked will depart to Sheol, the nations that forget God.

¹⁹Rise up, O God! Do not allow the insolence of mortal human beings.
In your presence let the nations be judged.

²⁰Strike them with terror, GOD;
let the nations know that they are but mortal.

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

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

'Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
In his name the Gentiles will hope' (Matthew 12:18-21 = Isaiah 42:1-4).

As Jesus says: 'As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (John 5:30).

2. Talk of God exercising justice by destroying enemies is foreign to Jesus (see page 21). Tragically, it is possible for us to destroy ourselves by being obstinately determined in our rejection of Love. It is not God who destroys. It is not God who punishes. God is Love and we have the whole of Jesus' life and ministry to convince us of that.

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

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

¹Why, O GOD, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?

²The wicked in their arrogance hound the poor,
but they are tangled in their own intrigues.

³The wicked boast of their ambition,
the greedy are full of self-adulation.

⁴They do not care about GOD:

‘There is no god to whom I must give an account!’

What schemes they devise!

How twisted their lives!

⁵They have no concern for your judgments.

They defy all who disagree with them.

⁶They think in their heart: ‘I will never be shaken,
nothing will get in my way!’

⁷From their mouths come deceit and fraud;
their speech is full of malice and lies.

⁸They wait in ambush to murder the innocent
under cover of secrecy.

Stealthily they watch for the helpless.

⁹They lurk in secret like a lion in its den,
that they may seize the poor and drag them away.

¹⁰The innocent, weighed down with oppression,
cannot withstand the violence of the wicked.

¹¹They think: ‘God has forgotten.
God has hidden from us and will never notice.’

¹²Rise up, O GOD, please do something.

Do not forget the oppressed.

¹³Why should the wicked spurn you, God,
and say in their hearts, ‘God will not call us to account’?

¹⁴You are the helper of the orphan.

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

Omitted

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 11 (10) with Jesus

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

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

³When foundations are destroyed, what can the just do?

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

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

Omitted

⁵GOD tests the faithful and the wicked,
and hates the lover of violence.

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

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

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

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

4. Psalm 11 is prayed in the Church's liturgy (where it is numbered as Psalm 10; see page 44). We find it in the Lectionary in the Office of Readings for the Common of a Martyr, and in the Prayer of the Church for Evening Prayer Monday Week 1. It is surprising to find verses 5 and 6 included ('God tests the faithful and the wicked, and hates the lover of violence and will cause coals of fire and sulphur to rain down on the wicked; a scorching wind will be their lot'). They express sentiments that are at home in the psalmist's limited understanding of God, but they run counter to all that Jesus represents and teaches. If they are not part of Jesus' prayer, why are Jesus' disciples praying them? Jesus does warn us of hell (see Matthew 5:22-30; 10:28; 18:9 and 23:15,33), but it is not divine punishment. As the Catholic Catechism (1994) states (n. 1033): 'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God forever *by our own free choice*. This state of definitive *self-exclusion* from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell".'

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

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

Praying Psalm 12 (11) with Jesus

¹Give us your saving help, O GOD,
for no one respects the covenant.

Sincerity has disappeared from the human race.

²People utter lies to each other.

They speak from hearts that are false.

⁴They say, 'With our tongues we will always prevail.

We can say whatever we like. Who is our master?'

⁵'Because of violence against the poor,

because the needy groan', says GOD,

'I will now rise up.

I will keep them safe as they give their testimony.'

⁶GOD's words are pure,

like silver refined in a furnace.

⁷It is you, O GOD, who will take us into your care.

It is you who protect us from those who do evil.

⁸See how the wicked prowl on every side,

while the worthless are highly prized.

Omitted

³May GOD destroy all flattering lips, the tongue that makes great boasts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 12

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

Praying Psalm 13 (12) with Jesus

¹O GOD, will you again remember me?

How long will you hide your face from me?

²How long must my soul be stricken with grief?

I carry sorrow in my heart day and night.

How long will my enemies prevail over me?

³Look at me, O GOD; answer me!

Shed your light on me, or I will die.

⁴Do not let my enemy say, 'I have prevailed.'

Do not let my foes rejoice to see me fall.

⁵As for me, I trust in your covenant love;

my heart rejoices in your saving help.

⁶I will sing to you, O GOD,

because of the good you have bestowed on me.

Psalm 13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 14 (13) with Jesus

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.

⁵Well, then, you will cringe with fear,
for God's cause is with the just.

⁶You may have the power to thwart the plans of the poor,
but know that GOD is their refuge.

⁷O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
When GOD restores the fortunes of the people,
then Jacob will be glad. Israel will rejoice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 15 (14) with Jesus

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

²**Those who live with integrity;
who do what is right;
who speak the truth with courage;**

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

⁴**who honour those who live their faith in GOD;**

who stand by their word, whatever the cost;

⁵**who lend without seeking interest;
who refuse to accept a bribe to condemn the innocent.**

Such are the just. They stand firm forever.

Omitted

³who despise those not approved by God

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

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

2. Before highlighting behaviour that we must shun, the psalmist focuses on two key elements of a blameless life. The first is 'doing what is right' (verse 2), or, as Jesus says: 'doing the will of God' (Matthew 7:21): 'hungering and thirsting for justice' (Matthew 5:6). The second is 'speaking the truth from the heart' (verse 2; see the reflection on Psalm 12, pages 48-50).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 16 (15) with Jesus

¹Protect me, O GOD. I turn to you for help.

²You are my greatest good.

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

⁴Those who run after strange gods
only multiply their sorrows.

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

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

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

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

⁹So my heart is glad.
A profound joy wells up within me.
Even my body rests secure,
as I place my trust in you.

¹⁰You do not abandon me to death.
You do not let your faithful see the grave.

¹¹You show me the path to life.
Your Presence fills me with joy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In his commentary on this psalm Origen writes:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 17 (16) with Jesus

¹O GOD, hear my appeal for justice.

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

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

³You scrutinize my heart. You probe it by night.

You will find in me no wickedness.

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

Following the instructions from your lips I have remained vigilant.

⁵Even on steep paths I have kept my footing.

Keeping to your way, I have not strayed.

⁶I call upon you, my God; attend to me, hear my voice.

⁷Show me your wonderful love, you who save those who trust you.

⁸Guard me as the pupil of your eye. Hide me in the shade of your wings

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

¹⁰They lack all feeling. Their speech is arrogant.

¹¹They track me down and hem me in.

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

¹²They are like lions eager for prey, like young lions lurking in ambush.

¹⁴Ensure that those you protect are saved from starving.

May their children be satisfied.

May they have more than enough for their little ones.

¹⁵As for me, I have been righteous. I will behold your face.

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

Omitted

¹³Rise up, O GOD, confront them, overthrow them!

With your sword snatch me away from the wicked.

¹⁴Kill them, O GOD. Kill them with your own hand.

Let them not share the heritage of the living.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 17

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Let nothing trouble you.
Let nothing frighten you.
Everything passes.
God never changes.
Patience obtains all.
Whoever has God wants for nothing.
God alone is enough' (Poem 9).

Reflecting on Psalm 18 (17) in Jesus' Company

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹²Lightning announced God's presence, with hailstones and flashes of fire.

¹³GOD thundered in the heavens,
the voice of the Most High resounded.

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

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

Psalm 18

¹⁶You reached down from on high and held me.

¹⁷You rescued me from powerful enemies,
from those who were too strong for me.

¹⁸They came against me on a disastrous day,
but GOD sustained me,

¹⁹opened for me an escape,
rescued me because God took pleasure in me.

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

²¹because I have kept your ways,
and have not repudiated my God;

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

²³I kept blameless before God, and I guarded myself against all guilt.

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

²⁵With the faithful you show your covenant love;
with the blameless you show yourself blameless;

²⁶with the pure you show yourself pure;
with the crooked you show yourself astute.

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

²⁸It is you, O GOD, who light my lamp.
It is you who illumine my darkness.

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

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

³¹Who is God apart from You? Who is the rock if not our God?

³²You gird me with strength. You guide me to achieve my goal.

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

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

³⁶You have widened the path for my steps,
 and I have kept my footing.

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

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

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

⁴⁰You put my enemies to flight,
 and reduced to silence my adversaries.

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

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

⁴³You rescued me from the wrangling of my people.

You made me head of the nations. A foreign people took me as their lord,
⁴⁴because of my fame they submitted to me.

Foreigners came cringing to me,
⁴⁵foreigners lost heart, and came trembling out of their strongholds.

⁴⁶GOD lives! Blessed be my rock! Be exalted, my God and Saviour!

⁴⁷God, you avenged me and subdued peoples under me,

⁴⁸you rescued me from my enemy,
 you exalted me above my adversaries and rescued me from their violence.

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

⁵⁰You show love to your anointed.

You reveal your love for David
 and for his descendants forever.

Psalm 18

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

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

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

1. Verse 1 is especially significant. When the psalmist writes: 'I love you', he uses the Hebrew word *raḥam*. It is a particularly tender word for love, related to the word for a 'womb', and so picking up the love a mother has for the child in her womb. *raḥam* is found only 4 times in the psalms. On the other three times (Psalms 102:13, 103:13 and 116:5) it refers to the tenderness of God's motherly love for us. In the whole Bible, only here in Psalm 18 do we find it used of our love for God. It fits nicely with Jesus relating to God as his Abba, and we are invited to join Jesus in this. As noted on page 8, with what we know of the woman's role in conception, today we can address God also as our Imma (Mother).

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 19 (18) with Jesus

¹The heavens proclaim the glory of God,
displaying the magnificence of God's creation.

²Day unto day takes up the story;
night unto night makes known the message.

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

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

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

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

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

¹¹Your servant is enlightened by them.
In keeping them there is great reward.

¹²Who is so sensitive as to observe hidden sins?
[Forgive me mine, O my God.

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

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

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

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

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

3. We know that Jesus was innocent of sin (see the reflection on Psalm 6, page 34). We need to pray these verses, and to have Jesus by our side as we pray them, for we are called to let Christ live in us and share with us his innocence. We are to 'be perfect as our Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). This is possible if we open our hearts to welcome the Spirit of Love that Jesus shared with his Father. This Spirit will purify our minds and hearts till we can say with Saint Paul: 'I live, no longer I. It is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:19-20).

4. On the expression 'fear of God' (verse 9) see the reflection on Psalm 2:11, page 24, including the reason for using the English 'revere' or 'awe' in place of 'fear.'

Praying Psalm 20 (19) with Jesus

¹In time of trouble may GOD respond to your plea.

May the God of Jacob protect you.

²From the sanctuary may God send you help,
giving you support from Zion.

³May God recall your many offerings,
and look with favour upon your sacrifices.

⁴May God grant you the desire of your heart,
and fulfil every one of your plans.

⁵May we shout for joy over your deliverance.
May we raise our standards in triumph.

“GOD will fulfil all your petitions.”

⁶Now I know that GOD’s anointed will be victorious.
The Holy One will grant him deliverance,
giving strength to his victorious right arm.

⁷Some boast of chariots and horses, but we invoke GOD.

⁸They will waver and fall, but we will stand firm.

⁹Give victory to the king, O GOD.
Answer us when we cry out to you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 21 (20) with Jesus

¹O GOD, the king rejoices in your power.

He celebrates your victory.

²You have given him his heart's desire.

You have not refused his prayer.

³You came to meet him, blessing him with success.

You have placed on his head a golden crown.

⁴He asked you for life. You gave it to him,

length of days forever and ever.

⁵His glory is great, thanks to your help;

you have bestowed on him honour and majesty.

⁶You pour out an abundance of blessings upon him.

You have filled him with joy in your presence.

⁷The king trusts in GOD.

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

¹³Rise up, GOD, in your power.

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

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

⁸Your left hand will deal with your enemies;

your right hand will deal with your foes.

⁹You will make them like a fiery furnace

when suddenly you, O GOD, appear.

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

¹⁰Destroy their offspring from the earth,

their children from among the human race.

¹¹All they do is plan evil against you,

they devise intrigues, but they will not succeed.

¹²For you will put them to flight;

you will pick them off with your bows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 22 (21) with Jesus

¹My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

How far from saving me, the words I groan!

²I call all day, my God, but you do not answer.

All night long I call, and I cannot rest.

³You dwell in the holy temple, you, the praise of Israel.

⁴In you our ancestors trusted; *they* trusted, and you rescued *them*.

⁵To you they cried, and *they* escaped;

they trusted in you, and never in vain.

⁶But here am I, more worm than human, scorned and despised.

⁷All who see me deride me, they toss their heads and sneer:

⁸'He relied on GOD, let God save him!

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

⁹Yet it was you who took me from the womb;

you entrusted me to my mother's breasts.

¹⁰Placed on your lap from my birth,

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

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

¹²A pack of bulls encircles me, fierce bulls of Bashan close in on me;

¹³for me they open wide their jaws, like ravenous, roaring lions.

¹⁴I am poured out like water; all my bones are out of joint.

My heart is like wax, melting within my breast.

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

You lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶Dogs hunt me; a gang of villains closes me in.

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

¹⁷I can count all my bones. They glare at me and gloat.

¹⁸They divide up my clothes, and cast lots for my robe.

¹⁹But you, O GOD, do not leave me.

O my strength, come quickly to my aid.

²⁰Rescue me from the sword, my life from the mauling of the dogs!

²¹Save me from the lion's jaws, from the horns of the wild bulls,

²²and I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

.....

²³Let your praise ring out, you who revere GOD!

Give glory to God, all you children of Jacob!

Stand in awe, all you children of Israel!

²⁴For God did not despise or scorn the condition of this wretch.
God's love remained fixed on me, hearing my cry.

²⁵Yours, O God, is my praise in the great congregation.

My vows I will pay before your faithful.

²⁶The poor eat and are satisfied.

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

²⁷All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to GOD.

All the families of nations will worship GOD

²⁸who rules over the nations.

²⁹To God, indeed, will bow, all who go down to the dust.

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

³⁰My descendants will worship;

future generations will be told about God*,

³¹and will proclaim God's justice to a people yet unborn:

'Look what God has done!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 22

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 23 (22) with Jesus

¹You, O GOD, are my shepherd. You are all I need.

²In green pastures I rest with you.

You lead me to tranquil waters

³to revive my drooping spirit.

You guide me along the right path.

You are true to your name.

⁴Though 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.

⁵You prepare a banquet for me

in the presence of my foes.

You anoint my head with perfumed oil;

my cup is overflowing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part Two. Enjoying hospitality in GOD's tent (23:5-6)

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

George Herbert

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 24 (23) with Jesus

¹The earth is yours, O GOD, and all its creatures,
the world and all its peoples.

²It is you who set the land on the seas,
and anchored it in the deep.

³Who is fit to climb GOD's mountain,
and stand in the GOD's holy place?

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

⁵These will receive blessing from GOD,
and justice from the God who saves.

⁶Such is the company of those who seek you;
who seek your face, O God of Jacob.

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

⁸*Who is the king of glory?*
The GOD of power and might, the conqueror of chaos.

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

¹⁰*Who is the king of glory?*
The Mighty GOD, your glorious king.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 24

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 25 with Jesus

¹All my longing is for you, O GOD. In you I trust.

²Do not let my enemies gloat over me. Do not fail me.

³Those who hope in you will not be disappointed.

Disgrace is for those who are wantonly unfaithful.

⁴O GOD, show me how to live. Teach me your way.

⁵Direct me to your truth, and guide me.

For you are God my saviour, my constant hope.

⁶O GOD, be mindful of your tender compassion,
your covenant love since ancient times.

[⁷Remember me, not the sins of my youth
or the ways I have been unfaithful.]

⁸Good and upright is GOD, guiding those who stray.

⁹God leads the poor, guiding them along the right path.

¹⁰YOUR paths are covenant love and faithfulness
for those who keep your covenant.

[¹¹Pardon my guilt, for it is great.]

¹²For those conscious of God's awesome presence,
GOD will reveal the path to choose.

¹³They will live a full life, and their heirs will inherit the land.

¹⁴GOD counsels the faithful, instructing them through the covenant.

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

¹⁶Turn to me and be gracious, for I am lonely and afflicted.

¹⁷Relieve the troubles of my heart. Free me from my distress.

¹⁸Observe my affliction and my pain. [Forgive all my sins.]

¹⁹See how many are my foes. How violent is their hatred towards me.

²⁰Rescue me and preserve my life. Do not let me be put to shame.
In you I take refuge.

²¹May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for in you, O God, I hope.

²²Rescue Israel from every danger.

Psalm 25

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 26 (25) with Jesus

¹Pass judgment on me, O GOD, for I am living an honest life
I trust in YOU, O GOD, without wavering. Put me to the test.

²Probe my feelings. Purify my heart.

³Your covenant love is ever before my eyes.
I walk boldly in your faithfulness.

⁶I wash my hands, and take my place, O GOD, around your altar.

⁷I sing a song of thanksgiving, and recount your wondrous deeds.

⁸I love your dwelling place, O GOD, the home where your glory abides.

¹⁰In one hand the bloodthirsty have evil plots;
the other is full of bribes.

¹¹I live an honest life. Rescue me and be gracious to me.

¹²I continue to walk in an upright way.

In the great congregation I will bless YOU, O GOD.

Omitted

⁴I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites;

⁵I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked.

⁹Do not sweep me away with sinners, nor my life with the bloodthirsty.

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

* * * * *

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

Psalm 26

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 27 with Jesus

¹GOD is my light and my salvation; whom will I fear?
GOD is the stronghold of my life; before whom will I shrink?

²When evildoers attack to devour me,
it is they, my adversaries and foes, who stumble and fall.

³Though an army encamp against me, my heart will not fear.
Though I have to engage in battle, even then I will trust.

⁴One thing I ask of you, O GOD, for this I long:
to live in your house all the days of my life,
to behold your beauty while at prayer in your temple.

⁵You hide me there in the hour of danger.
There, set on a rock, concealed under the cover of your tent,

⁶I offer sacrifices with shouts of joy, to the sound of music,
praising GOD in song.

⁷Hear me, O GOD, when I cry to you, be gracious and answer me!

⁸Your voice within me says, "Come, seek my face!"
It is your face that my heart seeks.

⁹Do not hide from me. Do not turn your servant away.
Do not reject me, for it is you who uphold me.

Do not cast me off. Do not forsake me, O God my saviour!

¹⁰Even if my father and mother were to forsake me,
I know you would welcome me.

¹¹Teach me your way, O GOD, lead me on a safe path.
My enemies are waiting in ambush.

¹²Do not give me up to their will.
False witnesses have risen against me, breathing out violence.

¹³I believe that I will see the goodness of GOD in the land of the living.

¹⁴Hope in GOD. Be strong. Be brave.
Put your trust in GOD.

1. The psalmist finds himself assailed by evildoers determined to destroy him (verse 2). His 'enemies are waiting in ambush' (verse 11). 'False witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence' (verse 12). We reflected on the opposition suffered by Jesus when praying Psalm 3 (pages 26-27). Jesus warned his disciples to expect similar opposition.

2. The psalmist is endeavouring to counter his fears (verses 1 and 3) by recalling his special relationship with God, 'my light and my salvation ... the stronghold of my life' (verse 1), 'my help ... my Saviour' (verse 9), to whom he turns, confident of being welcomed: 'Even if my father and mother forsake me, GOD will welcome me' (verse 10). We reflected on Jesus' intimate communion with God when praying Psalm 16 (pages 60-61), an intimacy we are invited to share.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praying Psalm 28 (27) with Jesus

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

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

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

⁶Blessed are you, O GOD. You hear the sound of my pleading.

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

⁸YOU are the strength of the people,
the saving refuge of God's anointed.

⁹Help your people, and bless your heritage.
Sustain them. Be their shepherd forever.

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

⁴Repay them according to what they do, the evil of their deeds.
Repay them according to their actions;
repay them as much as they deserve.

⁵Because they have no regard for what GOD is doing,
for the work of God's hands,
God will break them down and not build them up again.

These verses present an image of God that could find no place in Jesus' prayer, and should not find a place in ours. The psalm is not used in the Church's lectionary, and the only time we find it in the Prayer of the Church is on Friday Week 1 in the Prayer during the Day, when verses 4 and 5 are omitted. It is not God who 'breaks sinners down'. It is not God who punishes. We do this to ourselves when we stubbornly and persistently block God's love out of our lives.

* * * * *

As Christians we can hear Jesus crying out in his agony and on the cross (verses 1-2). We can hear, too, his exultation, when God hears his cry (verses 6-8). We are invited to share this psalm with him.

Praying Psalm 29 (28) with Jesus

¹Acclaim GOD, you beings of heaven.

Acclaim the glory and might of GOD.

²Acclaim GOD's glorious name.

Prostrate yourselves before GOD in GOD's holy temple.

³The voice of our glorious God

thunders above the mighty waters!

⁴The voice of GOD, full of power.

The voice of GOD, full of splendour.

⁵The voice of GOD shatters the cedars of Lebanon,

⁶makes Lebanon leap like a calf,

Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of GOD flashes flames of fire,

⁸shaking the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹GOD's voice rends the oak tree,

and strips the forest bare.

In your temple, O GOD, all cry: 'Glory!'

¹⁰For you rule over the mighty waters.

Your rule is forever.

¹¹Give strength to your people, O GOD.

Bless your people with peace.

Psalm 29

This is a psalm to the cosmic God of the storm. The numinous quality of a tempest reveals the sacred. Though the expression 'Fear of God' is not found here, this psalm captures well the sense of awe and wonder that characterise our response to God's presence. We reflected on the expression 'Fear of God' on page 24 when praying Psalm 2.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we recall the following scene: 'A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm' (Matthew 8:24-26).

Matthew uses similar imagery to highlight the earth-shattering significance of Jesus' death: 'The earth shook, and the rocks were split' (Matthew 27:51).

The Book of Revelation uses the image of thunder to emphasise the power of God's Word: 'The mighty angel gave a great shout, like a lion roaring. And when he shouted, the seven thunders sounded' (Revelation 10:3). 'I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder' (Revelation 14:2). 'I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder peals, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready' (Revelation 19:6-7).

Praying Psalm 30 (29) with Jesus

¹I will praise you, O GOD, for you have raised me up.

You have not let my foes gloat over me.

²I cried to you for help, O GOD.

³I was dying and you restored me to life.

⁴Sing praises to GOD, O you faithful,

give thanks as you shout aloud the holy name.

⁵GOD's favour lasts a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,

but joy comes with the dawn.

⁶When all was going well,

⁷I thought that, with God's powerful blessing,

I could stand as secure as a mountain.

Then you hid your face and I shook with fear.

⁸I cried out, 'O GOD! O GOD!' I begged, I pleaded:

⁹What good is there in my death, in my going down to the grave?

¹⁰GOD listened, was moved with pity, and came to my help.

¹¹You turned my mourning into dancing.

You clothed me with joy.

¹²I witness to your glory. I praise you and will not be silent.

O GOD, I will never stop thanking you.

Omitted

⁵God's anger lasts but for a moment.

⁹Will the dust praise you?

Will it tell of your faithfulness?

Psalm 30

The psalmist was facing death (verses 1-3). In keeping with the understanding of his times, he sees his sickness as an expression of 'God's anger' (verse 5), God's punishment for his sins. In Ancient Israel it was assumed that physical death is the end of life, so the dead cannot praise God or tell of God's faithfulness (verse 9). He bargains with God: why not preserve his life? That way God can continue to receive his praise. God has listened to his pleading and has restored his health (verse 2). He invites 'God's faithful ones' to join him in singing God's praises (verse 4).

1. Jesus does not see illness as a punishment from God (see the reflection on 'God's anger' under Psalm 2 pages 20-23). Nor does he share the psalmist's understanding of death. When the Sadducees tried to make fun of the idea of life after death, Jesus responded: 'You are wrong. You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God' (Mark 12:24). He goes on to remind them of God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush, when God declared: 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exodus 3:6). Jesus adds: 'He is the God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong' (Mark 12:27).

2. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him pleading with God, throughout his life, but especially in his agony and on the cross. Jesus knew what it is like to 'shake with fear' (verse 7). He is risen now and enjoying for all eternity the communion with God for which he longed. In the resurrection God 'restored him to life when he was going down into the grave' (verse 3). Joy came to him on the morning of the Resurrection (verse 5). God 'turned his mourning into dancing, and clothed him with joy' (verse 11), and Jesus 'never ceases from thanking God' (verse 12). Paul writes: 'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him' (Romans 6:9). The sequence sung in the Easter liturgy includes the following verse: 'Death with life contended: combat strangely ended. Life's own Champion slain, yet lives to reign.'

3. We, who hope to live with him in God's eternal embrace recall Jesus' promise: 'I am going to prepare a place for you, and I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also' (John 14:3). 'Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy ... you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (John 16:20-22). Paul writes: 'As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Praying Psalm 31 (30) with Jesus

¹In you, O GOD, I seek refuge. Let me not suffer shame.
May your justice be my security.

²Come close to hear me! Come quickly to rescue me!
Be my rock of refuge, my mighty stronghold.

³You are indeed my rock, my fortress.
Go before me; be my guide.

⁴The net tightens around me.
Release me, for you are my protector.

⁵Into your hands, O GOD, I commit my spirit.
You have redeemed me, faithful God.

⁶I place my trust in you.
⁷I exult and celebrate your covenant love.

You saw my affliction.
You watched over me while I was in danger.
⁸You did not put me at the mercy of the enemy.
You set me on open ground.

⁹Be gracious to me, O GOD, for I am in distress.
My eyes are swollen from grief. I am racked with pain.
¹⁰Sorrow consumes my life. My days are filled with sighs.
[Guilt saps my strength.] My bones waste away.

¹¹My enemies mock me. I am the butt of their jokes.
I am an object of dread to those who see me.
They turn and run the other way.

¹²No one thinks of me. It is as though I was dead.
I am of no use, like a discarded pot.

¹³I can hear the whispering of the crowd:
'Attack from every side!' They scheme to take my life.

¹⁴But I trust in you, O GOD. You are my God.

¹⁵My life is in your hands.
Rescue me from my enemies
Ruthlessly they hunt me down.

¹⁶Show your servant your radiant face.
In your covenant love save me.

¹⁹How abundant is your goodness
to those who revere you,
to those who find in you their refuge.
Let everyone see how good you are.

²⁰In the secret hiding place of your presence
you protect us from their scheming.
In your tent you hold us safe
from the tongues of the violent.

²¹Blessed be GOD, who has shown me wonderful love.

²²I said in my alarm, 'I am excluded from your presence.'
But you heard my supplications when I cried to you for help.

²³Love GOD, all you who are faithful.
GOD preserves those who believe,
but repays in full those who act in pride.

²⁴Be strong, let your heart take courage, all you who hope in GOD.

Omitted

⁶You hate those who venerate worthless idols.

Verses 17-18 are omitted from the Church's liturgy.

¹⁷Do not let me be put to shame, GOD, for having called on you;
let the wicked be put to shame; let them go in silence to Sheol.

¹⁸Let the lying lips be stilled that speak insolently
against the just with pride and contempt.

1. The psalmist has experienced a serious breakdown. He speaks of a 'net tightening around him' (verse 4). He speaks of his 'affliction' and of being in 'danger' (verse 7). He is 'in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul too and my body. My life is spent in sorrow, and my years go by in sighing; my strength fails because of my guilt, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, my neighbours enjoy themselves at my expense. I am an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street run the other way. No one thinks of me. It is as though I was dead; I have become like a useless pot' (verses 9-12). People are 'plotting to take my life' (verse 13). And, worst of all 'I said in my alarm: I am excluded from GOD's presence' (verse 22).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we can hear him echoing the painful words of the psalmist, even to feeling 'excluded from God's presence: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). Perhaps Jesus could even say: 'My strength fails because of my guilt' (verse 10). We know that Jesus was sinless (see Psalm 6, pages 34-35), but being sinless is not the same as feeling sinless. Jesus was always faithful in doing his Father's will (see page 11), but does this mean that he did not experience doubt as he struggled? (see Mark 14:35-36). When our experience mirrors that of the psalmist we can pray the psalm with Jesus, confident that he knows. He is with us, even when our suffering, unlike his, is the result of our sin.

2. The psalmist turns to God in his distress: 'Come close to hear me; come quickly to rescue me' (verse 2). He pleads with God: 'lead me and guide me' (verse 3). Only God can 'disentangle me from the net that tightens around me' (verse 4). He looks to God as his 'refuge, a strong fortress to save me' (verse 2). He trusts God (verses 6, 14). As we pray with Jesus, he teaches us to turn to God when we are in distress, as he did: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death' (Hebrews 5:7).

3. The psalmist invites those who are 'faithful', that is, those bonded to God by fidelity to the covenant (the hasidim, verse 23), to join him in thanking God for hearing his pleading and for rescuing him: 'I will exult and celebrate your covenant love because you have seen my affliction; you have watched over me while I was in danger. You have not put me at the mercy of the enemy; you have set my feet in a broad, open place' (verses 7-8). 'O how abundant is the goodness that you have reserved for those who fear you, and have dispensed to those who take refuge in you, forevermore to see!' (verse 19). 'You heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help' (verse 22).

4. 'Show to your servant your radiant face' (verse 16). This is a frequent theme in the psalms and throughout the Scriptures: 'May GOD bless you and keep you; may GOD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; May GOD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace' (Numbers 6:24-26). See the reflection on seeking God's face in Psalm 27, page 96. Praying this with Jesus we think of the man who ran up to Jesus wanting to experience the life that he saw in Jesus and his companions. We are told that 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him' (Mark 10:21). We are left to imagine what passed between them in that gaze. All we know is that the man 'went away grieving'. He couldn't bring himself to leave behind what he saw as his wealth.

Psalm 31

At the Last Supper 'Philip said to Jesus: Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied' (John 14:8). Like the psalmist he wanted to see God's 'radiant face' (verse 16). Jesus responded: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let him look upon us with love, and let us return Love's gazing, knowing in faith that 'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus, the Messiah' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

5. 'O how abundant is the goodness that you have reserved for those who fear you' (verse 19). We looked at 'Fear of God' in Psalm 2, page 24. We are not being told to be afraid of God. The psalmist is reminding us not to lose a sense of awe and wonder and reverence when God's Presence is revealed to us. This reverence is a gift from God and opens us to God's 'abundant goodness'.

6. The psalmist speaks of the security he experiences 'in the secret hiding place of your presence' (verse 20). He is referring to the 'temple'. As we pray this with Jesus we think of the community of Jesus' disciples, for we are sustained by the faith, hope and love that we find there. We think, too, of our own heart, remembering Jesus' words: 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever: the Spirit who abides with you, the Spirit who will be in you' (John 14:16-17). Jesus goes on to promise: 'I am coming to you ... You will see me, because I live and you will live' (John 14:18-19). 'My Father will love you and we will come to you and make our home in you' (John 14:23). The human heart is 'the secret hiding place of God's presence' (verse 20). In the human heart Jesus is in communion with God, the communion of love we call the Holy Spirit. We are invited to join him there. Jesus instructed his disciples: 'Whenever you pray, go into your room, and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret' (Matthew 6:6).

7. Perhaps the most profound prayer in this psalm is found in verse 5: 'Into your hands I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me, O GOD, faithful God'. The psalmist is suffering intensely. He chooses to believe in God's faithfulness, and so knows-in-faith that, however things may seem, God has redeemed him. Luke places these words on the lips of the dying Jesus: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). Compare the dying words of Stephen: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59).

8. The psalmist's final exhortation is: 'Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in God' (verse 24). Compare Paul: 'Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love' (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

Praying Psalm 32 (31) with Jesus

¹Blessed and happy are they whose sins are forgiven.

²Blessed and happy are they to whom GOD imputes no guilt,
whose spirit is no longer darkened by sin.

³If you remain silent, you will waste away,

⁴weighed down by sin day and night,
your strength dried up as in a summer drought.

⁵If you acknowledge your sin and stop hiding your guilt,
if you confess your transgressions,
your God will forgive your sin and remove your guilt.

⁶This is why the faithful pray to GOD in times of danger.
Even the rush of a mighty flood will not touch them.

⁷You, O God, are my hiding place; you free me from danger.
When I cry for help you encircle me with love.

⁸I will instruct you and show you the road you must follow.
I will watch over you and give you counsel:

⁹'Do not be a horse or mule, without understanding,
needing bridle and bit before anyone can approach you.'

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked,
but covenant love surrounds those who trust in GOD.

¹¹Be glad and rejoice in GOD, O you just.
Shout for joy, all you upright of heart.

Psalm 32

1. The psalmist was profoundly depressed until he acknowledged his sin and pleaded with God for forgiveness. The experience of forgiveness brought profound joy and a sense of deep gratitude. He is advising others to follow his example. Paul quotes verses 1-2 in his Letter to the Romans (4:7-8).

2. The psalmist's spirit, the life-breath that has its source in God is 'no longer darkened by sin' (verse 2). Now he enjoys the purity that comes in communion with God. We might reflect on the following texts from the New Testament: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:8-9). 'Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective' (James 5:16).

3. Sin has its effects in our lives. The psalmist describes what was happening to him while he refused to face up to what he was doing. When he finally admitted his sin, he experienced God's forgiveness and release. John has the same message: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:8-9).

4. The psalmist came to know that when he cried for help God 'encircled him with love' (verse 7; 'covenant love surrounded him' (verse 10). We recall Jesus' words: 'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (Luke 15:7).

5. In verses 8-9 it is not clear whether it is the psalmist offering advice, or God. Either way, we still have work to do in making sure we do not fall back into sin. We remember Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery: 'I do not condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again' (John 8:11). Ultimately we will experience relief from tribulation caused by sin only if we humbly listen to God, who is 'watching over us and giving us counsel' (verse 8).



The message of this psalm is a simple one. We would do well to ponder it, and, to do so in the presence of Jesus, for he came to call sinners to repentance (Mark 2:17). While he is without sin himself and so cannot pray verses 3-5 as in the psalm, he knew the consequences of those who did not seek forgiveness. With some adjustment of the text, instead of listening to the psalmist speaking from his experience - an experience that Jesus does not share - we can hear Jesus speaking to us, and pleading with us to acknowledge our sin.

We can say to him: 'You are my hiding place' (verse 7). As we cry for help he 'encircles us with love' (verse 7). He is 'watching over us and giving us counsel' (verse 8). He is assuring us that 'covenant love surrounds those who trust in God' (verse 10).

Praying Psalm 33 (32) with Jesus

¹Ring out your joy to GOD, you lovers of justice.

How right it is to praise!

²Give thanks to GOD upon the lyre.

Make music with the ten-stringed harp.

³In a new song raise your voice to God.

Play skilfully on the strings.

⁴For the word of GOD is true.

What God says, God does.

⁵GOD, the lover of justice and truth,

fills the earth with covenant love.

⁶By GOD's word the heavens were made,

and by God's breath all their starry host.

⁷God collects and stores the waters of the sea.

⁸Let all the inhabitants of the earth pay homage.

Let them stand in awe of God.

⁹GOD speaks and the world comes into existence.

GOD commands and creatures spring into being.

¹⁰GOD brings the designs of the nations to nothing,

frustrating their plans.

¹¹It is GOD's designs that stand,

the plans of God's heart from age to age.

¹²Blessed and happy is the nation who worship GOD,

the people whom GOD has chosen.

¹³From heaven God sees all the inhabitants of the earth.

¹⁴From where God sits enthroned,

¹⁵God fashions the hearts of them all, knowing all their deeds.

¹⁶Kings are not helped by their armies,

nor soldiers because of their strength.

¹⁷The warhorse is a vain hope for deliverance.

Despite its strength, it cannot save.

¹⁸**GOD looks with love on those who believe,
on those who count on God's covenant love**

¹⁹**to deliver them from death, to keep them alive in famine.**

²⁰**With all our being we wait for GOD, our strength and our shield.**

²¹**Our heart finds joy in GOD. We trust God's holy name.**

²²**Let your covenant love be upon us, O GOD,
for we place all our hope in you.**

1. The psalmist is inviting us to praise God the creator of the universe, and what God is doing in the world. Indeed, all that God does manifests God's 'faithfulness' (verse 4); 'the earth is full of the covenant love of God' (verse 5). He speaks of the power of God's word (verses 6 and 9). In the Prologue to the Gospel of John we read: 'All things came into being through God's Word. Without God's Word not one thing came into being' (John 1:3). 'God spoke, and it was; commanded, and it came to be' (verse 9). God created the universe simply by a word (Genesis 1:3). The heart of human beings, however, God fashions day by day as God gazes with love upon us.

2. The psalmist speaks of the 'plans of God's heart' (verse 11). Jesus is the central focus of the plans of God's heart. We are praying this psalm with him who is God's 'Word-made-flesh' (John 1:14), 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him' (Colossians 1:16).

3. The psalmist reflects on the power of the Creator. If God can command the sea to respect the land and not to encroach beyond the boundaries set by God, and can lock up the subterranean ocean, preventing the collapse of the pillars that support the earth, and allowing it only to well up to the surface in springs and rivers, then let everyone stand in awe at God's power (verse 8). As in the opening chapter of Genesis, God's will, God's Word, is enough to create divine order. How foolish are those who think that they can oppose God with their paltry plans (verse 10).

4. In reflecting on Psalm 2:11 we looked at the expression 'Fear of God' (verses 8 and 18) and saw that it is not the same as being afraid of God. Rather, it speaks of a sense of awe and wonder in relation to God's mysterious Presence. If there is an element of fear in this it is fear of our capacity to turn away from God's Presence. This understanding of 'Fear of God' is reinforced in this psalm. A regular feature of Hebrew poetry is making a statement in one line and following it by making the same point in a second line, using different words in order to depth the meaning. In verse 8 we read: 'Let all the earth fear God'. Then in the following line the meaning is explained: 'Let the inhabitants of the earth stand in awe'. Then in verse 18 we read: 'The eye of God is on those who fear God'. The following line explains: 'on those who hope in God's covenant love'.

5. The psalm ends in a prayer: 'Let your covenant love be upon us, O GOD, even as we place our hope in you' (verse 22).

Praying Psalm 34 (33) with Jesus

¹I will bless GOD at all times, praise continually on my lips.

²With thanksgiving I glory in GOD. Let the lowly hear and be glad.

³Join with me in singing of GOD's greatness,
together let us praise our God.

⁴I sought and GOD replied, setting me free from all my fears.

⁵Look to GOD, and be radiant.

⁶This poor person cried, and GOD heard me,
and saved me from every danger.

⁷The angel of GOD encamps around those who revere GOD.

⁸O taste and see that GOD is good.

Blessed are you who take refuge in God.

⁹Live in awe, you holy ones. You will want for nothing.

¹⁰The rich and powerful suffer want and go hungry.
Those who seek GOD lack nothing good.

¹¹Come children, listen to me; I will teach you to cherish GOD.

¹²Do you desire life, and time to enjoy success?

¹³Well then, keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.

¹⁴Finish with evil. Learn to do good. Seek peace, and pursue it.

¹⁵The eyes of GOD are on the just, to attend to their cry for help.

¹⁷Cry out for help. GOD hears, and rescues from every danger.

¹⁸GOD is near to those whose hearts are broken,
helping those whose spirits are crushed.

¹⁹Many are the afflictions of the just, but GOD rescues from them all.

²⁰GOD keeps guard over all their bones; not one of them will be broken.

²¹Evil brings death to the wicked.

Those who hate the just will be condemned.

²²GOD redeems the lives of God's servants.

No one who takes refuge in GOD will be rejected.

Omitted

¹⁶The face of God confronts evildoers,
to cut off all memory of them from the earth.

Recalling how God responded to his cry of distress, the psalmist is encouraging others to follow his example by placing their trust in God who is 'near to those whose hearts are broken, coming to the aid of those whose spirits are crushed' (verse 18).

1. As we pray this psalm with Jesus, we listen to the words as coming to us from the lips of the risen Jesus. Enjoying now eternal communion with God, his whole being 'glories in God' (verse 2), praising God with a heart overflowing with gratitude, for he continually sought God, and God 'answered him and delivered him from all his fears' (verse 4). It is his communion with God that matters most to Jesus and nothing gives him greater joy than to proclaim this to us, and invite us to 'sing of God's greatness, and together praise our God' (verse 3). As we join Jesus in praising God, we do so especially for God's gift to us of Jesus. As Paul says: 'We glory in God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 5:11).

2. Jesus invites us to 'look to God and be radiant' (verse 5). We think of Jesus as he looked to God at his transfiguration where his 'face shone like the sun' (Matthew 17:2). We are reminded of the depiction of the exalted Jesus whose 'eyes were like a flame of fire ... his face like the sun shining with full force' (Revelation 1:14,16). Paul writes: 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:16). 'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

3. Jesus assures us that God's protective Presence 'encamps around those who revere [fear] God' (verse 7). The word 'fear' here and in verses 9 and 11 needs careful attention. See our reflection on page 24 in relation to Psalm 2:11; also pages 110.

4. In a cult setting the reference in verse 8 ('taste and see') is to taking part in the communion sacrifice. 'Taste and see' can also refer to contemplation in which we savour the goodness of God. We find this verse echoed in the New Testament: 'Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good' (1 Peter 2:2-3).

5. The psalmist addresses the 'holy ones' (verse 9). Holiness in the Bible is an attribute reserved for God. Only God alone is holy. The assembled people are called 'holy' here, not because of any attribute they possess, but only because God, the Holy One, has chosen to be present in their midst.

6. The psalmist assures us that 'the person who seeks after God lacks nothing good' (verse 10). Jesus tells us: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and everything else will be given you as well' (Matthew 6:33).

7. In verses 11-14 the psalmist instructs us in what to do if we 'desire life'. In the New Testament Peter includes these verses in his advice: 'Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. For "Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer" (1 Peter 3:9-12).

8. 'God keeps guard over the bones of the just; not one of them will be broken' (verse 20). They will experience suffering, but their 'bones' will not be broken. Just as bones survive death, so the nation will continue on. This truth was symbolically represented in the Passover ceremony in which no bone of the lamb was broken: 'You will not break any of its bones' (Exodus 12:46). John draws attention to this as he depicts Jesus on the cross: 'These things occurred so that scripture might be fulfilled: None of his bones will be broken' (John 19:36). Physical death cannot destroy Jesus' life, and it cannot destroy ours.

Praying excerpts from Psalm 35 (34) with Jesus

Verses 1-3 portray God as a Warrior Lord. Verses 4-8 are omitted in the Church's Liturgy

⁹I will rejoice in you, O GOD,
celebrating what you have done for me.

¹⁰With all my heart I cry: 'O GOD, who is like you?
You deliver the poor from those who are too strong,
from those who take away what little they have.'

¹¹Malicious witnesses rise up,
accusing me of things about which I know nothing.

¹²They repay me evil for good, leaving me forlorn.

¹³I prayed for them with my head bowed on my bosom,
¹⁴as though I grieved for a friend or a brother.
I went about as one who laments for a mother,
bowed down in mourning.

¹⁵But they gathered against me.
The mob took me by surprise, and together they assaulted me.

¹⁶Lacking piety, they mocked again and again, gnashing their teeth.

¹⁷Rescue me from their ravages.

¹⁸Then I will thank you. In the congregation I will praise you.

¹⁹Do not let my treacherous enemies rejoice over me,
or those who hate me without cause enjoy themselves at my expense.

²²O GOD, you see it all! Do not be silent!
God*, do not be distant from me!

²³Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence,
for my cause, O my God!

²⁴Vindicate me, O GOD, according to your justice,
and do not let them rejoice over me.

²⁷Let those who desire justice for me shout for joy and be glad,
and say evermore, 'Great is GOD,
who delights in the welfare of God's servant.'

²⁸Then my tongue will tell of your justice
and praise you all day long.

Omitted

¹O GOD, contend with those who contend with me;
fight against those who fight against me!
²Take hold of shield and buckler. Rise up in my defence!
³Take up the spear and block the way against my pursuers;
say to me, 'I am your deliverance.'

Verses 4-8 are not in the Church's Liturgy

⁴Let those who seek after my life
be put to shame and dishonour.
Let those who devise evil against me
be turned back and confounded.
⁵Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the Angel of GOD scattering them.
⁶Let their way be dark and slippery,
with the Angel of GOD pursuing them.
⁷For without cause they hid their net to catch me;
for nothing they dug a pit to take my life.
⁸Let ruin come on them unawares.
And let the net that they hid ensnare them;
let them fall into the pit, to their own ruin.

Verses 20-21 are not in the Church's Liturgy

²⁰For they do not speak peace.
They conceive deceitful words against those who are quiet in the land.
²¹They open wide their mouths against me;
they say, 'Aha, Aha, we saw you do it.'

Verses 25-26 are not in the Church's Liturgy

²⁵Do not let them say in their hearts,
'Aha, we have what we have always been wanting.'
Do not let them say, 'We have devoured you.'
²⁶Let all those who rejoice at my calamity be put to shame and confusion;
let those who exalt themselves against me
be clothed with shame and dishonour.

This is an intense and insistent plea for God to intervene on the side of the psalmist against his enemies who are bringing false accusations against him (verse 11).

1. This psalm is not found in the Church's lectionary. In the Prayer of the Church it occurs only in the Office of Readings for Friday Week 1, and even there verses 4-8, 20-21 and 25-26 are omitted.

The image of God as a warrior king (verses 1-3) is not the way Jesus conceived of God. In verses 5-6, the psalmist speaks of the Angel of God pursuing and scattering those who devise evil against him. The 'Angel of God' is not an angel in the sense of a spiritual being carrying out God's will. Rather, it is a way of speaking of God acting, while preserving God's transcendence. Matthew speaks of the 'Angel of the Lord' in his prologue (Matthew 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19), and at the resurrection (Matthew 28:2). He is speaking of a revelation from God, as is Luke in his account of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:9), and in Acts 5:19, 8:26, 12:7, 23.

2. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we recall the terrible opposition he encountered (verses 11-12, 15-16), reaching its climax in his crucifixion (See the reflection on Psalm 3, pages 26-27). The cry: 'My God, do not be distant from me' (verse 22) echoes Jesus' cry from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34).

Through his own suffering Jesus experienced compassion for the oppressed: 'When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matthew 9:36); 'When Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick' (Matthew 14:14). See the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 34-36. Especially painful is the fact that the psalmist's enemies are people whom he has supported when they were in trouble (verses 13-14). How must Jesus have felt when the crowd shouted: 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' (John 19:6). Jesus did not call on God for vengeance. He offered his life to God 'in order to bring them to God' (1 Peter 3:18). From the cross we hear him pray: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34).

3. Jesus invites us to share his joy that God cares for the poor (verses 9-10 and 27). He speaks to us the words he spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper: 'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete' (John 15:11). 'I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (John 16:22).

Praying Psalm 36 (35) with Jesus

- ¹Sin speaks to sinners in the depths of their hearts.
God is watching them, but still they experience no fear.
- ²They so flatter themselves in their mind
that they know not their guilt.
- ³In their hearts are mischief and deceit. All wisdom is gone.
- ⁴They plot the defeat of goodness as they lie on their beds.
Committed to evil, they have no regrets.
- ⁵O GOD, your covenant love extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.
- ⁶Your justice is like the high mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep.
You give life to all living beings.
- ⁷How precious is your covenant love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shade of your wings.
- ⁸They feast on the abundance of your house.
You slake their thirst
from the river of your delights.
- ⁹For with you is the fount of life.
In your light we see light.
- ¹⁰Keep on loving those who know you,
doing justice to upright hearts.
- ¹¹Do not let the arrogant trample over me,
or wicked hands assault me.
- ¹²See how those who do evil lie prostrate.
Flung down, they are unable to rise.

Psalms 36

1. The psalmist gives us a graphic description of those who have no place in their lives for God (verses 1-4). They have allowed evil to enter and corrupt their hearts. As we ponder this psalm with Jesus we hear him warn us: 'It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come' (Mark 7:21). We pray to welcome God's love, which alone can purify our hearts, and we pray for the courage to allow this purification.

They should be terrified at what they are doing and at the path of destruction that they have chosen to follow - but they are not (verses 1-2). They have no sense of the sacred, and their way of life separates them from the deepest desires of their hearts.

2. The psalmist praises God's covenant love to those who take refuge in him (verses 5-9). He prays that this love will continue (verse 10). Jesus assures us that it will.

3. 'People take refuge in the shade of your wings' (verse 7). In the inner sanctuary of the temple was the mercy-seat, God's gold throne. It covered the ark of the covenant and was guarded by the cherubim whose wings extended over it. The people sought refuge in God's presence, shaded by these outstretched wings.

4. 'They feast on the abundance of your house, and you slake their thirst from the river of your delights. For with you is the fount of life' (verses 8-9). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him invite us: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:37-38). The heart of Jesus is the source of this life-giving water. As he said to the Samaritan woman: 'If you knew the gift of God, you would ask me and I would give you living water ... The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:10, 14). The Book of Revelation speaks of 'the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city' (Revelation 22:1).

5. 'In your light we see light' (verse 9). In the Prologue to his gospel John writes: 'In God's Word was life, and the life was the light of all people' (John 1:4). We hear Jesus say: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). 'I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness' (John 12:46). Let us ask Jesus to light the lamp of his love in our hearts.

God's love reaches out to everyone. It is received by those who 'know' God (verse 10). The psalmist is not speaking here of those whose knowledge of God is correct – though erroneous ideas about God are an obstacle. Nor is he speaking about those who know about God. Throughout the Bible, knowing refers to the knowing of intimate communion, knowing in love. We can be in intimate communion without realising that it is God with whom we are in communion. It is possible to know about God or have correct ideas about God (in so far as this is possible), but not be in communion with God. God is offering love unconditionally, but we are free to welcome or reject this love. If we do not welcome it, and are unwilling to be drawn into intimate communion with God, we are unable to receive the 'covenant love' (verses 7 and 10), so faithfully and so persistently offered to us.

Reflecting on Psalm 37 (36) in Jesus' Company

¹Do not fret because people act badly;
do not envy those who do wrong.

²They wither like grass, and fade like the green of the fields.

³Trust in GOD, and do good, cultivate faithfulness.

⁴Let GOD be your delight,
and you will be given what your heart is seeking.

⁵Commit your life to GOD. Trust God to act on your behalf.

⁶and your justice will shine forth like the dawn,
your judgments like the sun at noon.

⁷Rest in GOD and wait patiently.
Do not fret over those who prosper
as they carry out their evil schemes.

⁸Restrain your anger. Control your rage.
Fretting leads only to evil.

¹¹It is the meek who will inherit the land,
and enjoy abundant prosperity.

¹²The wicked plot against the just, and gnash their teeth.

¹³Their end is near.

¹⁴The wicked unsheathe the sword and draw the bow
to bring down the poor and needy,
to kill those who live upright lives.

¹⁵Their sword will enter their own heart, their bow will be broken.

¹⁶Better the few things owned by the just
than to be wealthy and do evil.

¹⁷The power of the wicked will be broken.
GOD sustains the just.

¹⁸GOD watches over the lives of the blameless;
their heritage will go on forever.

¹⁹They are not put to shame in evil times,
in the days of famine they have all they need.

Psalm 37

²⁰The wrongdoers will pass away like the flowers, vanish like smoke.

²¹The wicked borrow, and do not repay.

The just are generous and keep giving.

²²Those blessed by GOD will inherit the land.

²³GOD makes our steps secure,

holding us in love as we journey through life.

²⁴We might stumble, but we will not fall,

for GOD is holding us by the hand.

²⁶The just are always giving liberally and lending,

and their children will be blessed.

²⁷Avoid evil, and do good,

and you will always have a home.

²⁸For GOD loves justice,

and will not forsake the faithful.

³⁰The just utter wisdom, the judgments they pronounce are true.

³¹They carry the law of God in their hearts. They do not falter.

³²The wicked watch for the just, seeking to kill them.

³³GOD will not abandon the just to their power,

or let them be condemned when they are brought to trial.

³⁴Hope in GOD. Keep to the way of Love.

³⁷Observe the blameless, keep your eyes on the upright.

Prosperity is for the peacemakers.

³⁸There is no future for those who cut themselves off from God.

³⁹The deliverance of the just comes from GOD,

their refuge in time of trouble.

⁴⁰GOD strengthens them and rescues them from the wicked,

and saves them, because they take refuge in God.

Omitted

⁹For the wicked will be cut off.

¹⁰Wait but a moment: the irreligious are no more.

Search them out: they are not there.

Omitted

- ²⁵I have been young, and now am old,
and I have never seen the just forsaken or their children begging bread.
- ³⁵I have seen the wicked puffed up with pride,
towering like a luxuriant cedar.
- ³⁶I passed by again, and they were no more;
though I sought them, they could not be found.

This is not a prayer. It is a manifesto on how to live in an unjust world. The psalmist calls on his age and experience (verses 25 and 35) to contrast two groups of people and God's judgment on their lives. Through greed, neglect, and historical events, the psalmist finds himself in a society in which some have grown rich at the expense of others. How are the dispossessed to act, and in what kind of project are those concerned for the dispossessed to be involved? Where is God in all this and how are people to do God's will? The psalm is a call not to lose heart when the irreligious seem to prosper, but to continue to trust in God and to wait upon God's grace. Justice will prevail. Not surprisingly, if we want to listen to Jesus, rather than the psalmist, we will need to make some adjustments to the text.

1. The psalmist speaks of 'bad people'/'wrongdoers' (verse 1). Throughout the psalm he builds up a picture of their lives and the evil for which they are responsible. They plan evil and carry it out (verses 7 and 12). They are 'irreligious', having no regard for God or God's will (verses 10, 28, 34 and 38). They are living in opulence (verses 7 and 16). They tower over others like a luxuriant cedar (verse 35).

He also describes what will happen to them. They will fade and wither (verses 2 and 10). Their day of retribution is coming (verse 13). Their sword will enter their own heart (verse 15). They will perish - vanish (verse 20). They will be cut off (verse 22). They will be no more (verse 36). They will be altogether destroyed (verse 38).

2. By contrast, there are those who 'trust in God and do good' (verse 3). They cultivate faithfulness (verse 3). They commit their life's journey to God (verse 5). They rest in God (verse 7). They hope in God (verse 9). They are meek (verse 11). They are poor and needy, but live good lives (verse 14). They are generous and keep giving (verses 21 and 26). They are blessed by God (verse 22). They are just (verse 29). They keep to God's way (verse 34). They are people of peace (verse 37).

The psalmist speaks of their reward. God will give them their heart's desire (verse 4). God will act on their behalf (verse 5). God upholds them (verse 17). Their heritage will last forever (verse 18). They will have abundance (verse 19). They will not lack bread (verse 25). Their children will be for them a blessing (verse 26). They will always have a home (verse 27). They will experience salvation and liberation from God (verse 39). The central refrain of the psalm is that they will inherit the land promised to them by God: 'The meek will inherit the land' (verse 11; see also verses 3, 9, 18, 22, 27, 29). Jesus quotes this verse in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:5).

Psalm 37

As we pray this psalm (especially verses 28-29) with Jesus we recall Jesus' parable concerning God's ultimate judgment of what matters in life. There are those who give food to the hungry, and drink to the thirsty, who welcome strangers and clothe the naked, who care for the sick and visit those in prison (Matthew 25:35-36). They will inherit 'God's kingdom' (25:34), 'eternal life' (25:46). And there are those who do not care for others in this way (Matthew 25:42-44). If they obstinately persist in their behaviour, the consequence for them will be separation from God (25:41 and 46).

3. The psalmist assures 'those who trust in God and do good' (verse 3): 'God will make your justice shine forth like the dawn, and your judgments like the noonday sun' (verse 6). God will act in favour of the oppressed; and will vindicate those who commit themselves to God. God is the one who liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt, led them through the desert and gave them the Promised Land. But there are some who, because of the injustice of the powerful, are not enjoying the land that is theirs. They are unjustly dispossessed. God will redeem them: 'God helps them and rescues them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in God' (verse 40). 'Their heritage will last forever' (verse 18). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him say: 'Believe in me, and even though you die, you will live' (John 11:25).

4. God will lead us on our journey and sustain us (verse 17). 'Our steps are made firm by God, when he delights in our way. Though we stumble, we will not fall headlong, for God holds us by the hand' (verses 23-24). 'The law of their God is in their hearts. Their steps do not slip' (verse 31). 'Wait for God, and keep to his way' (verse 34). 'God will not forsake the faithful' (verse 28).

Hear Jesus saying: 'Let God be your delight and you will be given what your heart is seeking' (verse 4). 'Commit your life to God' (verse 5). 'Rest in God and wait patiently' (verse 7). 'We journey through life, held in God's heart' (verse 23). 'God is holding us by the hand' (verse 24). 'You will always have a home' (verse 27). 'Hope in God. Keep to God's way' (verse 34).

5. 'I have been young, and now am old, and I have never seen the just forsaken or their children begging bread' (verse 25). It is hard not to think that the psalmist was looking at his world through rose-coloured glasses. Be that as it may, he is setting out to encourage his contemporaries to trusting abandonment to divine providence.

6. There are a number of parallels between Psalm 37 and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10). 'Blessed and happy are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed and happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed and happy are the meek, for they will inherit the land. Blessed and happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for justice will prevail. Blessed and happy are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed and happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed and happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed and happy are those who are persecuted because they are just, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

Psalm 38 (37) Listening to Jesus

The psalm is composed as a prayer. I have adapted it to have Jesus speaking to us as we listen.

¹God is rebuking you, but not in anger;
disciplining you, but not in wrath.

²The arrows of Love are striking you,
the hand of Love lies heavy upon you.

³No part of your flesh is free from wounds
because of your indignation.
There is no sound bone in your body because of your sin.

⁴Yes, your guilty deeds are overwhelming you
their burden too heavy for you to bear.

⁵Your wounds grow foul and fester because of your folly.

⁶I know you are utterly bowed down and prostrate,
mourning all day long.

⁷You are burning with fever. No part of your body is free from pain.

⁸You are utterly spent and crushed.
You groan because of the anguish in your heart.

⁹God* knows all your longing;
your sighing is not hidden from God.

¹⁰Your heart is pounding, your strength is spent;
the light of your eyes is gone.

¹¹Friends and neighbours avoid you, keeping their distance.

¹²Those who seek your life lay snares for you.
Those who seek to hurt you speak of ruin.
They think up treachery all the day long.

¹³Like the deaf who cannot hear, like the dumb unable to speak,

¹⁴you have no words for your defense.

¹⁵In GOD you can hope. God will answer you.

- ¹⁶**They are gloating over you,
those who make fun of you when you stumble.**
- ¹⁷**On the point of collapsing, you have no relief from your pain.**
- ¹⁸**Confess your guilt.
It is your sin that fills you with dismay.**
- ¹⁹**Your enemies are strong.
There are many who hate you for no reason.**
- ²⁰**They render you evil for good;
they attack you for seeking what is right.**
- ²¹**Your God will not forsake you. Your God is close.**
- ²²**God* is hastening to come to your aid.**

The psalmist acknowledges his sin (verses 3-4, 5 and 18), but cries out to God not to leave him in such terrible physical and mental anguish. This psalm is unusual in the power of its description of suffering. He assumes, according to the mentality of the time, that suffering is willed by God, and therefore must be a form of punishment for sin (verse 3). He asks forgiveness.

1. As with Psalm 32, so here, this is not a prayer that the sinless Jesus could pray (On Jesus' sinlessness see the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 34-35). We can adapt the psalm. Instead of listening to the psalmist address God, we can listen to Jesus addressing us, knowing that he will hold us in love as we acknowledge our sinfulness and plead for God's compassion.

2. The psalmist is not objecting against being rebuked and disciplined, but against the extent of it, expressed here in terms of God's anger (verse 1; on God's 'anger' see the reflection on Psalm 2, pages 20-23).

3. He is confident that in spite of his sin God knows that his deepest yearning is for communion with God (verse 9).

4. Having described his sufferings, he spends the rest of the psalm, beginning in verse 11, speaking of how other people are relating to him. They are afraid of the contagion that they would contract from contact with one with whom, in their eyes, God is obviously displeased. They take the occasion to threaten and defame him (verse 12).

Praying Psalm 39 (38) in Jesus' company

¹I said to myself: 'I will watch my behaviour
lest I sin with my tongue.
I will control what I say when confronted by the wicked.'

²I was silent and held myself back, but to no avail.
The prosperity of the wicked stirred my grief,
³my heart was burning within me.

While I was attempting control, the fire inside me blazed.
I found myself unable to hold my tongue.
⁴'GOD, what will become of me? How fleeting is my life!
⁵A short span you have given me.
My days are as nothing in your sight.

We human beings are no more than a breath.
⁶We pass away like a shadow, our life passes by.
We amass possessions, not knowing who will enjoy them.

⁷So what am I waiting for, my God*? My hope is in you.
⁸Free me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the taunt of the fool.
⁹I am silent. I do not open my mouth,
since this is all your doing.

¹⁰Stop tormenting me.
I am worn down by the blows of your hand.
¹¹You chastise us in our guilt,
like a moth consuming what we treasure.
We human beings are no more than a breath.

¹²Hear 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.
¹³Look away that I may breathe again,
before I depart and am no more.'

Psalm 39

The psalmist is facing death. He tries to restrain himself but cannot, and bursts into a cry to God for respite. It is a tragic reflection on the human condition. The tension is not resolved and the reflection is indecisive. Its key theme is expressed in the refrain: 'We human beings ('adam) are no more than a mere breath (hebel)' (verses 5 and 11). There is an allusion here to the story of Cain and Abel (Hebrew 'hebel'). Like Abel, we are here for a brief moment, and our life is over like a sigh, like a 'passing breath' (verse 5) that is here one moment and gone the next.

He assumes that it is God who determines how long we live ('It is you who have done it' verse 9), so, since God is never unjust, his 'short span of life' (verse 5) must be punishment for his sins. The guilt of his transgressions lies heavily upon him (verses 8 and 11). Tragically, his focus is on himself rather than on God, and so his hope is fragile. He wants God to turn his attention elsewhere and leave him living for a while yet (verse 13). He gives no indication of a belief in a life of communion with God beyond physical death.

1. Jesus' understanding of the way God relates to the human condition is very different from that of the psalmist. This, along with his sinlessness and his belief in God's gift of life after death, means that Psalm 39 is not a prayer that Jesus could make his own. However, there are aspects of the psalmist's experience that Jesus shared. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews compares Jesus' shedding of blood to that of Abel (Hebrews 12:24). Like the psalmist Jesus pleaded with his Father to save him from death. In his struggle in Gethsemane was he pleading for more time to complete his mission? Like the psalmist (verse 7) Jesus placed his hope in God. Unlike the psalmist, Jesus reached a place of peace and commitment to continue his mission of love, come what may, for he knew-in-faith that ultimately all that mattered was to do his Father's will ('Not my will but yours be done' Mark 14:36). Unlike the psalmist Jesus knew that physical death is not the end of life. He was passing from this world and going to the Father: 'I am coming to you' (John 17:13).

2. We can hear Jesus praying: 'GOD, what will become of me? How fleeting is my life! A short span you have given me. My days are as nothing in your sight. We human beings are no more than a breath. We pass away like a shadow, our life passes by' (verses 4-6). 'My God, my hope is in you' (verse 7). 'Hear my prayer, O GOD, attend to my cry' (verse 12).

3. For the rest we can pray the psalm in Jesus' company, knowing that he understands our fears, as he reminds us of our Father's longing for us to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10).

Praying Psalm 40 (39) with Jesus

¹I anxiously waited for YOU, O GOD.

At long last you stooped down to me.

You heard my cry

²and drew me up from the desolate pit.

From the miry bog you set me on solid ground.

³You put in my mouth a new song, a song of praise.

Witnessing this, many will be moved

to put their trust in YOU.

⁴Blessed and happy are those who place their trust in YOU, O GOD,
who are not seduced by idols, nor caught up in illusions.

⁵How many wonderful things you have done, O GOD.

How many graces you have thought up to favour us.

There is no one like you.

I am tempted to recount them,

but they surpass anything I could say.

⁶Sacrifice and offerings you do not desire.

You want a listening ear.

For burnt or sin offerings you have not asked.

⁷And so I say: 'Here I am.'

In the scroll of the book it is written of me

⁸that I am to carry out your will. O my God, I long to do it.

Your law is etched in the depths of my heart.

⁹I proclaim the good news of your justice
to the great congregation.

See, I have not restrained my lips.

You know this, O GOD.

¹⁰I have not kept your justice hidden within my heart.
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your saving help.
I have not concealed your covenant love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.

¹¹O GOD, do not withhold from me
your tender compassion.
Let your covenant love and your faithfulness
always keep me safe.

¹²I am beset with countless evils.
[My guilty deeds have overtaken me, until I cannot see.
They are more than the hairs of my head].
My heart sinks within me.

¹³Free me, O GOD. Hasten to help me.

¹⁶May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you.
May those who love your saving presence keep saying,
'GOD is great!'

¹⁷As for me, I am poor and needy, but God* thinks of me.
You are my helper, my deliverer. O my God, do not delay.

Verses 14-15 are not in the Church's liturgy.

¹⁴Let all those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion.
Let those who desire to harm me be repulsed and dishonoured.

¹⁵Let those who say to me 'Aha! Aha!' remain aghast because of their shame.

The psalmist sings in praise of God who has 'drawn me from the desolate pit'. His need for help continues and he admits that it is his own sins that are largely responsible for his suffering (verse 12). He has come to see that what God wants from him, more than anything else, is that he embrace God's will in his heart (verses 7-8).

While Jesus cannot pray the section of verse 12 in brackets, we can pray it and it is good to pray it in Jesus' company.

1. We join Jesus as he cries out to God in Gethsemane and from the cross (verses 1-2, 11 and 17; see reflections on Psalm 22, pages 78-81). We share his pain as he continues to reach out to those who, in rejecting him, are rejecting his Father, closing their hearts to God's longing to free them from their 'idols' and 'illusions' (verse 4).

2. We join Jesus, too, as he rejoices when people, so often the simple people, open their hearts to welcome God whose heart longs to embrace them (verses 3, 5 and 16): 'Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because ... you have revealed these things to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will"' (Luke 10:21).

3. The psalmist declares his commitment to carry out God's call to witness to his personal experience of God's justice and uprightness, truth and saving action, covenant love and fidelity, and God's compassion (verses 6-10). God has dug through his blocked ear to open up a path for his word into the very centre of the psalmist's being. In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)' (Hebrews 10:5-7). On Jesus' commitment to God's will see page 11. For a reflection on obedience see Psalm 123, pages 393-397.

4. The psalmist knows that the cult is not enough for him (verse 6). God is calling him to a special vocation. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus twice quotes the following from Hosea: 'I desire covenant love, not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6:6; quoted Matthew 9:13 and 12:5).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us thank him for revealing to us a God of love. Let us pray to see whatever is blocking us from listening to God's Spirit in our hearts, revealing God's loving will to us. Let us renew our commitment to doing God's will.

Praying Psalm 41 (40) with Jesus

¹Blessed and happy are those who care for the poor.
When times are hard, GOD will rescue them.

²GOD protects them, preserves their life,
and blesses them in the land.

GOD will not give them up
to the will of their enemies,

³but on their sick bed will sustain them,
restoring them from sickness to health.

⁴I said, 'GOD, be gracious to me; heal me.'

⁵Enemies wish evil upon me:

'When will you die? When will your name be forgotten?'

⁶When they come to see me, they pretend to be friendly
but they are planning mischief in their hearts.

When they leave, they gossip about me.

⁷All who hate me gang up and plot evil against me.

⁸They say: 'He has contracted an incurable sickness;
Confined to bed he will never rise.'

⁹Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who shared my table, has abandoned me.

¹⁰But you, O GOD, be gracious to me. Restore me to health,
so that I can show them how wrong they are.

¹¹I will know that you are pleased with me
when my enemies do not triumph over me.

¹²You have restored my health.
Keep me in your presence forever.

¹³Blessed be GOD, the God of Israel,
forever and ever. Amen! Amen!

1. The psalmist has contracted what appears to be an 'incurable disease' (verse 8). According to the mentality of the time, it was assumed that sickness must be God's will, and, since God is just, sickness was thought to be punishment for sin (verse 4). This was still the common assumption in Jesus' time, an assumption which Jesus challenged: 'As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him' (John 9:1-3). Sickness and death are part of the human condition. What Jesus' ministry reveals is that Love, when welcomed in faith, can bring a measure of healing.

2. The psalmist begins his prayer with a profound act of trust in God, who 'will sustain those who care for the poor on their sick bed, and will restore them from sickness to health' (verse 3). The psalmist knows he can call on God's graciousness, and appeal to be healed (verse 4). As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him encouraging us in our sickness: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me' (John 14:1).

3. The psalmist's enemies and friends all share his assumption on the connection between sin and suffering. The psalmist's main concern seems to be that he does not want his enemies to see in his illness a vindication of their judgment of him.

4. His most acute pain is that 'even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who shared my bread, has abandoned me' (verse 9). This pain is echoed in the New Testament when Jesus is betrayed by one of the Twelve: 'The one who shared my bread has walked away from me' (John 13:18).

5. The psalm ends with gratitude. The psalmist's prayer has been answered: 'You have restored my health and you will keep me in your presence forever' (verse 12).

Verse 13 does not belong to Psalm 41. It marks the conclusion to Book I of the psalms.

As we pray this prayer with Jesus, let us invite him to touch our vulnerability and pain, trusting that he has compassion for us. Let us listen as he invites us: 'Come to me, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your soul' (Matthew 11:28-29).

Praying Psalm 42 (41) with Jesus

¹As the deer longs for running streams,
so my whole being longs for you, my God.

²With all the yearning of my soul I thirst for God, the living God.
When will I come and see your face?

³My tears have been my food by day and by night,
as I hear it said all the day long: 'Where is your God?'

⁴These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I would lead the rejoicing crowd into the house of God,
amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving, the throng wild with joy.

⁵*Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me?
Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,
my Saviour and my God.*

⁶My soul is cast down within me as I think of you,
from the region of the Jordan and Mount Hermon,
from the hill of Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep in the roaring of the waters.
All your waves and your billows crash over me.

⁸By day GOD sends forth such gracious love.
By night I keep singing, pleading to the living God.

⁹I say to God, my rock: *'Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go mourning, oppressed by the foe?'*

¹⁰With cries that pierce me to the heart my enemies revile me,
saying to me all the day long: 'Where is your God?'

¹¹*Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me?
Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,
my Saviour and my God.*

1. We begin praying this psalm by listening to Jesus as he expresses his longing in the words of the opening two verses: 'As the deer longs for running streams, so my whole being longs for you, my God. With all the yearning of my soul I thirst for God, the living God. When will I come and see the face of God?' It was this longing that drew Jesus to the Jordan to be baptised by John, a longing that opened his soul to hear God's response: 'You are my Son. I love you. I delight in you' (Mark 1:11). It was this longing that drew him into the wilderness to depth the meaning of God's response, for himself and for his mission (Matthew 4:1-11). It was this longing that kept calling him into prayer. He needed to be alone with God (see the reflection on Jesus' prayer in Psalm 4, page 29). Because of the intimacy of his communion with God Jesus could say: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:11). As his death drew near, Jesus could say to his disciples: 'I am going to the Father' (John 16:17), and to God: 'I am coming to you' (John 17:13). John concludes his account of Jesus' passion with the words: 'When Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said: "I am thirsty" (John 19:28), always thirsting for closer communion with God.

It is because of his own thirst that he recognised this same thirst in others. He recognised it in Andrew and his companion who followed Jesus to see where he lived (John 1:37-40). This was the thirst experienced by the people celebrating a wedding in Cana. Jesus' mother sensed this thirst when, representing every mother who longed for the coming of the Messiah, she said to Jesus: 'they have no wine' (John 2:3). This was the thirst that drew Nicodemus to Jesus. He wanted something more than his inherited religion could give him. His thirst was for 'eternal life' (John 3:16). This is what John the Baptist yearned for. He saw himself as the best man rejoicing in the presence of Jesus, the bridegroom (John 3:29). Jesus sensed this thirst in the Samaritan woman whom he encountered at Jacob's well: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you "Give me a drink", you would have asked him and he would have given you living (life-giving) water' (John 4:10). He went on to say: 'The water that I give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14).

The paralysed man at the pool of Beth-zatha wanted to find healing in the pool. Jesus knew he was longing for something more and made it possible for him to 'walk again' (John 5:9). On hearing of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew to a deserted place to be alone. The people joined him. Jesus 'was moved with compassion for them and cured their sick' (Matthew 14:14). Mark writes: 'Jesus was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things' (Mark 6:34). They were hungry. Jesus knew that their hunger was for more than food: 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, the food that I will give you' (John 6:27). 'The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (John 6:33). 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so you will live because of me' (John 6:57).

Jesus was in the temple for the celebration of the New Year Festival. It was the final day of the celebration, the Day of Rejoicing in the Torah, a festival of water and light. Here again, drawing on his own experience, Jesus wanted to connect with people's deepest yearnings. He cried out: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart (the heart of Jesus and the heart of the disciple) will flow rivers of living water"' (John 7:37-38). John goes on to explain: 'He said this about the Spirit which believers in him were to receive' (John 7:39).

John recounts the story of the man who was born blind. It is a story of enlightenment. He sees after he washes in the pool of Siloam (John 9:7) – a washing that is a symbol of baptism into the community of Jesus' disciples.

Jesus is deeply moved by the death of his friend Lazarus (John 12:33-35). Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary, want their brother to live. In this, the final sign, we are being invited to believe that physical death is not the end of our longing or of our life of communion with God. We will cast off the burial cloths and be welcomed into eternal life: 'Unbind him. Let him go free' (John 11:44).

At the Last Supper, 'Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end' (John 13:1): 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?' (John 14:1-2). Philip longed to see God: 'Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied' (John 14:8). Jesus responded by telling Philip that to see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9), because: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:10). Jesus promised that God would send his Spirit to dwell in us (John 14:17). This is the Spirit promised in John 7. Moreover Jesus and his Father would come to us and make their home in us (John 14:23). Jesus knew that our thirst is ultimately a thirst to enjoy the intimacy of God's life. Hence his prayer: 'I ask that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17:20-21), 'that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26).

We draw this reflection to a close by focusing on Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb. She was surprised to find the tomb empty, and ran to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple who ran to the tomb, and, finding it as Mary Magdalene had told them, they 'returned to their homes' (John 20:10). Not Mary, who remained at the tomb, weeping (John 20:11). It was because of her intense longing to see Jesus that she alone 'saw' him (John 20:18), when he called her by name (John 20:16).

In The Book of Revelation we read: 'The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift' (Revelation 22:17).

2. Verse 3 ('My tears have been my food by day and by night, as I hear it said all the day long: 'Where is your God?') takes us to Gethsemane and Calvary. At the Last Supper Jesus assured his disciples that even though they would leave him: 'I am not alone. The Father is with me' (John 16:32). In Gethsemane he continued to trust God. He continued to commit himself to do his Father's will (Mark 14: 36).

On Calvary Jesus cried: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) as he heard the leaders scoffing: 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, God's chosen one' (Luke 23:35). But he could still pray: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46).

3. The psalmist has experienced God's presence. Now he is exiled from the sanctuary and his priestly ministry and misses the experience of closeness (verse 4). He experiences God as absent, but he is like a timid female deer, alert to the scent of the life-giving water for which she longs. We think of the water flowing from the right side of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34), and, once again, recall his promise: 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38). We long to see the face of God (see the reflection on Psalm 31, pages 105-106). Paul assures us: 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (1Corinthians 13:12). The Book of Revelation assures us: 'They will see his face' (Revelation 22:4).

4. The psalmist questions his sadness: 'Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me? Hope in God. I will continue to praise you, my Saviour and my God' (verse 5), which acts as a refrain (see verse 11). God is called 'Saviour'. God does not prevent us from having hurtful experiences (often brought about by us and others refusing to obey God), but God does come to us with God's saving help, sustaining us to go through the difficulties, and maintaining for us the divine communion in which life consists.

5. The psalmist gives expression to the sadness that comes over him as he describes being overwhelmed with forces of chaos, made all the more painful by the taunts slung at him for believing. In his pain, he prays: 'My soul is cast down within me as I think of you' (verse 6). The sound of the cataracts bursting out from the mountain where the Jordan rises symbolises for the psalmist the destructive and chaotic forces that threaten to overwhelm him (verse 7). The pagan neighbours have their idols. The psalmist has nothing to show. They challenge him: 'Where is your God?' (verses 3 and 10). Compare the taunt thrown at Jesus as he was dying: 'He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son' (Matthew 27:43).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, pray to share Jesus' faith, hope and love. Pray to share Jesus' thirst for God, Jesus' longing to see the face of God. Jesus gazes on us with such love. Trust him and know that in returning his gaze we are looking on God and enjoying the communion for which we are being held in existence.

Praying Psalm 43 (42) with Jesus

¹You be my judge, O God.

Defend my cause against a godless people.

Rescue me from the deceitful and unjust.

²You are God. I take refuge in you.

Why have you cast me off?

Why must I go mourning oppressed by the foe?

³Send forth your light and your truth;

let these be my guide;

let them bring me to your holy mountain,

to the place where you dwell.

⁴I will go to the altar of God,

to God, my exceeding joy;

and I will praise you on the harp,

O God, my God.

⁵*Why are you cast down, my soul?*

Why are you groaning within me?

Hope in God. I will continue to praise you,

my Saviour and my God.

Though Psalms 42 and 43 are numbered separately in the Hebrew Bible and in the Greek Version, the psalms belong together. This is underlined by the fact that the refrain in Psalm 43:2 is also in Psalm 42:9, and the refrain in Psalm 43:5 is also in Psalm 42:5 and 11.

As in Psalm 42 the psalmist thinks of the cult (holy mountain, dwelling, altar, praise). The imagery in verse 1 is taken from the court, as the psalmist is appealing to the highest tribunal – that of God. He expresses his desire and his trust that he will experience again the communion with God which he experienced in the past.

In exile the psalmist asks for God's light and truth to escort him back into God's presence (verse 3).

In verse 5 we hear the refrain for the third time (see Psalm 42:5 and 11), now sung as an exultant hymn by the psalmist who knows that God has heard and will answer his prayer.

Reflecting on Psalm 44 (43) in Jesus' Company

This psalm, more than most, highlights the importance of recognising that the writings of the Bible, including the psalms, are human documents (see Chapter One, pages 5-8). Those responsible for composing Psalm 44, and those who treasured it, however inspired, were praying from within the context of their understanding of God and of God's relationship with the world, and especially with them as God's chosen people.

Very little of this psalm could be prayed by Jesus, and, in view of Jesus' teaching about God and about how we should relate to people we think of as enemies, very little of it can be prayed by Jesus' disciples. The psalm is not in the Lectionary and is prayed in the Prayer of the Church only in the Office of Readings for Thursday Weeks 2 and 4.

The opening verses present the belief found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that it was God who drove out the inhabitants of Canaan and gave the land to Israel.

¹We have heard, O God, our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old:

²with your own hand you drove out the nations,
and planted our ancestors there in their place;
you brought affliction on the peoples,
but brought prosperity to our ancestors.

³Not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory.
It was your right hand, and your arm,
and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them.

Modern archaeology does not support this claim. The inhabitants of Canaan were not driven out by the Israelites invading from outside. An outside group introduced a new way of understanding God which was taken up by the indigenous inhabitants who formed Ancient Israel (see *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's new vision of Ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts*, by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman (The Free Press, Simon and Schuster, 2001).

Jesus longed for 'the light of God's countenance' (see the reflection on Psalm 42, page 133). He also knew how much his Father 'delighted in him' (Mark 1: 11 and 9:7). We are invited to share this with Jesus.

Psalm 44

The psalmist shares the universally accepted view of his day that whatever happens in history is ultimately controlled by God (see the reflection on Psalm 2, pages 21-23), and so goes on to thank God for the many military victories Israel has had in the past

⁴You are my King and my God; you decree victories for Jacob.

⁵Through you we beat down our foes;
through your name we trample on our assailants.

⁶For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me.

⁷It is you who have saved us from our foes,
and have put to confusion those who hate us.

⁸In God we have boasted continually,
and we will call upon you in thanksgiving forever.

That was the past. The present looks very different. Israel is suffering the consequences of military defeat. The psalmist is utterly bewildered. Why is God allowing foreign nations to plunder the land at will?

⁹Yet you have rejected us and shamed us.
You have not gone out with our armies.

¹⁰You made us retreat before the foe,
and our enemies plunder us at will.

¹¹You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations.

¹²You have sold your people for a trifle,
letting them go cheaply.

¹³You have made us the taunt of our neighbours,
the derision and scorn of those around us.

¹⁴You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughing stock among the peoples.

¹⁵All day long my disgrace is before me,
my face is covered in shame

¹⁶at the insults of the taunters and revilers,
at the sight of the enemy attacking.

He would understand the calamity as divine punishment, if the people had been unfaithful to the covenant. However, as he sees it, this is not the case.

¹⁷All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant.

¹⁸Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way,

¹⁹yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness.

²⁰If we had forgotten the name of our God,
or spread out our hands to a strange god,

²¹would not God discover this,
God who knows the secrets of the heart?

²²Because of you we are being killed all day long,
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Verse twenty-two is quoted by Paul in Romans 8:36. Paul goes on to say that we who suffer because we follow Jesus are victorious because nothing can separate us from God's love. It is unthinkable that God would be unfaithful, so what is going on? Why is God so slow to act?

²³Rouse yourself, O God*! Why do you sleep?
Awake, do not reject us any longer!

²⁴Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

²⁵We sink down to the dust,
our bodies unable to rise from the ground.

²⁶Rise up, come to our help.
Redeem us because of your covenant love.

They can do nothing. It is up to God to act as he acted in the past (verse 1). God is renowned for 'covenant love' (Hebrew *hesed*). The ultimate basis for the supplication is not their own innocence (though that has been stressed throughout the psalm). It is God's covenant love. The psalmist pleads with God to reveal this love now. The plea is urgent.

Jesus knew rejection and persecution (see reflection on Psalm 3, pages 26-27). He even felt abandoned by God (Mark 15:34). As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote: 'Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7).

Reflecting on Psalm 45 (44) in Jesus' Company

¹My heart overflows with a noble theme.
I dedicate my verses to the king.
My tongue is as skilled as the pen of a scribe.

²You are the most handsome of men.
How gracious is your speech.
How your God continues to bless you.

³O mighty one, gird your sword upon your thigh.
⁴In splendour and majesty ride on victorious,
for the cause of truth and goodness and right.
In defense of justice let your right hand show your dread deeds.

⁵Your arrows are keen. To you armies surrender.
The king's enemies lose heart.

⁶Your throne is the throne of God.
Your reign endures forever.
Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity.

⁷You love justice and hate what is evil.

Therefore God, your God, with oil of gladness
has anointed you beyond your companions.

⁸Your robes are fragrant with aloes and myrrh.
From the ivory palace you are greeted with music.

⁹Daughters of kings are among your loved ones.
On your right stands the queen mother in gold of Ophir.

¹⁰Listen, O daughter, mark these words:
Leave your family behind,
forget your father's house.

¹¹The king is infatuated with your beauty.
Since he is your lord, you must bow to him.

¹²The city of Tyre comes with gifts,
seeking your favour.

¹³The richest of the peoples honour you.

¹⁴The king's daughter is clothed with splendour;
her robes embroidered with pearls set in gold.
They are leading her to the king.

¹⁵She and her maiden companions
are escorted amid gladness and joy
into the palace of the king.

¹⁶In the place of your ancestors you will have sons.
They will be princes over all the land.
Your name will be celebrated forever.

¹⁷The peoples will never cease thanking you
from one generation to the next,
giving praise to you through this song.

This is not a prayer, but a song to celebrate the wedding of the king. As we listen to it in Jesus' company, there are some verses that we can think of as applying to him.

1. Jesus' ministry was about 'truth and goodness, right and justice' (verse 4). His power to bring about the reign of God was far superior to the power of military prowess (verses 3-4). His was the power of Love, the power that creates and sustains the universe.

2. In his circular letter to the Gentile Christian communities in the East, Paul compares the virtues needed to live a Christian life to the armour of a soldier in the field (verse 3): 'Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places ... Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Ephesians 6:10-16).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes. The word faces us towards God' (Hebrews 4:12-13). In the Prologue to his Gospel, John states: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God' (John 1:1). Jesus is the incarnation of this Word (John 1:14). His word penetrates to the heart of our day to day living (our 'joints'), and to the centre of our vital energy (our 'marrow'), exposing the 'thoughts and intentions of the heart'.

3. The throne of the king is God's throne (verse 6), for the king is to execute God's will and God's justice, thus bringing about the reign of God in the land. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews quotes verses six and seven in relation to Jesus: 'Of the Son God says, "Your throne is God's throne; it endures forever and ever. Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity; you love justice and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" (Hebrews 1:8-9).

4. Jesus is the bridegroom (verses 11-15; see reflection on Psalm 23, page 85). He embraces sinners. So must his bride, the Church. Jesus was criticised for doing so, and so is the Church. The psalm reminds us that 'the king is infatuated with your beauty' (verse 11). We must not allow our own sin or the sin of others in the Church to distract us from her beauty as the Body of Christ in the world, continuing Jesus' liberating and healing ministry.

Praying Psalm 46 (45) with Jesus

¹God is our refuge and strength,
a helper close at hand in time of trouble.

²So we will not fear, though the earth should tremble,
though mountains collapse into the sea,
³though waters roar and foam,
though the mountains shudder before the crashing waves.

The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁴There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God,
home of the Holy One, our God, the Most High.

⁵God is in the midst of the city. It cannot be shaken.
God will be its help when the morning dawns.

⁶Peoples revolt. Kings mobilise their armies.
The earth shudders whenever God thunders.

⁷The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁸Come, behold the formidable things
the Lord has brought about on the earth:
⁹everywhere God puts an end to war, breaking the bow.

God shatters the spear, burns the chariot in a pyre.
An end to your fighting!

¹⁰Be still and know that I am God.
I am exalted above the nations, supreme on the earth.

¹¹The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Psalm 46

The beautifully refined poetry of this psalm establishes it as one of the masterpieces of the psalter. It is a psalm of trust in God whose presence in the city has saved it from foreign aggression.

God is compared to a citadel that is inaccessible to an invading army, and so provides certain protection to the people of the city. This is picked up in the refrain (verse 3, 7 and 11).

1. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the disciples on the lake, threatened by a storm. During the 'storms' of our lives we hear Jesus say to us as he said to them: 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' (Matthew 8:26). 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom' (Luke 12:32). We contemplate Jesus at the Last Supper as he says to us: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid' (John 14:27). The women who were present at Jesus' burial and later found the tomb empty were told: 'Do not be afraid ... He has been raised' (Matthew 28:5).

In his ministry Paul faced many problems: 'One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent"' (Acts 18:9). In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'We can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"' (Hebrews 13:6, quoting Psalm 118:6). In the words of Psalm 46: 'Be still, and know that I am God' (verse 10).

2. Fundamental to the confidence of the inhabitants of Jerusalem was the fact that the city's water supply was secure: 'There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city, it will not be moved' (verses 4-5). Jesus says to us as he said to the Samaritan woman: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you "Give me a drink", you would have asked him and he would have given you living (life-giving) water' (John 4:10). He went on to say: 'The water that I give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). We think of Jesus: 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38). 'One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out' (John 19:34).

3. Living in a world tormented by violence and war we pray with the psalmist: 'God makes wars cease all over the earth, breaking the bows, shattering the spears, and burning the chariots in a pyre' (verse 9). Let us pray that we will all heed God who is inspiring everyone to forgo violence, and experience the blessing promised to those who make peace (Matthew 5:9).

Praying Psalm 47 (46) with Jesus

¹Clap your hands, all you peoples!

Acclaim your God, singing for joy.

²For GOD, the Most High, we must revere,
great king over all the earth.

⁴Our inheritance, our glory, is from God,
given to Jacob out of love.

⁵God goes up with shouts of joy,
ascends to the blast of the trumpet.

⁶Sing praise to God, sing praise;
sing praise to our King, sing praise.

⁷For God is king of all the earth;
sing praise with all your skill.

⁸God is king over the nations;
God reigns on the holy throne.

⁹The princes of the peoples are assembled
with the people of Abraham's God.
All the rulers on the earth belong to God,
who reigns over all.

Omitted

⁴who subdues peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

This psalm celebrates the enthronement of the king.

1. 'GOD, the Most High, is to be feared, great king over all the earth' (verse 2). How can we recognise the majesty of God who reigns over the whole world without experiencing a profound sense of reverence, awe and wonder, and without realising our own smallness? As explained in the reflection on Psalm 2 (page 24), in the Hebrew Scriptures, 'fear of GOD' (verse 2) is primarily a matter of reverential awe at the majesty and mystery of God. However, there is frequently present also an element of fear of divine punishment. It is this latter element that is removed by Jesus who taught us to be afraid of our own capacity to reject God, but not to be afraid of God, whom he liked to address as 'Father'. Having stated that we should not be afraid of anyone other than God, Jesus went on to speak of God's care even for the sparrows, and he concluded: 'So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows' (Matthew 10:31). As John says: 'There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love' (1 John 4:18).

2. This psalm is prayed in the Church's liturgy to celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven 'when God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1:20). At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples: 'If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father' (John 14:28). As we pray this psalm with Jesus let us rejoice that he is experiencing the intimate communion with God that he always yearned for (see the reflection on Psalm 42, page 133-135).

3. 'Great king over all the earth' (verses 2 and 9). No one is outside the ambit of Jesus' loving influence and attraction: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32). From his pierced heart he fills the universe with his love: 'He ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things' (Ephesians 4:10).

Paul writes: 'that you may know what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things' (Ephesians 1:19-23). At the resurrection Jesus became 'king of kings' (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16). His reign is universal (verse 9), for God is to be 'all in all' (1 Corinthians 15:28). In The Book of Revelation we read: 'I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!"' (Revelation 5:13).

4. The psalmist rejoices in the land, 'our inheritance, our glory, given to Jacob out of love' (verse 4). The land is the pride and joy of a people who see themselves as the recipients of God's preferential love. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the many blessings we receive as members of the Church, 'which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:23).

Praying Psalm 48 (47) with Jesus

¹Great is GOD and most worthy of praise
in the city of our God.

²God'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.

³God, in the midst of its citadels, is its sure defence.

⁴Look, the kings are assembling, they advance together.

⁵As soon as they see it, they are astounded;
they panic, and take to flight.

⁶Trembling takes hold of them,
like the pangs of a woman in labour,

⁷as when the east wind causes shipwreck to a merchant fleet.

⁸As we have heard, so we have seen:
this is the city of our Mighty GOD,
the city of our God, who has established it forever.

⁹In your temple, O God, we ponder your covenant love.

¹⁰Your praise, O God, like your reputation,
reaches to the ends of the earth.
Your right hand is filled with justice.

¹¹May Mount Zion be glad.
At the sight of your judgments may the towns of Judah rejoice.

¹²Walk through Zion, walk all around it,
count its towers, admire its ramparts,

¹³take note of its citadels, that you may tell the next generation:

¹⁴'This is God, our eternal God, who is forever our guide.'

The psalmist is inviting us to admire and celebrate Mount Zion (Jerusalem) and its temple. 'Mount Zaphon' ('true pole of the earth', verse 2), near the mouth of the Orontes River in Northern Syria, was the sacred mountain of the storm god Baal-Hadad in ancient Canaanite mythology, the Canaanite equivalent of Mount Olympus for the Greeks. But, as even foreign kings can see (verses 4-8), no mountain city can compare to the city which is the abode of Israel's God, the 'great King' (verse 2).

1. Jesus in the Temple that is Heaven. We reflected on Jesus' love for Jerusalem when praying Psalm 2 (see page 24). As we begin to pray this psalm with Jesus our thoughts go to the 'heavenly Jerusalem' where the risen Jesus dwells with his Father. At the Last Supper Jesus said to his friends: 'If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father' (John 14:28). On the day of his resurrection he asked Mary of Magdala to go and tell Peter and the other apostles: 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17). We express our joy to Jesus that God raised him to life and took him to himself. Jesus spent his whole life longing for this.

As we love him, so our hearts are happy for him. His time of waiting, his time of suffering is over. Nothing can ever come between the longing of his heart and the joy of experiencing his heart's desire. Perhaps the most powerful picture of the Risen Jesus to be found in the New Testament is in The Book of Revelation. Describing his vision, John writes: 'I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force' (Revelation 1:12-16).

We are destined to enjoy Heaven with Jesus. The goal of our life is the same as his. We are called, like Jesus, to enjoy undistracted communion with God forever: 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9). 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also' (John 14:2-3). 'Father, you have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am' (John 17:22-24).

2. Jesus in the Temple that is the world. Having reflected with Jesus on our eternal home, where Jesus now lives with God, and where we hope to join him, our thoughts go to our present situation. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the presence of God, and so the presence of the risen Jesus, in the universe. Wherever we are, we confidently pray: 'your hand will lead me, and your right hand will hold me fast' (Psalm 139:7-10). Jesus is THE Sacrament, THE Mystery, THE Symbol of God. 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:19). 'In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Colossians 2:9). Being in communion with his Father, his heart is able now to reach out, beyond all the limits of space and time, to be wherever God's love is. And so he is able to be with us. We recall his promise: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32). We speak of him being at God's right hand – which is our way of saying that he is at the heart of God's powerful action, bringing about the reign of God's loving will in this our broken world.

We can still resist God's loving advances – hence the continual corruption of sin in our personal and communal lives. But nothing can stop God's love, and millions are welcoming this love and responding to it heroically in their lives. We know the way Jesus relates to us now, because we have seen the way he related to us before death took him from our sight and our touch. He whom God lifted up to himself is he whom we lifted up on a cross. If we want to see what it means for Jesus to ascend into heaven, the best image is the glorified Christ reigning from the cross. The words that he spoke from the cross teach us the way in which he will always relate to us.

He longs to forgive our sins ('Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing', Luke 23:34). He longs to take us with him to be with him forever in God's embrace ('This day you will be with me in paradise', Luke 23:43). He is thirsty for our hearts ('I thirst', John 19:28), and from his pierced side he pours out upon us the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist to cleanse and nourish us (John 19:34). He is constantly giving us the very Spirit of love that binds him to the Father, so that we can love with his love ('He gave up his spirit', John 19:30), and he assures us of his own mother's special care ('Here is your mother', John 19:27).

Paul writes: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us' (Romans 8:18). 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

3. Jesus in the Temple of the Church. In a special way, we reflect on the presence of the risen Jesus in the Church, the 'new Jerusalem', which Paul speaks of as 'the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation' (Ephesians 1:23). 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish' (Ephesians 5:25-27).

We thank God for the community of Jesus' disciples to whom it is our privilege to belong. When Philip asked to see the Father, Jesus told him that to see him is to see the Father (John 14:9). Similarly, if we want to see the face of Jesus we have only to look upon the face of the Church. Of course we need to be discerning. The Church is composed of sinners like you and me who have been partly enlightened by Jesus but who are still partly living in the dark. The Church is composed of people like you and me who long for God but who can easily be distracted and fail, sometimes seriously. There are sinners in the Church because the Church continues the mission of Jesus, clasping sinners to her bosom.

We look at the face of the saints, and we look at each other and marvel at the goodness that we see there. It is Jesus who is loving in and through us; it is Jesus who is praying in and through us. So we thank God for the holiness that is evident in the Church. The Spirit that comes from his heart comes to us through the community, especially through the sacraments.

We think of the three sacraments of initiation into the community. In Baptism we were united to Jesus and in Confirmation his Spirit was poured into our hearts. In Communion we are taken into heaven for a few moments and are given a taste of the communion with God and with all whom we love which will be our eternal home. Then there is the beautiful sacrament of Reconciliation. Jesus is always ready to forgive, heal and encourage us. In Marriage and in Sacred Orders our way of loving and our way of ministering to others is consecrated so that whenever we love, it is he who is loving in us, and whenever we serve it is Jesus who is serving in us. Finally, when we are losing our hold on life, our final journeying to God is surrounded by grace through the sacrament of Anointing.

Jesus promised that if we listen to the community we will hear him. We thank God in a special way for the Church, for it is there that Jesus continues to dwell in a special way, drawing us to himself. Jesus promised: 'I will build my church, and the gates of the Underworld will not prevail against it' (Matthew 16:18). The Book of Revelation speaks beautifully of the Church, describing it as 'the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven' (Revelation 3:12). 'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Revelation 21:2). 'I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb' (Revelation 21:22).

The Church is THE Sacrament, THE Mystery, THE Symbol of Jesus. The portrait of the Risen Jesus in The Book of Revelation concludes with the words: 'In his right hand he held seven stars.' These are the churches of Asia, representing the local Christian assemblies all over the world that draw Christians together to celebrate their faith. The risen Christ is holding the local churches in his hand.

In the Catholic Catechism (n. 776) we read: 'As sacrament, the Church is Christ's instrument. The Church is taken up by him also as his instrument for the salvation of all, the universal sacrament of salvation, by which Christ is manifesting and bringing about the mystery of God's love for all people. The Church is the visible plan of God's love for humanity, because God desires that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built into one Temple of the Holy Spirit.'

Speaking of the local church assembled for the Eucharist, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews picks up the imagery of Psalm 48 when he writes: 'You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first born who are enrolled in heaven' (Hebrews 12:22-23).

In Christ we find the fullness of God. Furthermore, while everything shares in the grace of Christ and reflects something of his fullness, it is to the church that we must look if we wish to see his fullness, for he fills the church with his Spirit (it can be called, therefore, his 'body') and pours out the fullness of grace into her. The church is the body which he fills with his life, which radiates his glory throughout the cosmos, and which draws the whole of humankind and all creation into his fullness as it is built up and grows into him.

The Second Vatican Council declares: 'The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only arousing in them a desire for the world to come, but also animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end' (The Church in the Modern World, §38). The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus' body, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God's love.

It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now, raised to the fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus - the Spirit of love which binds him to the Father - that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcomed. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the Church. 'In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him' (Colossians 2:9-10).

4. The Beauty of God's Temple. As we pray the psalm with Jesus, we are in awe at the beauty of the universe, being created and held in existence by God's Word (see John 1:1-13). We are in awe at the beauty of Jesus, in whom 'the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of the gift of truth' (John 1:14). We are in awe at the beauty of the Church. Speaking of the Church Paul writes: 'In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord' (Ephesians 2:21). 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (1 Corinthians 3:16). 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?' (1 Corinthians 6:19).

5. Jesus in the temple of the human person. Each of us personally is called and graced to be the temple in which God wants to dwell: 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom you know, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you ... If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home in you' (John 14:15-18, 23).

As we admire the beauty of the risen Jesus, and the beauty of his Body, the Church, our prayer is that 'all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3:18). The text continues: 'this comes from the Lord, the Spirit'. This is the Spirit of love that flows between God and the risen Jesus, the Spirit that is 'poured into our hearts' (Romans 5:5). We pray with Paul: 'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6). We pray that the beauty the psalmist sees in Jerusalem, the beauty we see in the face of Jesus, will increasingly be the beauty that God wants for each of us, till we can pray with Paul: 'It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Reflecting on Psalm 49 (48) in Jesus' Company

¹Hear this, all you peoples!

Listen, inhabitants of the world,

²people both high and low,

rich and poor alike.

³I have wisdom you need to hear.

My heart is full of insight.

⁴I turn my mind to an enigma.

To the sound of the harp I will present my challenge.

⁵Why should I fear times of trouble,

when criminals track me down to destroy me,

⁶people who trust in their wealth

and boast of the abundance of their riches?

⁷Yes, none of us can buy our own freedom,

or pay a ransom to God for our lives.

⁸For the ransom is too high,

well beyond our means.

⁹There is no escaping death,

no avoiding the grave.

¹⁰Look, even the wisest die.

They perish just like the foolish and the stupid.

They have to leave their wealth to others.

¹¹The grave is their home forever,

their final dwelling,

even if their names spread wide through the land.

¹²*Human beings in their opulence cannot endure;*

like the animals they must succumb to silence.

¹³Such is the lot of those
 who find their security in themselves:
 just like sheep
 they are being driven to the grave.

¹⁴Death shepherds them.
 Straight to the grave they descend,
 and their form wastes away.
 The realm of the dead is their home.

¹⁵But I know God will rescue me,
 snatching me from the grip of death.

¹⁶Do not be concerned when people become rich,
 when the wealth of their house increases.

¹⁷When we die we will take nothing with us.
 There is no place for wealth in the grave.

¹⁸Though in their life they consider themselves blessed –
 for you are praised when you do well for yourself –

¹⁹they will go down to join their ancestors,
 and will never again see the light.

²⁰*Human beings in their opulence cannot endure;
 like the animals they must succumb to silence.*

Psalm 49

Psalm 49 is not a prayer. It is a reflection on death as an unavoidable dimension of the human condition. The rich and powerful cannot buy their way out of it. They are foolish, therefore, to be too impressed by the power they wield. We should not be too impressed either, but rather place our hope in God, who alone gives and sustains life (verse 15).

The psalmist knows what it is like to experience 'times of trouble' (verse 5). But he makes the point that we should not be afraid – persecutors die like everyone else (verses 9-11).

The idea of being ransomed from death (verse 15) takes on a new meaning in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' mission was to reveal God as love by giving himself in love for us. The way he lived and the way he died showed us how to live. His gift to us of the Spirit of his love-communion with God enables us to welcome him to live in us, trusting in God and offering our lives for others. As Jesus himself said: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28).

Paul writes: 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God ... and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:21, 23). 'He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity' (Titus 2:14). In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'He entered once for all into the Holy Place ... with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption' (Hebrews 9:12). Peter writes: 'You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors ... with the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18-19).

In listening to the psalmist's reflection in the company of Jesus, we might reflect on the following parable:

'Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But Jesus said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'

Then he told them a parable: The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God' (Luke 12:13-21).

Praying Psalm 50 in Jesus' Company

¹The Mighty God,
the High GOD, speaks,
summoning the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.

²Out of Zion,
the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.

³Our God is coming and will not be silent.

First comes a devouring fire;
then a mighty tempest.

⁴From on high God summons the heavens and the earth
to witness the judgment of the people:

⁵'Gather to me my people,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.'

⁶The heavens declare God's justice,
for God is coming in person as judge.

⁷'Listen, my people, for I will speak;
Israel, I testify against you.
I am God, your God.
I accuse you. I lay the charge before you.

⁸I find no fault with your sacrifices;
your offerings are always before me.

⁹I do not ask for more bullocks from your stalls,
or goats from your herds.

¹⁰Every wild animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle in their thousands on my mountains.

¹¹I know all the birds of the air;
all that moves in the field is at my disposal.

¹²If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.

¹³Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?

¹⁴Offer to me a sacrifice of confession
and pay your vows to the Most High.

¹⁵Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honour me.'

¹⁶To the wicked God says:
'How dare you quote to me my law.
How dare you invoke the covenant,

¹⁷you who hate discipline, and turn away when I speak?

¹⁸You make friends with a thief when you see one.
You keep company with adulterers.

¹⁹You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue plots deceit.

²⁰You sit and speak against your kin;
you slander your own mother's child.

²¹This is how you behave
and should I be silent?

Do you think that I am like you?
I will accuse you to your face.

²²Mark you this,
you who never think of God!

I will not punish you
without offering you an escape.

²³They honour me who bring to me as their sacrifice
admission of their guilt.
I will see that those who correct their conduct
will enjoy my salvation.'

This is a psalm composed for the penitential liturgy. God is accusing his people of their failure to keep the covenant. There are many allusions to the Sinai Covenant. Psalm 51 follows as the second part of the liturgy, in which the people acknowledge their sin and ask for pardon. There are many verbal connections between the two psalms.

‘Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth’ (verse 2). See the commentary on Psalm 48:2.

‘Those bound to me’ (verse 5) are those who owe fidelity to God, the ḥasidim, who have entered into a covenant relationship with God, a commitment of love (ḥesed). God is faithful to God’s commitment. Are we?

In verse 7 God opens the case against the people, accusing them of sin. They are fulfilling all their cultic obligations. God has nothing of which to accuse them on that score (verses 8-13). But cult and sacrifices cannot substitute for a genuine relationship with God. They are guilty of breaking the covenant. We cannot carry out our religious duties, and use that to bribe God into silence.

Our relationship with God is tested by our relationship with others (verses 16ff). In the decalogue we are commanded not to kill, not to destroy through adultery the marriage relationship which is at the basis of family life, not to deprive others of the material things which they need to live properly, and not to accuse others falsely (Exodus 20:13-16). God is accusing the people of breaking the commandments: not fulfilling their side of the covenant.

It matters how we live. As we listen to this psalm we would do well to listen to Jesus’ parable about what ultimately matters in human behaviour. We are judged on how we have loved (Matthew 25:31-46). What Psalm 50 asks of us is that we be honest. To the extent that we have broken the covenant, we should own up to our failure. Only honest confession (‘a sacrifice of confession’, verses 14 and 23) provides the basis for repentance, and a renewal of communion with God.

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.

²*Wash* me more and more from my guilt;

purify 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.

¹⁴Rescue me, O God of my *salvation*,
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.

¹⁸**In your goodness show favour to Zion.**

Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

¹⁹**Then 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 [*raḥamim*], 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 *raḥamim*, which is related to the word for 'womb' (*reḥem*). 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.

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. 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).

Psalm 51

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.

Psalms 52

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 48-50.

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.

Psalm 52

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 is 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

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.

Psalm 54

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.

²⁰**They have no reverence [‘fear’] for God.**

They betray their friends. They break the covenant.

²¹**Their speech is softer than butter, but their heart is set on war.**

Their words flow smoother than oil, but they are naked swords.

²²**Cast 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!

Psalm 56

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 21-24.

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 75.

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.

⁵*Arise, 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.

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

Psalm 57

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.'

Psalm 58

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 26-27. 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 29, where we meditated on Jesus' prayer. Also the reflection on Psalm 34, page 112, where we are encouraged to 'look to God and be radiant.' See Psalm 11, page 47, where we reflected on Love's gazing. The refrain concludes with the words: 'My God, you show me covenant 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 fulfil 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 24. 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 I find rest. In God alone is my salvation.*

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

³How long will you keep up your attack?

How long will you batter your victim

as you batter a leaning wall, or a tottering fence?

⁴Their 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 I find rest. In God alone is my hope.*

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

⁷In God is my salvation and my glory,

my stronghold, my haven.

⁸Trust God at all times, O people.

Before God, our refuge, pour out your hearts.

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

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

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

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

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

¹²Covenant love belongs to you, O God*.

¹³You 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 26-27).

2. The refrain (verses 1-2 and 5-6) beautifully expresses the psalmist's faith: 'Only in God can I find rest.' This takes us to the heart of Jesus' prayer (see the reflection on Psalm 4, page 29). Ultimately we 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 *yēshu'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 I 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.
I thirst 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 46. For a reflection on thirsting for God see Psalm 42, pages 133-134.

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 I long for you, O God.
I thirst for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?’ (Psalm 42:1)

‘I long, indeed I faint, for the courts of God;
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;
I thirst 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 47. For a reflection on 'the face of God' see Psalm 31, pages 105-106.

'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).

Psalm 63

‘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 187.

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 (*ḥâtâ'*)' (Exodus 34:7). *ḥâtâ'* 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

¹Cry 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.'

⁵Come 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 forever with might.

God keeps watch on all the nations.

Let rebels not raise their heads!

⁸Bless 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.

¹³I 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.

¹⁶All 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.

Omitted

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 21-23).

¹⁸If I had cherished evil in my heart, God* 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 Year C, and then only the verses in *italics* 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.

³*The 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!

⁵*Father of orphans and protector of widows*

is God in the temple: the holy habitation.

⁶*God 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.

⁹*You showered down a generous rain,*

restoring the land, your heritage, when it languished.

¹⁰*It 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 forever.

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.

²⁶Praise God in the great congregation.
Praise 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.
 God's servants 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 34-35). 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 164-166.

'Let there be rejoicing and gladness for all who seek you' (verse 4). For a reflection on longing, see Psalm 11, page 46; Psalm 42, pages 133-134; and Psalm 63, pages 194-196. For a reflection on seeking God's face, see Psalm 31, pages 105-106.

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.

¹⁹**Your 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?**

²⁰**You have brought me through many troubles.
I know you will do so again. You will restore my life.**

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

²²**I 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.**

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

²⁴**All 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 191-192.

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 190-191.

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 79-82). 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 forever,
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 forever.
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 290.

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

²³Yet I am continually with you;
you hold me by the hand.
²⁴You guide me according to your plan.
You carry me to a glorious destiny.

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you?
What does the earth mean to me without you?
²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

²⁸For 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 21-24).

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 laid 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.

Psalm 74

¹⁰How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

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 forever 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 42).

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 21-24 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 133-135, and Psalm 63, pages 194-197.

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.

Psalm 78

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?'

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.

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 21-24). 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.

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.

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,
 and no longer dwelt with the people.
⁶¹God abandoned the ark,
 letting it fall into the hands of the enemy.

Psalm 78

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 'belie 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 21-24). 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 *ḥasidim*: 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.

Psalm 79

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.

¹²Repay our neighbours seven times

for the way they taunted you, O God*!

Verse 12 is not in the liturgy. 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!

³*Restore 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.

⁷*Restore 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.

¹⁴Turn again, O mighty God, we implore,
look down from heaven, and see.

¹⁵Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted.

¹⁶They have burned it with fire and destroyed it.
May they perish at the frown of your face.

¹⁷Let your right hand be upon the one you have chosen,
the one you have given your strength.

¹⁸And 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 97. 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!

- ¹⁴**At once I would subdue your foes,
and use my power against your enemies.**
- ¹⁵**Those who hate me would cringe before you,
and their doom would last forever.**
- ¹⁶**And 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 6), 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:

²‘How 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. Even when the consequences of our sinful behaviour are seen as punishment from an angry God, 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 21-23). 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 forever 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,

⁷Gebal, 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 133-135, and Psalm 63, pages 194-197. 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 105-106), and on seeking God's face (Psalm 27, page 97).

'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 24).

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 149-151).

'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 148-149).

'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 forever ...

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 201.

'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 21-24.

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 creedal 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'lihâ*). For this we revere you' (Psalm 130:3-4). For a reflection on forgiveness see Psalm 65, page 201.

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 190-191 for a reflection on ‘Salvation’. The word ‘comfort’ (Hebrew *nḥm*) 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 *nḥm* 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 forever.

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 foreveryone'(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).

John-Paul II goes on to say: '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"(G&S 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'(Mission of the Redeemer, (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

¹O GOD, my God, by day I plead for your help,
by night, I cry out in your presence.

²Let my prayer reach you; heed my cry.

³I am steeped in trouble, on the brink of the grave.

⁴I am numbered among those who go down to the pit.

⁵My time is up and I am left to die,
like the slain that lie in the field.

⁸I am shut in so that I cannot escape.

⁹My eyes are sunken with grief.
All day long I call on you, O GOD,
straining my hands towards you.

¹³O GOD, I cry to you for help;
in the morning my plea comes before you.

¹⁴Why 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 21-23.

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 21-24.

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 102. 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 forever 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 forever.

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.

³⁰If 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.

³³But I will not remove from him my covenant love,
or be false to my faithfulness.

³⁴I will not violate my covenant,
or go back on the word I have spoken.

³⁵Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness
that I will not fall short of what I have promised to David.

³⁶His line will continue forever,
his throne will endure before me like the sun.

³⁷It 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 forever. 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 forever (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 21-24.

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 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 161.

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 forever, 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.

¹⁴I 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 178-180. For a reflection on 'salvation' see Psalm 62, pages 190-191. For a reflection on 'Sharing Jesus' intimacy with God' see Psalm 16, pages 60-61.

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 forever 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 202. 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

¹GOD is king, with majesty enrobed,
robed with might, girded with power.
The world you established, not to be moved.

²Your throne, O GOD, has stood firm from of old.
You are from all eternity.

³The torrents swell, the waters roar.
Hear the crashing of their waves.

⁴More majestic than the roar of mighty waters,
more glorious than the surging of the sea,
GOD is glorious on high.

⁵Truly 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'GOD 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 266-267 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!

⁸'Do 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 God' (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 GOD's people Israel according to all that was 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, O God*.
They will glorify your name' (Psalm 86:9).

'Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!
Praise GOD's name which alone is exalted;
whose 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 93, pages 290.

Praying Psalm 97 (96) with Jesus

¹GOD is king! Let the earth rejoice.
Let all the coastlands be glad.

²Cloud and darkness are God's raiment,
Justice and right are the foundations of God's kingdom.

³Fire consumes all resistance.

⁴God's lightning lights up the world.
The earth sees and trembles.

⁵Mountains melt like wax before GOD,
before the God* of all the earth.

⁶The heavens proclaim the justice of God.
All the peoples behold God's glory.

⁷Worshippers of images are put to shame,
those who boast of their worthless idols.
You gods, bow down before GOD!

⁸Zion hears and is glad,
the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments, O God.

⁹For you indeed are GOD,
Most High over all the earth;
exalted far above any god.

¹⁰GOD loves those who hate evil,
guards the lives of the faithful,
and rescues them from the power of the wicked.

¹¹Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright of heart.

¹²Rejoice 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 190-191. 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 188, 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
who is gracious, and for whom a song of praise is fitting' (Psalm 147:1).

Praise GOD [Alleluia]! Praise God in the sanctuary; praise God in the mighty firmament! Praise God's mighty deeds; praise God's surpassing greatness! Praise God with trumpet blast; 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]!' (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 is revealed as 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'. 'If you lose your life for my sake you 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, addressed to 'God the Almighty', 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.

Praying Psalm 101 (100) with Jesus

¹I sing of covenant love and right judgment.
To you, O GOD, I make music.

²I live the truth I sing, as I come before you.
I show my royal household how to live a perfect life.

³I do not admire anything dishonourable.
I hate the ways of the wicked.
They will never attach themselves to me.

⁴Perverseness of heart will be far from me.
I want nothing to do with evil.

⁵I silence anyone who secretly slanders a neighbour.
I do not tolerate a haughty look or an arrogant heart.

⁶I look with favour on the faithful in the land.
Only they will share my palace.
Only those whose lives are upright
have a place in my service.

⁷No one who practises fraud
shall remain in my house.
No one who utters lies
shall continue in my presence.

⁸Morning by morning
I put down the wicked in the land,
excluding all who do evil from the city of GOD.

The king is promising God to govern with justice. Psalm 99 acknowledges God as a God of Justice: 'Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob' (Psalm 99:4). Psalm 100 celebrates the fact that God's justice is everlasting: 'God is good; God's covenant love endures forever. God's faithfulness to all generations' (Psalm 100:5). Here in Psalm 101 the psalmist declares that this exercise of justice is realised through the governing of the king.

Verse 1 ('I sing of covenant love and right judgment') speaks of right judgment when it is founded on covenant love. This is the way a ruler in Israel is expected to judge.

'Loving kindness and faithfulness preserve the king, and his throne is upheld by covenant love' (Proverbs 20:28).

'What does God require of you but to make right judgments, to be committed to covenant love, and to walk humbly with your God?' (Micah 6:8).

'Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with fairness (*en epieikeia*) and with great forbearance you govern us; for you have power to act whenever you choose. Through such works you have taught your people that the righteous must be kind' (Wisdom 12:18-19).

The Greek *epieikeia* is a basic quality expected of a person who pronounces judgment. *Epieikeia* is the wise application of the law by a judge who takes all circumstances into consideration and exercises justice with compassion and loving kindness. In the New Testament it is frequently translated 'gentle'.

'Be gentle and show every courtesy to everyone' (Titus 3:2).

'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).

In verses 3-5 and again in verses 7-8 the king promises to rid the government of anyone who is not committed to the covenant love that is the foundation of justice.

In verse 6 he describes the qualities he expects of those who share his power.

This is an excellent psalm for anyone who exercises power in the community, both in the Church and in the State. As we pray it with Jesus we hear him say: '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 11:29). Paul appeals to the Christians in Corinth 'by the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (2 Corinthians 10:1). He lists 'gentleness' among the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:23). He appeals to the Gentile Christians to be humble, gentle and patient (Ephesians 4:2), and to the Christians of Philippi: 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone' (Philippians 4:5).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, let us pray to share his gentleness, especially in our judgments.

Praying Psalm 102 (101) with Jesus

¹Hear my prayer, O GOD, let my pleading reach you.

²Do not hide your face in my hour of need.

Listen to me; answer me speedily when I call.

³For my days dissolve like smoke,
my bones burn like a furnace.

⁴My heart withers like grass. I am too weak to eat,

⁵so consumed am I with grief. I am all skin and bone.

⁶I am like a bird in the wilderness,
like a young owl haunting the ruins.

⁷I lie awake and moan.

I am like a solitary bird on the rooftop.

⁸All day long my enemies taunt me.

They use my name to curse me.

⁹I eat ashes for bread, and mingle tears with my drink.

¹¹My days are like a lengthening shadow.

I wither away like grass.

¹²But you, O GOD, reign forever.

Your name endures from one generation to the next.

¹³Rise up! Have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favour us with your grace.

¹⁴Your servants hold dear its stones, and cherish even its dust.

¹⁵Nations will fear YOU, kings will be in awe of your glory.

¹⁶GOD, when you rebuild the walls of Zion,
you will appear in glory.

¹⁷You hear the prayer of the destitute.

You do not despise their plea.

¹⁸Write this down for a future generation,
so that a people yet unborn may praise GOD.

¹⁹GOD watches from heaven, observing the earth.

²⁰GOD hears the groans of the prisoners,
and sets free those condemned to die.

²¹They chant GOD's name in Zion, GOD's praise in Jerusalem.

²²There peoples and kingdoms gather to worship GOD.

²⁴I say, 'My God, do not take me away.
My life is only half spent,
while you endure throughout all generations.'

²⁵Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

²⁶They will perish, but you endure.
They will all wear out like a garment.

You change them like clothing, and throw them away;
²⁷but you are the same. Your years will never end.
²⁸May your servant's line last forever.
May our children grow strong under your gaze.

Omitted

¹⁰because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.

²³God has broken my strength in my prime
and cut short my days.

The omitted verses are written on the assumption that God controls whatever happens to us. For a reflection on this see Psalm 2, pages 22-24, where there is also a reflection on the expression 'The Anger of God'. Harsh experiences are seen as expressions of God's 'anger'.

This psalm offers us waves of lyrical poetry of excellent quality. In verses 1-12 the psalmist is pleading with God at a time of intense personal suffering. The threat of premature death in mid-life is seen against the eternity of God (verses 11-12). We are mortal, but God is immortal. It is in God that we place our hope. Compare the following.

‘Our years come to an end like a sigh.

Even if we live seventy years, or eighty if we are strong,
life is toil and trouble;
the years soon pass, and we are gone’ (Psalm 90:9-10).

‘I am gone like a shadow at evening’ (Psalm 109:23).

‘We are like a breath; our days are like a passing shadow’ (Psalm 144:4).

As we pray verses 1-12 with Jesus we think of the many times when he could pray ‘All day long my enemies taunt me’ (verse 8). At his baptism in the Jordan he experienced an overwhelming sense of being loved by God. This was at the heart of his mission. He realised that it is our failure to know how loved we are that is at the heart of our temptation to despair of meaning as we attempt to eke out an existence as best we can. Jesus brought God’s love to us in ways that gave authority to his message and power to his healing. But it wasn’t long before he experienced resistance, especially from the religious leaders. Quite early in his ministry we read: ‘The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him’ (Mark 3:6). See Psalm 3, pages 26-27 where we reflected on the opposition that Jesus endured. It is especially in his final suffering and death that we can hear him praying these words of Psalm 102.

In verse 13 the focus on personal suffering widens to a plea for Jerusalem (Zion): ‘Have compassion on Zion, for it is time to favour us with your grace.’ The Hebrew verb translated here as ‘have compassion’ is from the root *rhm*. ‘Favour with grace’ translates the Hebrew *hanan*. These two ideas are often found together in the Bible, along with the word *hesed* (covenant love). See Psalm 85, pages 261-262, for a reflection on these three key expressions of God’s love.

In verse 14 the psalmist speaks of the love that the people have for the city, even its very stones: ‘Your servants hold dear its stones.’ Jesus’ love for Jerusalem (‘Zion’) is apparent. Luke writes (19:41-44): ‘As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, “If you, even you, had only 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.”’

In verse 16, the psalmist prays: 'GOD, when you rebuild the walls of Zion, you will appear in glory.' Praying this psalm with Jesus we think of the call to rebuild the Church – a call that needs to be heard by each generation, so that the Church will be seen for what it is: the Body of Christ revealing God's love to the world. Saint Francis of Assisi was one who heard this call. He responded with generosity. His example inspires us, for we are all called to play our part in this.

'You hear the prayer of the destitute. You do not despise their plea' (verse 17). These words echo Psalm 22, the psalm placed on the lips of Jesus on the cross: 'He did not despise or scorn the condition of this wretch; he did not hide his face from me, but heard me when I cried to him' (Psalm 22:24).

In verse 18 the psalmist declares: 'Write this down for a future generation, so that a people yet unborn may praise GOD.' Psalm 78 expresses the same desire. There the psalmist insists on the importance of handing on the traditions that remind us of 'the glorious deeds of God.'

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,
⁵who 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.

Verse 20 reads: 'GOD hears the groans of the prisoners, and sets free those condemned to die.' Compare: 'God gives the desolate a home, leads prisoners to freedom' (Psalm 68:6). 'GOD hears the needy, and does not despise those who are in bonds' (Psalm 69:33). 'Let the groans of the prisoners come before you. According to your great power preserve those doomed to die' (Psalm 79:11).

Verses 25-27 are quoted in the New Testament in the Letter to the Hebrews 1:10-12. The author is making the point that the risen and exalted Jesus shares in the eternal life of God. He 'endures'. His 'years will never end.'

Praying Psalm 103 (102) with Jesus

¹Praise GOD, O my soul.

All that is within me, praise GOD's holy name.

²Praise GOD, O my soul.

Never forget GOD's blessings.

³Praise GOD, who forgives our sins,
and heals every one of our ills,

⁴who keeps us from the grave,
and surrounds us with covenant love and compassion,

⁵who fills us with good things as long as we live,
renewing our strength like the eagle's.

⁶O GOD, you see to justice and right judgments
for all the oppressed,

⁷revealing your ways to Moses,
and your deeds to the people of Israel.

⁸GOD is tenderly compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in covenant love.

⁹GOD will accuse us, but not always,
and be angry, but not forever.

¹⁰GOD will not deal with us as our sins deserve,
nor repay us according to our guilt.

¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is GOD's covenant love
toward those who reverence *[fear]* God.

¹²As far as the east is from the west,
so far God removes from us our sins.

¹³As a father has compassion for his children,
so GOD has compassion for us who reverence *[fear]* God.

¹⁴GOD does not fail to remember that we are but dust.

¹⁵As for us mortal human beings, our days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field.

¹⁶Come the wind, the flower is gone,
and its place does not remember it.

¹⁷But for those who reverence *[fear]* God,
GOD's covenant love has always been, and will always be, present.
Your righteousness, O GOD,
passes from one generation to the next,

¹⁸to all who keep your covenant
and take care to carry out your commandments.

¹⁹GOD reigns from heaven, governing the universe.

²⁰Praise GOD, you mighty angels who do God's bidding,
always obedient to God's word.

²¹Praise GOD, you powers, eager to carry out GOD's will.

²²Praise GOD, you creatures, subject to GOD's rule.
Praise GOD, O my soul!

This has been called the Old Testament's 'Te Deum' (Latin hymn of praise and thanksgiving prayed in the liturgy on major feasts). As it stands it is post-exilic, but it builds on earlier material. It is a hymn of thanksgiving, beginning in a personal way and then inviting all of Israel (verse 10), all humankind (verse 14), and finally the whole of the cosmos to join in praising God. It may arise out of a personal experience of healing (verses 3-4), or as a result of the return from exile (verse 6), or simply as a meditation on God's covenant love (verse 8). The focus is on God's mercy which is moved by human weakness (verse 14), and experienced by those who are faithful to the covenant (verses 17-18).

When GOD is the object of blessing, as in verses 1-3, and again in verses 20-23, we are praising and thanking God for a blessing already received or requested.

In verses 3-6 the psalmist gives six reasons for praising God.

1. God forgives all our sins. See Psalm 65, page 200 for a reflection on forgiveness. Again and again throughout his ministry Jesus assured people that their sins were forgiven. He saw their faith and their love. Read, too, Jesus' parable about the need to forgive (Matthew 18:21-35).

2. God heals all our diseases. Having shown Jesus healing people, Matthew comments: 'This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matthew 8:17, quoting Isaiah 53:4). 'Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness' (Matthew 9:35-36).

3. God holds us back from death. This refers in a special way to his saving us from the ultimate death: separation from God, the source of life. Jesus said: 'I came not to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for the multitude' (Mark 10:45).

4. God crowns us with covenant love (*hesed*) and compassion (*rahamim*). These two words recur in the psalm (see verses 8, 11, 13 and 17). Along with 'graciousness' (*hanan*) they occur together regularly when speaking of the key qualities of God. See the reflection on Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

5. God continues to satisfy us with all that is good.

'We are filled with the goodness of your house, with the holy gifts of your temple' (Psalm 65:4).

'With honey from the rock I would satisfy you' (Psalm 81:16).

'With long life I will satisfy them' (Psalm 91:16).

'You, O God satisfy the thirsty, and see that the hungry have food' (Psalm 107:9).

'I will satisfy the poor of Zion with bread' (Psalm 132:15).

'You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing' (Psalm 145:16).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we would do well to contemplate the scene of his multiplying the loaves and the fish to feed the crowd (see Mark 6:30-44 and 8:1-10). Let us reflect, too, on the Last Supper (see Mark 14:17-26), and on these words addressed by the Risen Jesus to the Christian community in Laodicea: 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (Revelation 3:20).

6. God sees that the oppressed receive justice. On justice see the reflections on Psalm 82, pages 249-251, and Psalm 85, page 263. Jesus' concern for justice is expressed, perhaps most clearly, in the first of his beatitudes: 'Blessed and happy are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20). For a reflection on the 'poor' see Psalm 82, pages 251-254.

In verse 7 the psalmist recalls the Exodus from Egypt. Later (verses 17-18) he will speak of the covenant.

Verse 8 repeats the creedal formula found throughout the Bible. See the reflection on Psalm 85, pages 261-262, and Psalm 61, page 188.

‘GOD will accuse us, but not always, and be angry, but not forever. GOD will not deal with us as our sins deserve, nor repay us according to our guilt. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is GOD’s covenant love’ (verses 9-11). These verses assume that some terrible catastrophe (the exile in Babylon perhaps), happened because God was angry at the failure of the people to repent (See the reflection on God’s anger in Psalm 2, pages 20-23). The focus in this psalm, however, is on the assurance that God’s ‘anger’ is always trumped by covenant love. God has made a commitment to love Israel, and the people can be confident that God will remain faithful to this commitment.

In verses 13-14 God is likened to a father: ‘As a father has compassion for his children, so GOD has compassion for us who revere [fear] God. GOD does not fail to remember that we are but dust.’

Like a father GOD exercises authority:

‘Let my son go that he may worship me’ (Exodus 4:23).

Like a father GOD educates:

‘Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so GOD your God disciplines you’ (Deuteronomy 8:5).

‘Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for GOD has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me’ (Isaiah 1:2).

Like a father GOD accepts the anointed king as his adopted son:

‘I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me’ (2 Samuel 7:14).

‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’ (Psalm 2:7)

Like a father GOD cares for orphans as his own:

‘Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in the holy habitation.’
(Psalm 68:5)

GOD’s ‘feelings’ are those of a father:

‘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’ (Hosea 11:8).

‘I thought you would call me, “My Father”, and would not turn from following me. Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness’ (Jeremiah 3:19, 22).

‘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).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we are conscious of the fact that picturing God as a father is central to Jesus image of God. We saw this when reflecting on Jesus' intimate communion with God in Chapter Two (pages 10-11). We looked at this again in reflecting on Psalm 4 (page 28). Jesus knows that everything he is and everything he does has its source in God. When Jesus calls God 'Abba' (as in Mark 14:36), he did not understand this as separating him from us. On the contrary, a central dimension of his ministry was to reveal God as everyone's Father. He wanted his disciples to love their enemies, and so 'to be children of your Father in heaven' (Matthew 5:45). Jesus wanted them to 'be compassionate as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:36). When he taught his disciples to pray he taught them to open their prayer with an acknowledgement that God is 'Father' (Luke 11:2). Jesus' image of God is expressed beautifully in the parable of the two sons (see Luke 15:11-32).

Jesus wanted all of us to be able to say, with him: 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30); 'The Father is in me and I am in the Father' (John 10:38; see 14:10-11, 20). The Risen Jesus commissioned Mary of Magdala to 'go to my brothers and say to them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17).

Paul witnesses to the practice in the early Christian communities of addressing God as Jesus addressed God: 'Abba! Father!' (Romans 8:15). 'Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"' (Galatians 4:6). 'For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist' (1 Corinthians 8:6). 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father' (Philippians 1:2). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'The one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters' (Hebrews 2:11).

Jesus wants each of us to know that God is the source of all we are and all we do. In his culture this is beautifully expressed in acknowledging God as 'Father.' In the ancient world, and in the medieval world, indeed right through to the beginning of the modern era, the role of the woman in conception was unknown. The father was thought to be the sole source of human life. It was the mother's role to nurture this life. It was not realised that she contributes to it.

Knowing this it is insufficient for us today to acknowledge God as 'Father'. We now know that the father is not the sole source of life. The mother has a complementary and essential role in procreation. In fidelity to what Jesus revealed about God we acknowledge God as 'Father-Mother.'

We human beings are fragile (verses 15-16).

¹⁹GOD reigns from heaven, governing the universe.

²⁰Bless GOD, you mighty angels who do God's bidding, always obedient to God's word.

²¹Bless GOD, you powers, eager to carry out GOD's will. ²²Bless GOD, you creatures, subject to GOD's rule. Bless GOD, O my soul!

The angels, the stars of the heavens, the whole of the created universe, are invited to 'bless God', that is, to praise and thank God for the blessings God continues to pour out on creation. Finally, the psalmist invites his own soul to join in the praise.

Praying Psalm 104 (103) with Jesus

¹Bless GOD, O my soul.

O GOD, my God, how wonderful you are.

You are clothed with beauty and majesty,

²wrapped in a mantle of light.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent.

³You establish your dwelling above the rains.

You make the clouds your chariot,

and ride on the wings of the wind.

⁴You make the storm your herald.

The lightning carries out your will.

⁵You set the earth on its foundations.

It will never be shaken.

⁶You cover it with the ocean as with a garment.

The waters rise up to assault the mountains.

⁷When you rebuke the waters they flee;

at the rumble of your thunder they take to flight.

⁸They rose up to the mountains and ran down to the valleys,
to the place you appointed for them.

⁹You set a boundary that the waters may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

¹⁰You make rivers gush forth from their springs,
to flow between the hills,

¹¹giving drink to the wild animals.

The wild asses quench their thirst.

¹²The birds of the air nest near the streams,
and sing among the branches.

¹³From your lofty abode you water the hills.
The ground drinks its fill of your gift.

¹⁴You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants through human labour.

- We are to produce food from the fields,
¹⁵wine to gladden the heart,
 oil to make the face shine,
 and bread for strength.
- ¹⁶The trees of GOD are watered abundantly,
 the cedars of Lebanon planted by God.
- ¹⁷Birds nest in their branches.
 On the tree-top the stork has its home.
- ¹⁸High mountains are for the wild goats;
 rocks are a refuge for the hyrax.
- ¹⁹You make the moon to mark the seasons.
 The sun knows its time for setting.
- ²⁰You make darkness, and it is night,
 when all the animals of the forest come out.
- ²¹The young lions roar to you
 as they search for their prey.
- ²²At the rising of the sun they withdraw,
 and go to rest in their dens.
- ²³We go out to our work
 and labour until evening.
- ²⁴O GOD, how manifold are your works!
 Everything you have done is masterly;
 the earth is full of your wonderful creatures.
- ²⁵Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
 filled with fish past counting.
- ²⁶There ships ply their trade,
 and there is Leviathan that you made for play.

- ²⁷**All these creatures look to you
to give them their food in due season.**
- ²⁸**When you provide it, they feed.
When you open wide your hand, they have their fill.**
- ²⁹**When you hide your face, they are dismayed.
When you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.**
- ³⁰**You send forth your breath, and they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.**
- ³¹**May your glory, O GOD, endure forever.
May YOU rejoice in creation.**
- ³²**One look from YOU and the earth trembles.
One touch, and the mountains erupt.**
- ³³**I will sing to GOD as long as I live.
I will sing praise to my God, while I have breath to do so.**
- ³⁴**May my meditation be pleasing to YOU,
for I delight in YOU.**
- ³⁵**May sinners disappear from the earth.
May the wicked be no more.
Bless GOD, O my soul. Praise GOD [Alleluia].**

Psalm 104 extols the greatness of the Creator as revealed by God's presence and action in creation.

As we reflect back on this psalm seven themes stand out.

1. How creation reveals God's work.

Compare with this poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'God's grandeur'.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

2. The Transcendent God is continually present and acting in creation.

‘When you hide your face, they are dismayed.
 When you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.
 You send forth your breath, and they are created,
 and you renew the face of the earth’ (verses 29-30).

3. Human beings work in harmony with the rhythms of creation (verse 23).

4. Sharing in God’s delight in creation. The author is a contemplative: he is attentive to the sacred in the inter-connectedness of things. He is a poet, working with language to share what he recognises to be beyond comprehensive expression.

5. Everything is connected to everything else (verses 29-30). This is expressed well in the following words from the Preacher: ‘All have the same breath’ (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

6. How creation reveals the beauty of the Creator. Praying it as Christians we contemplate Jesus, God’s focal word, the perfect expression of divine beauty. We might read ‘The Windhover’ by Gerard M. Hopkins, composed in 1877, just before his ordination, and dedicated ‘To Christ our Lord’.

I caught this morning, morning’s minion,
 kingdom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in its riding
 of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
 high there, how he rung upon the rein of the wimpling wing
 in his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
 as a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and gliding
 rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
 stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
 Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
 buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
 times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
 No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
 shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah, my dear,
 fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

We might reflect also upon the following stanzas and the accompanying commentary from 'The Spiritual Canticle' of John of the Cross.

Stanza 4

O woods and thickets
planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
coated, bright, with flowers,
Tell me, has he passed by you?

Stanza 5

Pouring out a thousand graces,
He passed these groves in haste;
And having looked at them,
with his image alone,
He clothed them in beauty.

'St. Paul says: The Son of God is the splendour of his glory and the image of his substance (Hebrews 1:3). It should be known that only with this figure, his Son, did God look at all things, that is, he communicated to them their natural being and many natural graces and gifts, and made them complete and perfect, as it is said in Genesis: "God looked at all things that he made, and they were very good" (Genesis 1:31). To look and behold that they were very good was to make them very good in the Word, his Son.

Not only by looking at them did God communicate natural being and graces, as we said, but also with this image of his Son alone, he clothed them in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This he did when he became man and elevated human nature in the beauty of God, and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all. Accordingly the Son of God proclaimed: "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will elevate all things to myself" (John 12:32). And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of his Son and through the glory of his resurrection according to the flesh not only did the Father beautify creatures partially, but, we can say, he clothed them entirely in beauty and dignity' (Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 5,4).

Stanza 14

My Beloved is the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands, and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes

Stanza 15

The tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music, sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes,
and deepens love.

'This spiritual flight denotes a high state and union of love, in which, after much spiritual exercise, the soul is placed by God. This state is called spiritual espousal with the Word, the Son of God' (Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 14-15,2).

7. The seventh theme concerns sin. In the final verse: 'May sinners disappear from the earth. May the wicked be no more' (verse 35) the psalmist longs to see the end of sin, for it is sin that obscures the glory of God and spoils creation.

Reflecting on Psalm 105 (104) with Jesus

Psalm 105 is not a prayer. The psalmist is calling the people to remember the covenant God made with their ancestors (verses 8-10) and that it is God who released them from slavery in Egypt (verse 37), led them through the wilderness (verses 39-43), and gave them 'the lands of the nations' (verse 34). They must 'observe GOD's law' (verse 45).

¹Give thanks to GOD, call on GOD's name,
Tell all the peoples what GOD has done.

²Sing to the sound of instruments;
tell of all the wonderful things GOD has done.

³Sing Alleluia to GOD's holy name.
May the hearts of those who seek GOD rejoice.

⁴Seek continually for the presence and the power of God.

⁵Remember God's wonderful deeds,
God's miracles, and judgments,
⁶you offspring of God's servant Abraham,
you children of Jacob, the chosen of GOD.

⁷GOD is our God, judge of all the earth,
⁸ever mindful of the covenant,
⁹the promise made to Abraham,
¹⁰the oath to Isaac, confirmed to Jacob,
the everlasting commitment made to Israel
fixed for a thousand generations.

¹¹God said 'To you I will give a land,
Canaan, as your inheritance.'

¹²When they were few in number, of little account,
and strangers in the land,

¹³wandering from nation to nation,
from one kingdom to another,

¹⁴God allowed no one to oppress them,
rebuking kings on their account:

¹⁵'Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.'

Psalm 105

¹⁶God caused famine to ravish the land,
and took away their sustenance.

¹⁷Joseph was sent on ahead, sold as a slave.

¹⁸His feet were bound with fetters,
his neck with a collar of iron,

¹⁹until what he had said came to pass,
and he was vindicated by the word of God.

²⁰Pharaoh released him;
the ruler of nations set him free.

²¹He made him master of the palace,
steward of all his possessions,

²²to instruct his officials at his pleasure,
and to teach his elders wisdom.

²³Then Israel came to Egypt;
Jacob lived there as an alien.

²⁴God made Jacob's people fruitful,
stronger than their foes,

²⁵whose hearts God then turned to hate Israel.
They were eager to enslave them.

²⁶God sent Moses, the servant of the Lord,
and Aaron, the chosen one.

²⁷They performed signs among them,
and miracles in Egypt.

²⁸God covered the land in darkness,
but still they resisted.

²⁹God turned their waters into blood,
causing their fish to die.

³⁰Their land swarmed with frogs,
even in the chambers of their king.

³¹God spoke, and there came swarms of flies,
and gnats throughout their country.

- ³²God sent hail to pound them,
and lightning to strike the land.
- ³³God struck their vines and fig trees,
and shattered the trees throughout the land.
- ³⁴God spoke, and the locusts came,
young locusts without number.
- ³⁵They devoured all the vegetation,
the fruit of the land.
- ³⁶God struck Egypt's first born,
the first issue of their strength.
- ³⁷Then God led Israel out with silver and gold.
Not one among them faltered.
- ³⁸Egypt was glad when they departed,
for dread had fallen upon them.
- ³⁹God spread a cloud for a covering,
and fire glowing by night.
- ⁴⁰Israel prayed, and God sent quails,
and gave them food from heaven in abundance.
- ⁴¹God opened a rock, and water gushed out,
flowing through the desert like a river.
- ⁴²God remembered the holy promise,
given to Abraham, the servant of God.
- ⁴³God brought the people out with joy,
the chosen ones with shouts of rejoicing.
- ⁴⁴God gave them the lands of the nations,
and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,
- ⁴⁵that they might keep the commandments
and observe God's law. Alleluia!

Praying Psalm 106 (105) with Jesus

The opening seven verses are addressed to God. The same is true of the final verse (verse 47). The psalmist admits: 'Like our ancestors we have sinned; we are guilty; we have acted wickedly' (verse 5). The bulk of the psalm focuses on the rebellion of the ancestors, but, more importantly, on God's faithfulness to the love God promised them. The psalmist trusts that God will continue this fidelity (verse 7), and that he will share in the joy this will assuredly bring to God's people (verses 4-5). Apart from the admission of personal sin, we can picture Jesus praying these verses and we can pray them with him.

¹**Praise GOD! (Alleluia!)**

Give thanks to GOD, who is good.

Your covenant love endures forever.

²**Who can number GOD's mighty deeds, or sing enough praise?**

³**Blessed and happy are those who do what is right,
and act with justice at all times.**

⁴**Remember me, O GOD,
when you demonstrate your love for your people.**

**Help me when you rescue them,
⁵that I may experience the prosperity
enjoyed by your chosen ones,
that I may rejoice along with your nation,
and that I may greet you, as one of your own, with shouts of joy.**

⁶**Like our ancestors we have sinned;
we are guilty; we have acted wickedly.**

⁷**In Egypt our ancestors paid no heed
to your wonderful deeds.
They forgot the abundance of your covenant love,
and at the Red Sea rebelled against the Most High.**

Reflecting on Psalm 106 (105) with Jesus

The rest of the psalm is not a prayer, but an ‘historical survey’ of the ways in which the people of Israel persisted in breaking their covenant with GOD in spite of GOD’s constancy to them. Archeology has demonstrated that the survey presents, not an accurate detailed history, but the way Israel came to present its origins to itself and to others. We are dealing with legend, not history.

In their *The Bible Unearthed: archeology’s new vision of Ancient Israel* (2001), Finkelstein and Silberman write: “Although these stories [of the patriarchs, the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan and the sagas referring to the united kingdom of David and Solomon] may have been based on certain historical kernels, they primarily reflect the ideology and the world-view of the writers [of 7th Century Judah]’ (page 23).

⁸Yet, true to God’s name, God saved them,
to reveal God’s mighty power.

⁹God rebuked the Red Sea, and it dried up. [see Exodus 14]
The deep was as dry ground.

¹⁰God led the people across,
rescuing them from the enemy’s power.

¹¹The waters swallowed their adversaries.
Not one of them survived.

¹²Then our ancestors believed God’s word
and sang songs of praise.

¹³But they soon forgot God’s deeds.
They lost faith in God’s designs. [see Numbers 11]

¹⁴They had a wanton craving in the wilderness,
and in the desert put God to the test.

¹⁵God gave them what they wanted,
but sent a wasting disease among them.

¹⁶They were jealous of Moses in the camp,
and of Aaron, God’s holy one.

¹⁷The earth opened and swallowed up Dathan,
burying alive the followers of Abiram. [see Numbers 16]

¹⁸Fire broke out amongst them,
its flame consuming the wicked.

¹⁹They made a calf at Horeb
and worshipped a cast image.

²⁰They exchanged the glory of God
for the image of an ox that eats grass. [see Exodus 12]

²¹They forgot their God,
the God who had saved them

²²by doing great things in Egypt,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

²³God determined to destroy them, and would have done so
had not Moses, your chosen one,
stood in the breach before God
to turn back God's wrath. [see Exodus 32]

²⁴They scorned the land of promise,
having no faith in God's promise. [see Numbers 14]

²⁵They grumbled in their tents,
and did not obey the voice of God.

²⁶So God swore an oath
to make them fall in the wilderness,

²⁵and would disperse their descendants among the nations,
scattering them over the lands.

²⁸They attached themselves to the Baal of Peor,
and ate sacrifices offered to the dead. [see Numbers 25]

²⁹They provoked God to anger
with the way they were behaving.
and a plague broke out among them.

³⁰Phinehas stood up and interceded,
and the plague was checked.

³¹This has been to his honour ever since.

³²They angered GOD at the waters of Meribah,
and it went ill with Moses on their account;
³³for they made his spirit bitter,
and he spoke rash words. [see Exodus 17 and Numbers 20]

³⁴They failed to destroy the peoples, as the Lord had commanded,
³⁵but intermarried with them and adopted their customs.

Verses 34-35 are dependent on the understanding of the Deuteronomic school which blamed the failures of Israel on the fact that they did not wipe out the Canaanites. This failure led them to compromise their faith (see Deuteronomy 7:2; 20:16-17). Their understanding of God and of God's will is flawed, but in a world that looked upon disasters as God's punishment they had to find a reason for their suffering in sinful behaviour.

³⁶They worshipped their idols,
which became to them a snare.
³⁷They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons.
³⁸shedding innocent blood. [see Deuteronomy 12:31]

They polluted the land with the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan.
³⁹Thus they prostituted themselves by their deeds.

⁴⁰Then the anger of GOD
was kindled against the people.
God was disgusted with them,
⁴¹and handed them over to the nations.
⁴²Their enemies oppressed them,
and they were ruled by their foes.

⁴³Again and again God delivered them,
but they were stubborn, and their sins brought them down.

⁴⁴But still God saw their plight
and heard their cry of distress.

⁴⁵Remembering the covenant,
God showed compassion
according to the abundance of GOD's covenant love.

⁴⁶God caused them to be pitied by their captors.

Praying Psalm 106 (105) with Jesus

⁴⁷Save us, O GOD, our God.

Gather us from among the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise.

4. Conclusion to Book 4 of the Psalms

⁴⁸Praised be GOD, the God of Israel, forever and ever.

Let all the people say, "Amen." Praise GOD! (Alleluia).

Praying Psalm 107 (106) with Jesus

¹Give thanks to GOD who is good.
Your covenant love endures forever.

²Let those saved by GOD tell their story:
how they were redeemed from the power of the enemy,
³and gathered in from far-off lands,
from east and west, north and south.

⁴Some wandered in desert wastes,
unable to find a town where they could dwell.

⁵Exhausted from hunger and thirst
they were on the verge of collapsing.

⁶*Then they cried out to you, O GOD,
and you came to their rescue,*
⁷leading them by a straight way
to a place where they could make a home.

⁸*They celebrate your covenant love,
all the wonderful things you have done.*

⁹You, O GOD, satisfy the thirsty,
and see that the hungry have food.

¹⁰Some sat in darkness and gloom,
prisoners in misery and chains,
¹¹having rebelled against the word of God,
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.

¹²Weighed down by the burden of their misery
they collapsed with no one to help them.

¹³*Then they cried out to you, O GOD,
and you came to their rescue,*
¹⁴breaking their fetters,
and dispersing the gloom.

¹⁵*They celebrate your covenant love,
all the wonderful things you have done.*

¹⁶**GOD shatters bronze doors
and cuts through iron bars.**

¹⁷**Some became ill,
struck down because of their sin.**

¹⁸**They loathed any kind of food,
and drew near to the gates of death.**

¹⁹*Then they cried out to you, O GOD,
and you came to their rescue,*

²⁰**speaking a word of healing
which delivered them from death.**

²¹*They celebrate your covenant love,
all the wonderful things you have done.*

²²**Offering a sacrifice of praise.**

²³**Merchants sailed the sea in ships,
doing trade on the mighty waters.**

²⁴**They witnessed the deeds of GOD,
all the wonders of the deep.**

²⁵**A storm whipped up the waves.**

²⁶**They mounted up to heaven,
then plunged down to the depths.**

Their courage melted away in the calamity.

²⁷**They reeled and staggered like drunken men at their wit's end.**

²⁸*Then they cried out to you, O GOD,
and you came to their rescue.*

²⁹**You stilled the storm and the waves were calmed.**

³⁰**They rejoiced in the calm, and you brought them to port.**

³¹*They celebrate your covenant love, O GOD,
all the wonderful things you have done.*

³²**They thank you, O GOD, when the people assemble.
They give voice to their praise when the elders come together.**

³³YOU turn rivers into a desert,
 springs of water into thirsty ground,
³⁴a fruitful land into a salty waste.

³⁵But YOU also transform a desert with springs of water,
 change a parched waste into fertile land,
³⁶giving it to the hungry,
 for them to establish a town.

³⁷They sow crops and plant their vines,
 and gather in the harvest.
³⁸With YOUR blessing they prosper;
 people and cattle flourish.

³⁹If the people fail to prosper,
 suffering the effects of oppression,
⁴⁰Their leaders will find themselves
 wandering in trackless wastes.

⁴¹But YOU lift up the needy from their distress,
 shepherding them like a flock.
⁴²The upright see and rejoice.
 Those who do wrong are silenced.

⁴³Let those who are wise give heed to these things,
 and wonder at the marvel of GOD's covenant love.

The psalmist uses a number of images to describe the situation people find themselves in through their sin. However, in each case, when they cry out to God their cry is heard. God frees them. The psalmist calls for gratitude and concludes: 'Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and wonder at the marvel of GOD's covenant love.'

This is a psalm about salvation. We reflected on this theme in Psalm 62, pages 190-191.

In the first scene (verses 4-9) God delivers those who are dying of hunger and thirst in the desert. Praying this with Jesus we recall his nourishing the crowd in the wilderness (see Mark 6:30-46). Verse seven pictures God 'leading them by a straight way to a place where they could make a home.' The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them' (Hebrews 11:16). Praying this psalm with Jesus we call to mind John the Baptist making the path straight preparing us to find our home in the heart of Jesus.

In the second scene (verses 10-16) God rescues those who are in darkness and gloom because they have rejected God's word. We are reminded of the scene where Jesus brings peace to a deranged man (Mark 5:1-20). We reflect also on the trials that face us, and the effects of sin: 'If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it' (1 Corinthians 10:12-13).

In the third scene (verses 17-22) God delivers those who are facing death. Praying this with Jesus we recall his ministry of healing the sick (Mark 6:53-56; 7:24-37).

In the fourth scene (verses 23-32) God delivers those facing death at sea. The description of the vessel struggling against a storm reminds us of Paul's warning: 'We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming' (Ephesians 4:14). Praying this scene with Jesus, we recall the scene when the boat he was in appeared to be in danger of sinking. The disciples woke Jesus and 'Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm' (Mark 4:39). We recall another scene: 'The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going' (John 6:18-21).

The lesson of the psalm is expressed in the final verses: 'You lift up the needy from their distress, shepherding them like a flock. The upright see and rejoice. Those who do wrong are silenced. Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and wonder at the marvel of GOD's covenant love' (verses 41-43).

We recall Paul's words: If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself' (2 Timothy 2:13).

Praying Psalm 108 (107) verses 1-5 with Jesus

¹My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast.

I will sing and make melody. Awake, my soul!

²Awake, harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.

³I will give thanks to you, O GOD, among the peoples.

I will sing praises to you among the nations.

⁴For your covenant love is as high as the heavens;
your faithfulness extends to the clouds.

⁵Rise up, O God, above the heavens.

Let your glory fill the earth.

Verses 1-5 are found also in Psalm 57:7-11. The only difference is that where Psalm 108 verse 3 addresses GOD, Psalm 57 addresses God* [Adonai].

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 (verses 1-2). Praying with Jesus we think of his resurrection. For us everything will be dispelled by the light of the resurrection. The ultimate dawn is when we share in Jesus' risen life.

See the commentary on Psalm 57, pages 178-180 for a reflection on 'Let your glory fill the earth' (verse 5).

Reflecting on Psalm 108 (107) v. 6-13 with Jesus

⁶Give victory with your right arm,
so that those whom you love may be rescued.

⁷God has decreed in the sanctuary:
‘I will triumph and divide the land of Shechem.
I will portion out the Vale of Succoth;

⁸for Gilead is mine, and Manasseh.

Ephraim is my helmet;
Judah is my commander’s staff.

⁹Moab is my washbowl;
on Edom I plant my shoe.
Against me, Philistia,
hurl forth your war cry if you dare!’

¹⁰Who will lead us to Edom
to breach the city wall?

¹¹God, will you still hold back?
Will you desert our camp?

¹²Grant us help against the foe,
for human help is of no avail.

¹³With God we will do valiantly.
It is our God who will crush our foes.

Verses 6-13 are found also in Psalm 60:5-12. 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.

Where, in verse 6, the psalmist speaks of ‘those whom you love’ we might reflect upon the Church as the especially loved Spouse of Christ, redeemed by his love.

Praying Psalm 109 (108) with Jesus

Part One (verses 1-19)

In spite of the terrible way he is being treated (verses 2-19) the psalmist continues to turn to God, pleading for a response (verse 1).

¹God to whom I pray, be not silent.

²For wicked and deceitful voices speak out against me,
pursuing me with lies.

³They beset me with words full of hate;
they attack me without cause.

⁴I treat them with love, but they still accuse me,
even while I pray for them.

⁵They return evil for good, and hatred for my love.

⁶They say, 'Appoint a crooked judge,
and have an accuser close by.

⁷When he is tried, let him be found guilty;
may his pleading be reckoned as sinful.

⁸May his days be few. May others fill his place.

⁹May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow.

¹⁰May they wander about and beg;
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.

¹¹May the creditor seize all that he has.
May strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.

¹²May there be no one to do him a kindness,
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.

¹³May his line end; may his name be blotted out
in the second generation.

¹⁴May the guilt of his father be remembered before GOD.
Do not let the sin of his mother be erased.

¹⁵May his memory be cut off from the earth.

¹⁶He did not remember to show kindness,
but pursued the poor and needy
and the brokenhearted to their death.

¹⁷He loved to curse; let curses rebound on his head.
He did not offer a blessing; may he not receive one.

¹⁸He clothed himself with cursing as his coat,
may it soak into his body like water, into his bones like oil.

¹⁹May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself,
like a belt that he wears every day.'

Part Two (verses 20-31): The psalmist's prayer

²¹But you, O GOD, my God*,
act on my behalf for your name's sake.
Because you are good, rescue me.

²²For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded.

²³I am fading like a shadow at evening.
I am brushed aside like a locust.

²⁴My knees are weak through fasting;
my flesh has become gaunt.

²⁵I am an object of scorn to my accusers.
When they see me, they shake their heads.

²⁶Help me, O GOD, my God!
Save me according to your covenant love.

²⁷Let them see your hand at work.
Let them know that you have acted.

²⁸They curse, but you will bless.
Let my assailants be put to shame.
May your servant be glad.

²⁹May my accusers be clothed with dishonour.
May they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle.

³⁰**I raise my voice in thanks to GOD;**

I praise my God in the midst of the throng.

³¹**For GOD stands at the right hand of those in need,
to save them from those who would condemn them to death.**

Omitted

²⁰May what my accusers want for me

be Your payment for those who speak evil against me.

Psalm 109 is not used in the Church's liturgy, possibly because of the length of the section in which the psalmist speaks of the terrible way he is being treated, and possibly because verse 20 does not fit with Jesus' injunction that we love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). However, it has many verses that are quite moving.

Praying Psalm 110 (109) with Jesus

¹A decree of GOD to my king:

‘Sit on my right.

I will make you master of your enemies.’

²GOD will wield from Zion your sceptre of power.

will conquer your foes in battle.

³Your people will rally to you when you mobilise for war.

From the womb your majesty is sacred,

from your birth on the holy mountain,

your youth as fresh as the morning dew.

⁴GOD has sworn an oath and will not change:

‘You are a priest forever

a priest like Melchizedek of old.’

⁷The king will drink from a wayside stream,

and rise up refreshed.

omitted (Verse 6 is not in the Church’s liturgy)

⁵God* is at your right

to crush kings on the day of judgment.

⁶It is God* who judges the nations.

shattering heads, heaping up corpses.

This is a royal psalm. Other royal psalms are Psalm 2, which speaks of the rebellion of vassals, Psalms 20-21 which are prayers for before and after a battle, Psalm 45 on the occasion of a royal wedding, and Psalm 72 concerning just government.

Psalm 110 opens with an oracle at the enthronement of the king. During the long centuries when Judah was under Persian, Greek and Roman rule Psalm 110 encouraged the community to hold on to their hope that one day they would be ruled again by a king of Judah.

1. The risen Jesus as Messiah

Once, in response to Jesus' question: 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered: 'The Messiah of God' (Luke 9:20). On that occasion Jesus seems to have been wary of the title, a wariness that stayed with him throughout his ministry. The term 'Messiah' meant different things to different people. Jesus was keen to carry on his ministry from God while avoiding being categorised. It was only after his death and resurrection that his followers embraced the title 'Messiah' ('Christ') for him, so much so that the community came to be called 'Christians' (Acts 11:26). Peter's speech at Pentecost as presented by Luke includes the words: 'let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2:36). Central to Paul's enlightenment was the recognition of the Risen Jesus as the promised Messiah, the one who, in his person, fulfilled the hopes expressed in the royal psalms. In his letters he refers to Jesus as 'the Christ' (the 'Messiah') nearly four hundred times. The New Testament frequently calls on verse 1 in relation to Jesus:

'While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, 'How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?' (Mark 12:35-37).

'You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mark 14:62).

'The Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God' (Mark 16:19).

'David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool' (Acts 2:34-35 [Peter speaking on the day of Pentecost].

'Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us' (Romans 8:34).

'He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death' (1 Corinthians 15:25-26).

'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' (Ephesians 1:20; see Colossians 3:1).

'To which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?' (Hebrews 1:13).

2. The Risen Jesus as High Priest.

Verse 4 acclaims the king as 'a priest forever, a priest like Melchizedek of old.' Priesthood is about mediating the sacred. The Old Testament priests carried out their functions in the sanctuary. There they brought God to the people by mediating to them God's word, God's will and God's blessing. They brought the people into communion with God by offering to God the sacrifices through which their lives were sanctified.

Being of the tribe of Judah, the king could not hold the office of a priest of Levi. His priesthood, however, was a superior one, for he was responsible not only to see that the Levitical priests cared for the holiness of the cult but also to be God's instrument in making holy the whole land and its people. The priesthood of the king is 'like Melchizedek of old', for Melchizedek was the priest-king of Jebusite Jerusalem at the time of Abraham (see Genesis 14:18-19).

In the Letter to the Hebrews verse 4 is applied to Jesus: 'Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 5:5-6). The author is underlining the fact that the priestly mediation of Jesus is the mediation, not of the Levitical priests, but of the Messiah-king.

For Christians there is only one priest, one mediator, the exalted Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). From the sanctuary of heaven, Jesus speaks God's word and draws everyone to himself that we might make of our lives, as he did of his, a self-offering to God. His priesthood fulfils the functions of the Levitical priesthood, and transcends them, for his is the priesthood of the king: a royal priesthood 'according to the order of Melchizedek' (Hebrews 5:10). His priestly role is to mediate the sacred to the whole of creation.

This is the priesthood into which all the baptised are consecrated, called as Jesus' followers to carry the mission of Jesus to all the world. Jesus' disciples are graced to share in Jesus' priesthood. Jesus said: 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15:5). His life, the life of the vine, is the Spirit of love that binds him in intimate communion with God, his Father. The branches share this Spirit and so share in Jesus' communion of love. Paul can say: 'It is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19). Disciples share in Jesus' life according to the special grace each is offered, and according to the way in which each responds to this grace. In the community of the church we are the Body of Christ carrying out his mission in the world with all the creative power of God, through his Spirit poured out into the community.

In his First Letter, Peter writes: 'Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2:4-5). The communities to whom Peter is addressing this letter are feeling the rejection of their neighbours. By adhering to Christ through belonging to the Christian community they have turned their backs on many of the meanings and values that inform the culture to which they once belonged.

In doing so they have become the object of suspicion, rejection, harassment and even persecution. Peter tells them to come to Jesus. He was 'rejected', but not by God. He was 'chosen and precious in God's sight.' They are living in intimate communion with God because they are sharing in the life of Christ. This means that they, too, though suffering a similar rejection, are not being rejected by God. On the contrary, they, too, are 'chosen and precious in God's sight'.

Christ is an especially dressed stone (Greek: *lithos*), selected by God for a special purpose. The rejection is part of the chiselling that prepared the stone for God's purpose which is that he live the full life of resurrected glory. God is preparing them, as one dresses a stone, for the same fullness of life. Peter tells them to let God work on them as together they are being built by God into a 'house' which is 'spiritual', because it is being formed by the action of God's Spirit. It is also a temple in which God has chosen to dwell.

The Christian community, God's household, is present in the world as a temple. The whole community is to be a 'holy priesthood.' They are to offer sacrifices which are acceptable to the only true, living, God. They are to mediate God's grace to the world and draw all people into communion with God. The sacrifices are 'acceptable' because they, too, are 'spiritual', being inspired by the Spirit and expressive of the communion in the Spirit of love which is the very life of the community.

All of this – being 'living stones', welcoming God's action which is dressing them so as to build a temple, and offering their lives, like Jesus, as a sacrifice to God – all of this is 'through Jesus Christ'.

In the Book of Revelation we read: 'Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen' (Revelation 1:4-6). Echoing Exodus 19:6, John says that the glorified Jesus makes the Christian assembly 'a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.' The kingdom of God is brought about by the redemption effected by the blood of Christ, that is to say, by his life-giving on the cross. The assembly recognises that it is in the Christian community that Christ reigns as Lord, and so it renews its commitment to live his life, and to carry on his mission of bringing about God's reign on earth.

John, the author of the Book of Revelation (Revelation 1:1) reminds his listeners that Christ has chosen to exercise his priestly mediation through them. Christ has chosen to live in us. We are to live our lives in union with him in the presence of God. Sharing in Jesus' priesthood, we are called to mediate God's word, God's will, and God's blessing to the world. We are called to offer prayer and praise to God, to offer ourselves as a spiritual sacrifice and to draw others into communion with God. We are to show that God delights in all that he has made.

We are to mediate God's forgiveness, to reconcile the world with God, to draw people to a life of obedient faith in God and of love for each other, and so, throughout all the epochs of time, to effect redemption for humankind.

We are able to carry out this priestly function thanks to the grace and peace from God given us by Christ through the Spirit. Those who are listening to John's proclamation are suffering discrimination but they are not to be on the defensive. They are to resist the prevailing culture and continue to mediate the love of Christ and so convert their contemporaries to a life of grace.

There are as many different ways of carrying out Christ's priestly mediation as there are disciples of Jesus in the Christian community. One can think of all the many simple ways in which we are a sacrament to each other of God's love and consecrated into the priesthood of Jesus through our baptism. In all stages and forms of life, each disciple of Jesus has the unique opportunity to live out this priestly mediation in the world. As sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, indeed every form of family relationship can answer this call to mediate love. Single people, devoted to Jesus, bring a particular focus with their presence in love. From her communion in the life of God, a wife and mother lives out the priestly mediation of Jesus by mediating God's love and God's word to her husband and children, and by welcoming their loving response she helps draw them into the communion of love which is Jesus' life. Likewise a husband and father for his wife and family. One can think of volunteers in all walks of life, teachers, nurses, politicians and public servants. Jesus is carrying on his priestly mediation through and in us, sanctifying the world through the holy lives which we live, lives which he makes possible by sharing his Spirit with us.

Praying Psalm 111 (110) with Jesus

¹Praise GOD (Alleluia)!

I give thanks to GOD with all my heart,
in the assembly of the upright.

²Look at what GOD has done.

Reflect upon it with admiration.

³Glorious and majestic are the deeds of GOD,
whose justice endures forever.

⁴Who can fail to acclaim GOD's wonderful deeds?
GOD is gracious and tenderly compassionate,

⁵nourishing the faithful,
ever mindful of the covenant,

⁶demonstrating mighty deeds,
giving them a land, the heritage of the nations.

⁷GOD's deeds are according to truth and right judgment.
All GOD's precepts can be trusted.

⁸Enacted in justice and truth,
they are established forever.

⁹GOD has redeemed the chosen people,
ratifying the covenant for all time.
Holy and awesome is GOD's name.

¹⁰Reverence for ['fear of'] GOD is the beginning of wisdom.

Wise are those who live this way.
Praise of GOD will continue forever.

This is a meditative hymn of thanksgiving for what God has done. Since God's covenant (verses 5 and 9) endures forever (verses 3, 5, 8 and 9), so must our praise (verse 10).

1. Praying this psalm with Jesus, we think of his words at the Last Supper. Having broken bread to share with his friends his body, about to be broken in death, Jesus shared a cup of wine with them. But it was more than a cup of wine: 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20).

Jesus had given himself to them all through their life together. Now, his life was about to be violently taken from him. He wanted his disciples to know that he would never stop loving them. He would always be with them. He would make, even of his dying, a gift of himself, and so a gift of God, for them – what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews calls 'the new and eternal covenant' (Hebrews 13:20). Christ is 'the mediator of a new covenant' (Hebrews 9:15). His gift brought to its fulfilment all the ancient promises given by God. 'Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant' (Hebrews 7:22). God had promised through the prophet Jeremiah: 'This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (Jeremiah 31:33). This promise is quoted by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who sees it fulfilled in Jesus (Hebrews 8:10).

The covenant is 'new', not in the sense that God's commitment has changed – God's commitment has always been absolute – but in the sense that, at last, a member of the human race, Jesus of Nazareth, welcomed God's commitment with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. And so he was able to show us, in a human way, how absolute is God's commitment to us. Furthermore, he loved us so convincingly, that he showed us how to respond to God. He shared his Spirit with us, so that we would be able to respond with his response. For the same reason Jesus could say: 'A new commandment I give you: love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34). Paul speaks of Jesus as 'the last Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45), the 'man of heaven' (1 Corinthians 15:47). '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 15:49). Paul writes: 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17), and 'a new creation is everything' (Galatians 6:15).

Thanks to Jesus we are able to witness God's absolute commitment to us, and, because we share Jesus' Spirit (his love-communion with God) we are able to welcome God's commitment, and respond by loving God and each other with Jesus' love. God's unconditional commitment to love is absolute. The covenant is 'new' because our response to God's commitment is new.

2. The psalmist claims that 'Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom' (verse 10). We reflected on 'fear of God' in Psalm 2, page 24, and again in Psalm 33, page 110, and Psalm 47, page 146. The psalmist is speaking of a gift from the Spirit of God: a gift of a profound sense of awe in the presence of the sacred, and a humble recognition of our fragility, and the possibility of separating ourselves from God's love by our sinful behaviour.

Praying Psalm 112 (111) with Jesus

¹Praise GOD (Alleluia)!

Blessed and happy are those who revere [fear] GOD,
who delight in GOD's law.

²Their descendants too will be blessed.

They will be mighty in the land.

³Their households thrive,

their righteousness endures forever.

⁴When they find themselves in the dark,

a light is shining for them:

the light of their GOD who is gracious,
tenderly compassionate and just.

⁵All goes well for those

who deal generously and lend,

who conduct their affairs with justice.

⁶They will never falter and will be remembered forever.

⁷They are not afraid of evil tidings.

Their hearts are secure in GOD.

⁸Steady and fearless,

they are not afraid of their enemy.

⁹They give generously to the poor.

Their righteousness endures.

Their strength brings them honour.

They will never falter.

¹⁰The wicked are angry

on seeing the prosperity of the just.

Their hatred eats them up.

Their desires will be thwarted.

Verse 1 is a declaration of who are 'blessed and happy' (see Reflection on Psalm 1, page 19). They are 'those who 'fear GOD'. For a reflection on 'Fear of GOD' see Psalm 2, page 24, and also Psalm 33, page 110 and Psalm 47, page 146).

In verse 4 GOD is acclaimed as 'gracious [ḥannûn], tenderly compassionate [raḥûm] and just [tsadîq].'

The verb *hanan* means to show favour [ḥen]. The one showing favour is 'gracious'. When used of God it refers to the many particular ways in which God graces his people, or an individual. 'Gracious' is one of the qualities attributed to God in the creedal formula that recurs throughout the Bible (see Psalm 85, pages 261-262).

The Hebrew for 'womb' is *reḥem*. We find it in Psalm 22:10, 58:3 and 110:3. It is likely that there is a connection with the verb *rhm* which speaks of the tender compassion that GOD has for his people. The noun *raḥ^amîm* speaks of God's tender compassion, as does the adjectival form *raḥûm* which occurs here in verse 4. Being 'tenderly compassionate' is also one of the qualities attributed to God in the creedal formula that recurs throughout the Bible. We recall also Jesus' words: 'Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:36).

For a reflection on GOD's justice see Psalm 82, pages 249-251 and Psalm 85, page 263. As we reflect with Jesus on verse 6 ('They will never falter') we recall the final words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: 'The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock' (Matthew 7:25).

Verse 9 ('They give generously to the poor. Their righteousness endures') is quoted by Paul:

'The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written: He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.' He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us' (2 Corinthians 9:6-11).

In reflecting on verse 10 we recall Jesus' parables about the Last Judgment, about what ultimately matters in our lives (Matthew 25). When we have to face up to our obstinate and persistent failure to welcome grace and to live accordingly there will be 'gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:30).

Praying Psalm 113 (112) with Jesus

¹Praise GOD! [Alleluia].

²O servants of GOD, praise GOD,
now and forever.

³From the rising of the sun to its setting,
praised be GOD, who is on high, above all nations.

⁴GOD's glory shines over the heavens.

⁵Who is like our GOD, enthroned on high?

⁶GOD looks down upon heaven and earth,
to raise the poor from the dust.

⁷GOD raises the needy from their misery,

⁸to seat them with princes, with the leaders of the people.

⁹It is God who gives a home to the barren woman,
and gladdens her heart with children. Praise GOD! [Alleluia]

This is the first of the so-called Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118), sung on the pilgrimage feasts (Tabernacles, Passover, Pentecost), and also at Hanukkah and each month at the new moon. It is an acclamation of praise and joy. All are invited to praise GOD, especially for raising up the poor.

Verses 6-9 speak of God's action on the earth. Compare the Canticle of Hannah (1Samuel 2) and the Magnificat of Mary (Luke 1:53-53). Praying the psalm with Jesus we see God carrying out God's liberating action in and through Jesus.

Reflecting on verse 7 we recall the following from James: 'Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?' (James 2:5).

Reflecting on verse nine we recall Paul's words to the communities in Galatia. He quotes Isaiah 54 verse 1: 'Shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married' (Galatians 4:27). We might reflect on Jesus' words on Calvary: 'Jesus said to the disciple, "Here is your mother", and from that hour the disciple took her into his own' (John 19:27).

Praying Psalm 114 (113:1-8) with Jesus

¹When Israel came out from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from an alien people,

²Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel, God's dominion.

³The sea pulls back before them,
the Jordan retreats.

⁴The mountains leap like rams,
the hills like yearling sheep.

⁵'Why shrink back, O sea?
Jordan, why do you retreat?

⁶'Mountains, why is it that you leap like rams,
you hills, like yearling sheep?'

⁷Tremble, O earth, at the presence of GOD,
at the sight of the God of Jacob,

⁸who turns rock into a pool,
flint into a spring of water.

This is a joyful, festive hymn inviting praise of God for liberating Israel from Egypt and marvellously caring for them as they journeyed. It has a special quality of concentrated, lyrical energy.

Praying Psalm 115 (113:9-26) with Jesus

¹Not to us, O GOD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
because of your covenant love, because of your faithfulness.

²Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?'

³Our God is in the heavens and answers to no one.

⁴Their gods are crafted by hand, mere silver and gold.

⁵They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.

⁶They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell.

⁷They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk.

No sound comes forth from their hollow throats.

⁸Those who make them are like them;

as are all who trust in them.

⁹Israel, trust in GOD,

your strength and your shield.

¹⁰House of Aaron, trust in GOD,

your strength and your shield.

¹¹All who revere ['fear'] GOD, trust in GOD,

your strength and your shield.

¹²Always mindful of us, GOD will bless us all:

the house of Israel; the house of Aaron;

¹³all who revere ['fear'] GOD, both small and great.

¹⁴May GOD bless you more and more,

you and your children.

¹⁵May you be truly blessed

by the Maker of heaven and earth.

¹⁶The heavens belong to GOD,

who has entrusted the earth to you.

¹⁷The dead go down into silence.

They do not praise GOD.

¹⁸But we, the living, bless GOD,

now and forever. Amen! Praise GOD! [Alleluia]

Because the Greek Septuagint (and consequently the Latin Vulgate and the Christian liturgical texts) kept the Hebrew Psalms 9 and 10 together as a single psalm, the numbering of the Greek, Latin and liturgical psalms from the Hebrew Psalm 10 up to this point has been one behind the Hebrew numbering. Now, once again, the Greek Septuagint has kept two psalms (Hebrew Psalms 114 and 115) together as one psalm, with the result that now the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate and the Christian liturgical text are two behind the Hebrew numbering.

Verse 1 reads: 'Not to us, O GOD, not to us, but to your name give glory, because of your covenant love, because of your faithfulness'. See Psalm 85, pages 261-262 for a reflection on 'Covenant Love.' See Psalm 61, page 188 for a reflection on 'Covenant Love and Faithfulness.' See Psalm 57, pages 178-180 for a reflection on 'glory.'

Verse 2 reads: 'Why do the nations say, "Where is their God?"' Compare the following: '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 and 10), and 'Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?"' (Psalm 79:10).

Verses 3-8 is a polemic against idols from the period of the Exile in Babylon. Before the Exile there was an attempt to educate the people away from having idols, because of the danger of falling back into an identification of GOD with an idol (see the account of the golden calf, Exodus 32, and the idols in Bethel, 1 Kings 12:29). During the exile, it appeared that Marduk, the god of Babylon, had defeated Israel's God. Furthermore they could only point to a destroyed sanctuary when asked: 'Where is your god?' Their response was 'Our God is in the heavens and answers no one' (verse 3; see Genesis 1). This psalm belongs with parts of the Isaiah scroll in mocking the popular Babylonian idol-worship (see Isaiah 44:12-20 and 46:1-7).

In verses 9-11 the psalmist appeals to the people of Israel assembled in prayer, then to the priests, and then to all who look to GOD in reverence to place their trust in GOD.

In verses 14-15 the psalmist prays for GOD's blessing. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we recall his words in the parable about the ultimate judgment, where the king (the Risen and Exalted Jesus) says to those who have cared for people in need: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father' (Matthew 25:34).

Jesus does not share the psalmist's understanding that 'the dead do not praise GOD' (verse 17). When the Sadducees tried to make fun of the idea of life after death, Jesus responded: 'You are wrong. You know neither the scriptures nor the power of GOD' (Mark 12:24). He goes on to remind them of GOD's appearance to Moses in the burning bush, when GOD declared: 'I am the GOD of Abraham, the GOD of Isaac, and the GOD of Jacob' (Exodus 3:6). Jesus adds: 'He is the GOD not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong' (Mark 12:27).

Praying Psalm 116 (114-115) with Jesus

¹I am filled with love for GOD who hears me when I call.

²I will continue to call on you, O GOD, as long as I live.

³Death's trap was set. The grave had me in its grip.

I was overcome with distress and anguish.

⁴I cried out to GOD: 'Rescue me, O GOD! Save me!'

⁵Gracious is GOD, and just, and tenderly compassionate.

⁶GOD shelters those who are weak.

When I was brought low, God saved me.

⁷Rest once more, my heart,

for GOD has dealt bountifully with you.

⁸GOD, YOU have delivered me from death,

wiping my tears, steadying my feet.

⁹I am walking with YOU in the land of the living.

• • • • •

¹⁰I believe, even as I say, 'I am sorely afflicted.'

¹¹I believe, even as I cry, 'No one can be trusted.'

¹²How can I repay GOD for all the goodness I am shown?

¹³*I raise the cup of salvation and call on you, O GOD.*

¹⁴*I fulfil my vows to YOU in the presence of all your people.*

¹⁵O GOD, you hate to see your faithful die.

¹⁶I am your servant, the child of your serving girl.

You freed me from death's grip.

¹⁷*I offer a thanksgiving sacrifice, and call on you, O GOD.*

¹⁸*I fulfil my vows to YOU in the presence of all your people,*

¹⁹in the courts of the house of GOD,

in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise GOD! [Alleluia]

In the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and so the Christian liturgical books, Hebrew Psalms 9 and 10 are combined into one psalm (Psalm 9), and Hebrew Psalms 114 and 115 are combined into one psalm (Psalm 113). In the present psalm the process is reversed. Here it is the Greek, Latin and liturgical texts which divide Hebrew Psalm 116 into two psalms (Psalms 114 and 115). This means that in the next psalm (Hebrew Psalm 117) we are back with what we have become accustomed to: The Greek being one behind the Hebrew numbering.

The Psalmist is thanking God because he has escaped death (verses 1-4 and 16; compare Psalm 30). He speaks of his being abandoned and powerless to help himself. He speaks also of his interior affliction. He is taking part in a liturgy in which he is fulfilling a vow taken when ill (verse 14). Verse 19 suggests a communal dimension: God has liberated his people from the slavery and death of exile, and restored them to life in bringing them back to the temple. It is a song of love (verse 1), of faith (verse 10), and of thanksgiving (verse 17).

Psalm 116 is listed among the Hallel Psalms, sung on the pilgrimage feasts (Tabernacles, Passover, Pentecost), and also at Hanukkah and each month at the new moon. Psalm 116 was the first psalm sung after the Passover meal, and so is possibly the psalm sung by Jesus before leaving the Last Supper (see Matthew 26:30).

Verse 5 ('Gracious is GOD, and just and tenderly compassionate') draws on the creedal formula of the Book of Exodus: 'GOD passed before Moses, and proclaimed, 'GOD, GOD, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6). See Psalm 112 verse 4 for a reflection on 'gracious', 'just' and 'tenderly compassionate.'

Verse 6 reads: 'GOD shelters those who are weak.' See Psalm 82, pages 251-254 for a reflection on God's care for the poor.

Praying verse 7 with Jesus ('Rest once more, my heart, for GOD has dealt bountifully with you') we recall Jesus' invitation: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-20). We recall also the acclamation by the chorus in the scene where Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night: 'God so loved us that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16). We think also of Paul: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:18-23).

Paul draws on verse 10 when he writes: 'Just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with Scripture-- 'I believed, and so I spoke' – we also believe, and so we speak' (2 Corinthians 4:13). Paul also draws on verse 11: 'Although everyone is false, let God be proved true' (Romans 3:4).

In the Biblical tradition, the word 'believe' (verses 10-11), and the word 'faith' translate words from the Hebrew root *'mn*. The noun *'mnh* is often translated 'faithfulness'. It denotes the quality one has when one acts according to one's nature or commitments. The related adjective is descriptive of a person who is faithful, reliable, and so trustworthy.

God has this quality in its fullness because God always acts according to who God is. To speak of God in this way is to say that God is the real God, not a false one, and that God always acts according to the truth. Because of this, we can find our security in God, we can rely upon God, we can place our trust in God: 'The word of God is upright, and all GOD's work is done in faithfulness' (Psalm 33:4).

When we say that God is 'faith-full', we are saying that God always acts according to who God is. But who is God? Among the many necessarily imperfect answers to this question found in the sacred Scriptures, there is one that stands out: God is the one who hears the cry of the poor. When God first appears to Moses, God declares: '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). 'I am GOD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am GOD, your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians' (Exodus 6:6-7).

We are made in God's image. What does it mean for us to 'believe', to have 'faith', to be 'faith-full'? To believe in God is to accept the salvation which God offers and to experience a summons, like Moses, to be God's instrument in liberating the oppressed: 'God has taken his place in the council of the gods. It is there God holds judgment: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? 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"' (Psalm 82:1-4).

Jeremiah challenges King Zedekiah: 'Did not your father [King Josiah] eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? ... He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord' (Jeremiah 22:15-16). King Josiah, Zedekiah's father, acted justly and so can truly be said to have put his faith in the faithfulness of God. The idea recurs again and again in the writings of the prophets: 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:24). 'Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land' (Hosea 4:1). 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6:6).

‘They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’ (Isaiah 11:9).

The Mosaic Law requires of God’s people to be faithful to the covenant by acting with justice for the poor. They are to remember that they were once oppressed and that it was God who redeemed them. The following text is typical and similar injunctions can be found throughout the books of the Law: ‘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’ (Exodus 22:21-23).

What, then, does it mean for us to have ‘faith’, to ‘believe’, to be ‘faith-full’? To answer this question we must look at Jesus. In the New Testament Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our ‘leader in faith’ (Hebrews 12:2). For a reflection on obedience see Psalm 123, pages 393-398.

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus’ word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us. To do so we will need to trust him. We will also need to live faithfully the life he offers us, not independently, but as people who are ‘born of God’ (John 1:13), like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (John 15:1ff). Believing speaks of listening to God, heeding God’s inspiration, and acting accordingly. It focuses on the dynamic movement of our actual relating with God. Far from being a speculative, cerebral thing, faith is essentially practical. It is fundamentally about action. As Jesus himself says: ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 7:21).

The Vatican Council (Dei Verbum, n. 2) writes: ‘The invisible God from the fulness of Love addresses human beings as God’s friends and moves among them in order to invite and welcome them into God’s own company.’ Opening our minds and hearts to welcome God’s communication and loving invitation is what we mean by faith. It speaks of the decisions we make, and the lifestyle to which we are committed as a consequence of taking this revelation seriously.

When we speak of human beings believing, we are saying that they are trustworthy because what they do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth, and deal honestly and carry out our obligations, then we share in the faithfulness of God, and others in turn can rely upon us. Abraham is described as having a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God’s communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1 Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1 Samuel 3:20).

To believe is, as the English word so aptly expresses, to ‘be’ - ‘lieve’, to ‘be’ in ‘love’. It is to be in God’s love, receiving with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the eternal mystery of God’s being and which he offers to us by pouring his Spirit into our hearts.

To be faith-full is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God's love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion. To believe is:

- to listen to God's word as revealed in Jesus.
- to heed what God says, trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with our hearts and minds, our soul and strength.
- to live in communion with Jesus, sharing his life of love and so sharing his faith – the faithfulness (fullness of faith) of God which Jesus incarnates and reveals.
- to act in accordance with God's will as revealed by Jesus, especially by living a life of love.

To have faith is to respond to God by savouring what we have received, reflecting upon it, integrating it into our lives, and living accordingly.

We now come to the heart of Christian faith. It is not a matter of copying Jesus, of modelling ourselves on him, on his 'faith', on his 'believing', on his being 'faith-full.' It is welcoming Jesus' own faith, given us when he pours his Spirit into our hearts. We are given the 'faith of Jesus, the Messiah' (Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:16). We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us.

We are not isolated individuals. God reveals God's Self to us through others. Christian faith is handed on through tradition, through the Sacred Scriptures and through the community of Jesus' disciples. We might reflect on the following statements from the Catholic Catechism: 'To live, grow, and persevere in faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God. We must beg the Lord to increase our faith. It must be 'working through love' (Galatians 5:6), abounding in hope, and rooted in the faith of the Church' (n. 162). 'No one can believe alone ... I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I help support others in the faith' (n. 166). 'The Christian community is our teacher in the faith' (n. 169).

God's 'faithful' (verse 15) are those who have welcomed God's covenant love [hesed] and are faithful in keeping the covenant: 'Love God, all you his faithful ones. God preserves those who believe in God' (Psalm 31:23).

The 'cup of salvation' (verse 13) and the 'thanksgiving sacrifice' (verse 17) draw us to think of the Last Supper, and the Eucharistic meal that is central to the life of Jesus' disciples: 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20). 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?' (1Corinthians 10:16). 'Jesus took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me' (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Praying Psalm 117 (116) with Jesus

¹Praise GOD, all you nations!

Extol our God, all you peoples!

²Great is GOD's covenant love for us.

GOD is forever faithful.

Praise GOD! [Alleluia]

In his Letter to the Christians in Rome (Romans 15:8-12), Paul includes this psalm among the quotations he uses to indicate God's will to reach out to the Gentiles. He speaks of God's faithfulness to Israel in keeping his promises, and God's steadfast love in reaching out to save all nations.

For a reflection on God's 'covenant love' see Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

For a reflection on God's faithfulness see Psalm 116, pages 357-359.

The call is for *all* peoples to praise God (verse 1). The Gospels recall Jesus' ministry to people who were not Jews. We think of his healing of the servant of the centurion (Matthew 8:5-13) and the demoniacs in the country of the Gadarenes (Matthew 8:28-34). He healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28). Matthew ends his Gospel with the commission Jesus gave to his disciples: 'Jesus came and said to them, "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).

For a reflection on the universal offer of salvation see Psalm 87, pages 268-272.

Praying Psalm 118 (117) with Jesus

¹*Give thanks to GOD who is good.*

GOD's covenant love endures forever!

²Let the people proclaim:

'GOD's covenant love endures forever.'

³Let the priests proclaim:

'GOD's covenant love endures forever.'

⁴Let all who revere ['fear'] GOD proclaim:

'GOD's covenant love endures forever.'

⁵I called to GOD in my distress.

GOD answered and set me free.

⁶With GOD on my side,

I do not fear what people can do to me.

⁷GOD is with me to help me.

I will see my enemies defeated.

⁸It is better to take refuge in GOD

than to rely on human help.

⁹It is better to take refuge in GOD

than to trust in princes.

¹⁰The nations surrounded me.

Calling on GOD, I drove them back!

¹¹They surrounded me on every side.

Calling on GOD, I drove them back!

¹²They swarmed like bees,

and blazed like a brushwood fire.

Calling on GOD, I drove them back!

¹³I was hard-pressed and falling.

GOD came to my help.

¹⁴GOD is my strength, my song, my saviour.

¹⁵Glad shouts of victory ring out
in the tents of the righteous.
'With triumphant arm raised high,
¹⁶GOD has conquered!'

¹⁷I will not die.
I will live to recount GOD's deeds.
[¹⁸GOD punished me severely,]
but did not leave me to die.
¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter and give thanks.

²⁰This is GOD's gate.
Through it only the righteous can enter.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me.
You have become my saviour.

²²The stone that the builders rejected
has become the corner stone.

²³This is GOD's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day GOD has made;
let us rejoice in it and be glad.

²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O GOD!
O GOD, grant us success!

²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in GOD's name.
We bless you from GOD's house.
GOD is our light.

²⁷On this our festival go forward with branches
even to the altar.

²⁸You are my God. I give you thanks.
You are my God. I extol you.

²⁹*Give thanks to GOD who is good.
GOD's covenant love endures forever!*

The occasion is a festival procession into the temple, celebrating victory. The Master of Ceremonies is summoning the people, then the priests, and finally the whole assembly to thank God, and in turn to shout: 'GOD's covenant love endured forever!' (verses 1-4).

For a reflection on Thanksgiving (verse 1) see Psalm 21, page 75. For a reflection on 'Fear of GOD' (verse 4) see Psalm 2, page 24.

Then the king recounts how GOD came to his aid (verses 5-14). Verse 6 is quoted by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'He has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "With GOD on my side, I do not fear what people can do to me"' (Hebrews 13:5-6).

Responding to the king, the chorus recalls the celebration in the camp of the victory that was achieved through the power of GOD (verses 15-16).

Verses 17-19 are spoken by the king. Praying the psalm with Jesus we rejoice that 'God did not leave Jesus to die': 'We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him' (Romans 6:9). We trust that we will share in Jesus' risen life. In the meantime: 'We are treated as dying, and see - we are alive' (2 Corinthians 6:9).

In verse 19 the king turns to those responsible for opening the gate to the temple: 'Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter and give thanks.' They reply in verse 20. Praying this with Jesus we recall his words: 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture' (John 10:9). And: 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6).

Verses 22-23 are chanted by the chorus. Jesus quotes them in his parable about his being rejected and the consequences for those who rejected him: 'Have you not read this scripture: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the corner stone. This is GOD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes' (Mark 12:10). Peter quotes this text in his trial before the Sanhedrin: 'This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone." There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortal human beings by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:11-12).

Peter quotes it again in his First Letter: 'It stands in scripture, "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame" (Isaiah 28:16). To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner' (1 Peter 2:6-7).

Paul alludes to it in his Letter to the Gentile communities: '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 GOD; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God' (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Psalm 118

The chorus chants verses 24 to 26. 'Save us' translates the Hebrew 'Hosanna.' These verses are echoed in the New Testament. In the account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem we read: 'Those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' (Mark 11:9-10). 'They took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!" (John 12:13).

In his recounting of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, Matthew includes the following lament: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate' (Matthew 23:37-38). The conclusion picks up Psalm 118: 'You will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord"' (Matthew 23:39).

The Master of Ceremonies instructs the assembly: 'On this our festival go forward with branches even to the altar' (verse 27). The king cries out: 'You are my God. I give you thanks. You are my God. I extol you' (verse 28). The assembly repeats the cry: 'Give thanks to GOD who is good. GOD's covenant love endures forever!' (verse 29; see verse 1).

Praying Psalm 119 (118) with Jesus

Psalm 119 is an acrostic psalm. Each line in the first stanza begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each line in the second stanza begins with the second letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and so on throughout the psalm. In including the whole alphabet in this way, the psalmist conveys the idea of God's all-encompassing will.

Stanza One

¹Blessed and happy are those whose lives are blameless,
who follow GOD's law,

²Blessed and happy are those who keep GOD's decrees
seeking God with all their heart,

³who do no wrong, but follow GOD's way.

⁴You have laid down your precepts
to be observed with care.

⁵O that I was steadfast in keeping your statutes!

⁶I would be without shame,
if only my eyes were fixed on your commandments.

⁷I praise you with an upright heart,
as I learn your righteous judgments.

⁸Hold me close to you,
and I will observe your statutes.

Before commenting on Psalm 119, it is good to recall Psalm 19:7-11 (and see the reflection on page 71).

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

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

¹¹Your servant is enlightened by them.
In keeping them there is great reward.

‘Blessed and happy are those whose lives are blameless, who follow God’s law’ (verse 1).

1. For a reflection on ‘Blessed and happy’ see Psalm 1, page 18.

2. God’s law (‘Torah’)

It is important from the outset to state that the word ‘law’ does not satisfactorily convey the meaning intended by the Hebrew word *Torah*. The Concise Oxford Dictionary gives as its first definition of law: ‘a body of enacted or customary rules recognised by a community as binding.’ This is a fairly adequate definition of the Greek word *nomos* which the English ‘law’ translates. However behind the Greek *nomos* stands the Hebrew *Torah*, which is perhaps better translated as ‘instruction’, or ‘way’. It includes what we intend by ‘law’, but has a broader as well as a more precise application.

We find *Torah* being used for the way God reveals God’s will via a specific oracle issued by a priest or a prophet. From this it came to stand for the totality of the way God has revealed God’s Self and God’s will through the history of dealings with the people of Israel. In this sense *Torah* (‘law’) is synonymous with the whole of Israelite tradition, written (the Scriptures), and oral. In this sense ‘law’ can be the equivalent of ‘the religion of Israel.’

When the Scriptures were given a more definite form in the period after the exile, the word *Torah* came also to be used in a more restricted sense for the first five books of the Jewish canon: the Book of Genesis and the Books concerned with Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). An example of this usage is found in the Prologue to the Book of Sirach: ‘Many great teachings have been given to us through the Torah and the Prophets and the other Writings that followed them.’

For the rest of this reflection we use the word ‘law’ in its widest application as ‘the revelation from God found in the writings and traditions of Israel.’ This is the meaning it has in Psalms 19 and 119. Committed as he is to doing God’s will, the psalmist in Stanza One speaks also of God’s ‘decrees’ (verse 2; instructions backed by divine testimony), God’s ‘way’ (verse 3; the path we are to follow), God’s ‘precepts’ (verse 4; obligations of special importance), God’s ‘statutes’ (verse 5; God’s will engraved on stone or parchment), God’s ‘commandments’ (verse 6), and God’s ‘judgments’, (verse 7). Stanza Two will speak of God’s ‘word’ (verse 9; God’s will as revealed in creation and history), and God’s ‘promise’ (verse 11). In Psalm 119 the psalmist loves to play with all these words to speak of the centrality of obeying God’s will. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we recall his absolute commitment to doing the will of his Father (see texts quoted on pages 10-11).

Living according to the law as an experience of salvation

It is clear from the whole of the New Testament that the law (*Torah*) was treasured as a genuine revelation of God and that living according to the law was a genuine experience of salvation. This remained the understanding of the Christian community when the Church saw itself as distinct from the Jewish synagogue and was increasingly Gentile.

This is clear from the theological writings of Irenaeus. In his famous work *Against Heresies: a refutation and subversion of knowledge falsely so called* (180AD), he writes: 'God formed humankind ... but chose the patriarchs for the sake of humankind's salvation, and prepared a people ... and raised up prophets upon earth, accustoming people to bear his Spirit and to hold communion with God' (AH IV,14,2).

The Bible records the religious experience of a people, many of whom in living their religion came to close communion with God. One has only to pray the psalms to realise this truth. Using a remarkably evocative image, which applies not only to Judaism (the 'law') but to all that is genuine in every human religion, Irenaeus continues: 'God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation' (AH IV,14,2).

For Irenaeus, and for Christians generally, Christianity is not just one among many religions, including Judaism. We find expressions of the Word of God in every human expression of truth. We find the life-giving activity of the Spirit of God in every genuine religious experience. In Christianity, however, we have the Word of God finding perfect human expression ('incarnation') in Jesus. Once again, Irenaeus: 'The person who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God, and always acknowledging the same Word of God (although he has but now been manifested to us), and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God (although he has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times) will know that he descends even from the creation of the world to its end upon the human race, from whom those who believe God and follow God's word receive that salvation which flows from God' (AH IV,33.15).

The Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation ('*Dei Verbum*', 1965) reminds us: 'Through Moses, with the race of Israel, God acquired a people for God's Self, and to them he revealed God's Self in words and deeds as the one, true, living God, so that Israel might experience the ways of God with people' (DV n.14).

Jesus and the Law

Again and again the Gospels speak of Jesus fulfilling what has been written in the sacred Scriptures. From Jesus' opening words, it is clear that Matthew intends to portray Jesus as wanting to 'fulfil all righteousness' (3:15). In the wilderness, he remains obedient to God's will (4:1-10). He has come to fulfil the law and he demands obedience to God's revealed will from his disciples (5:17-19; 7:21; 12:50). Matthew would agree with Paul that the law is a 'gift' from God (Romans 9:4); that it is 'holy' (Romans 7:12) and 'good' (Romans 7:12) and 'beautiful' (Romans 7:16), and that it reveals God's fidelity to his covenant of love (what Paul calls his 'justice', Romans 1:32; 2:26; 7:12). It is God's Spirit who breathes through the law (Romans 7:14). Besides revealing God, it directs us how to respond to God, and therefore helps us to recognise our sinfulness (Romans 3:20; 7:7; Galatians 3:19).

Matthew presents Jesus as the goal of God's revelation found in the law. It is he who brings it to perfection. He demands the same perfection from his disciples who are to obey God's will from the heart with a 'righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees' (5:20; see 5:21 - 6:18). They can learn to do this only from the Son:

'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:27-30).

Jesus as the fulfilment of the law (and the prophets) is expressed dramatically in what is commonly called the Transfiguration: 'There appeared to the disciples Moses [symbolic of the law] and Elijah [symbolic of the prophets] talking with Jesus ... Then from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' ... When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone' (Matthew 17:3,5,8).

To obey God's will expressed in the law we must listen to Jesus and share in Jesus' faith, hope and love (Galatians 2:15-21; Romans 3:31; 10:4). It is because Christ lives in his followers that they are able to carry out the just requirements of the law (Galatians 3:2,5; Romans 8:4). It is the love of Christ experienced in the Christian community which is the fulfilment of the law (Galatians 5:14; 6:2; Romans 13:10). Jesus' relationship to the law is summed up in the opening words of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds' (Hebrews 1:1-2).

This same point is made by Irenaeus: 'The patriarchs and prophets sowed the word concerning Christ, but the Church reaped, that is, received the fruit ... both the sower and the reaper may rejoice together in the kingdom of Christ, who is present with all those who were from the beginning approved by God who granted them his Word to be present with them' (AH IV,25,3).

Likewise by the Second Vatican Council: 'The most intimate truth which revelation gives us about God and human salvation shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation' (DV, n.2). 'God taught them to look for the promised saviour. And so, throughout the ages, he prepared the way for the Gospel' (DV, n.3). 'Jesus Christ completed and perfected revelation' (DV, n.4).

Removing the limitations of the law

It is important to recognise the essentially human and so limited understanding of God and of ourselves that we find expressed in the Sacred Scriptures. See our reflection on this in Chapter one of this book. This point is stressed in a document issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). A few passages should suffice: 'Scripture reveals the meaning of the events which bring revelation to fulfilment and the events reveal the meaning of Scripture, that is, they require that certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted' (pages 91-92).

In other words all understandings found in the law concerning God, God's ways with the human race, and our response to God must be looked at anew in the light of the events that fulfil the law – that is to say, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: 'The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding' (page 94). 'The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute' (page 113). 'Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language' (pages 132-133).

The law, however good, was imperfect, incomplete. It had to give way before the revelation of the Word-made-flesh. Matthew, like Paul, held that the limitations and imperfections of the law had to be let go when they failed to express the revelation of God and of God's will given by him who is 'the lord of the sabbath' (12:8). Paul writes: 'You have died to the law through the Body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God ... We are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit' (Romans 7:4,6).

This does not mean that the law has lost its value. It does mean that it now has to be treasured as seen through the eyes of Jesus and as understood with his mind. The law indicates the way to communion with God, but now it has come to its goal, now we have experienced its flowering, now we can read it in its proper perspective and discern more accurately what is of God and where limited human perception was unable to receive God's Word without distortion.

Disciples of Jesus are not bound to observe all the detailed prescriptions of the law. Many of the laws will express lasting human values, values embraced by Jesus himself. A Jew, becoming a Christian, will find much in his religious tradition that is of lasting value. A Gentile, becoming a Christian, will be enriched by coming to know and follow the divine guidance found in the law. However, the early Christian community recognised that it was not necessary to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, for the basis of a person's communion with God was not conformity to the law but communion with Jesus. For Paul, as no doubt for many Jews who became disciples of Jesus, this was experienced as a deliberate and painful shift, likened to a death: 'By works of the law shall no one be justified ... For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose' (Galatians 2:16,19-21).

'If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the Law' (Galatians 5:18; see also Philipians 3:7-11).

‘Their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains, unlifted, because only through Christ is it being annulled. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts; but when a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed’ (2 Corinthians 3:14-16).

In Matthew’s Gospel we have already seen Jesus setting aside injunctions accepted as law by his contemporaries. Jesus touches lepers (8:3), eats with sinners (9:11). He does not follow the Sabbath regulations expected by the religious authorities of his day. Jesus’ followers did not follow the cultic food laws (Acts 10-11), nor did they accept the necessity of circumcision as a requirement of belonging to God’s people (Acts 15). Following Jesus’ teaching they did not accept the barrier between Jews (judged to be ‘holy’) and Gentiles (judged to be ‘unclean’).

It is still obvious today that people find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to let go practices which have been part of their religious identity. Many of Jesus’ contemporaries, especially those responsible for preserving the tradition, were no exception. Jesus was crucified because he was seen as a threat to the temple and to all that the temple stood for (26:61; see Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Jesus’ followers were to meet a similar fate (Acts 6:13; see Acts 7; re Paul, see Acts 21:28).

The other side to this is that many recognised in Jesus the fulfilment of their religious aspirations, and the flowering of the law. They found in his love the power to be liberated from sin – something they were unable to do within the confines of the law.

‘Blessed and happy are those who keep God’s decrees, seeking God with all their heart’ (verse 2). Note that obedience to the law is within the context of seeking God.

Stanza Two

⁹How can young people keep themselves pure?

By paying attention to your word.

¹⁰With all my heart I seek you; do not let me stray.

¹¹I treasure your word in my heart,

to avoid offending you.

¹²Blessed are you, O GOD; teach me your statutes.

¹³With my lips I recite the judgments you have uttered.

¹⁴I delight in your ways, more than in great riches.

¹⁵I meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your way.

¹⁶I delight in your statutes. I remember your word.

It is because we are ‘seeking God with all our heart’ that we ‘treasure God’s word in our heart’, that we ‘delight in following the way’ God reveals to us, that we ‘pay attention to God’s word.’ We do not want to ‘offend God’, or ‘stray’ from God’s way.

Stanza Three

- ¹⁷**Deal bountifully with your servant,
so that I may live and observe your word.**
- ¹⁸**Open my eyes, that I may behold
wondrous things in your law.**
- ¹⁹**I am a pilgrim on the earth;
do not hide your commandments from me.**
- ²⁰**My soul is constantly consumed
with longing for your judgments.**
- ²¹**You rebuke the insolent,
who wander from your commandments.**
- ²²**Save me from their scorn and contempt,
for I keep your decrees.**
- ²³**Even though princes sit plotting against me,
I, your servant, meditate on your statutes.**
- ²⁴**Your decrees are my delight; they are my counsellors.**

‘Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things in your law’ (verse 18). Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall Jesus’ ministry of healing the ‘blind’ (see Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52; John 9:1-41). Jesus wants us to see: ‘Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not in the lampstand?’ (Mark 4:21). Jesus wanted to enlighten (John 9:5). We recall Paul’s enlightenment on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-9). He calls us to be ‘a light to the world’ (Matthew 5:14).

In his letter to the Gentile churches Paul prays: ‘I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, *with the eyes of your heart enlightened*, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power’ (Ephesians 1:15-19).

‘I, your servant, meditate on your statutes’ (verse 23). See Psalm 63, page 197, for a reflection on ‘meditate’.

Stanza Four

²⁵**I lie in the dust; revive me by your word.**

²⁶**I tell you of my straying
and you answer by teaching me your statutes.**

²⁷**When you make me understand your precepts,
I recognise your wondrous works.**

²⁸**When I am numb with grief,
revive me with your word.**

²⁹**Turn me away from false paths,
graciously teach me your law.**

³⁰**I have chosen the way of faithfulness,
cherishing your judgments.**

³¹**O GOD, I cling to your decrees.
Do not disappoint me.**

³²**I hasten along the way of your commandments,
for you set free my heart.**

‘I have chosen the way of faithfulness’ (verse 30). See Psalm 116, pages 357-359 for a reflection on ‘faith’ and ‘faithfulness’.

‘I hasten along the way of your commandments for you set free my heart’ (verse 32). We recall Jesus’ words: ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’ (John 8:31-32). Jesus continues: ‘If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed’ (John 8:36). God’s commandments do not restrict our lives. On the contrary, they reveal how we are to live so as to be open to welcome God’s offer of God’s Self, God’s offer of love. When we ‘stray’ (verse 26), we are ‘numb with grief’ (verse 28). God’s response is to reveal the way we should walk. Praying this with Jesus we thank God that Jesus is ‘the way’ (John 14:6). Walking this way we are never alone, for Jesus is walking with us.

Stanza Five

- ³³Teach me, O GOD, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe them closely.
- ³⁴Help me understand your will,
that I may keep your law with all my heart.
- ³⁵Guide me along your path, for in it I delight.
- ³⁶Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.
- ³⁷Keep my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your way.
- ³⁸Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who revere ['fear'] you.
- ³⁹Keep me from the disgrace that I dread.
How good are your judgments.
- ⁴⁰See, I long for your precepts;
in your righteousness, give me life.

'Help me understand your will, that I may keep your law with all my heart' (verse 34). The history of Ancient Israel is a history of failure to 'keep God's law.' Hence the promise of Jeremiah: 'The days are surely coming, says GOD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says GOD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they will be my people' (Jeremiah 31:31-33; quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews 8:8-12).

This is reinforced by the prophet Ezekiel: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances' (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his gift of himself at the Last Supper, a gift which he saw as a fulfilment of the promises given by God through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jesus called it 'a new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20; see 1 Corinthians 11:25). Jesus is 'the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance' (Hebrews 9:15). Jesus asked his disciples to do what he is doing: to give our lives in love for each other, indeed for the world. Paul saw himself as graced to be 'a minster of the new covenant' (2 Corinthians 3:6).

For a reflection on 'Fear of GOD'(verse 38) see Psalm 2, page 24.

Stanza Six

⁴¹**Touch me, O GOD, with your covenant love.
Save me as you promised.**

⁴²**Then I will have an answer for those who taunt me,
for I trust in your word.**

⁴³**Let me speak the whole truth,
for my hope is in your judgments.**

⁴⁴**I keep your law, now and always will.**

⁴⁵**I walk freely, following your precepts.**

⁴⁶**I will speak of your decrees before kings,
and not be ashamed.**

⁴⁷**I find my delight in your commandments,
because I love them.**

⁴⁸**I revere your commandments, which I love,
and I meditate on your statutes.**

For a reflection on God's 'covenant love' (verse 41; Hebrew *hesed*) see Psalm 85, pages 261-262). Jesus offers more than a 'touch' (verse 1). He promises to live in our hearts, along with the Father and the Spirit: the communion in love which he shares with the Father (John 14:15-23; see John 17:26).

For a reflection on 'trust' (verse 42) see Psalm 27, page 96.

For a reflection on 'truth' (verse 43) see Psalm 12, pages 48-50.

For a reflection on 'hope' (verse 43) see Psalm 62, pages 191-192.

In verse 47-48 the psalmist speaks of his 'delight in God's commandments' and of 'loving' them and 'meditating' on them. We hear Jesus saying: 'I do nothing on my own. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29). At his baptism Jesus was overwhelmed by an experience of God's delighting in him (Mark 1:9-11). Jesus knew that God wants everyone 'to live, and to live to the full' (John 10:10). God reveals how we are to live so as to welcome the love that God is constantly pouring over us. Jesus knew this. Hence his commitment to respond to God's will with all his mind and soul and heart and will. He wants us to do the same, for this is the way to the life and happiness for which we are created.

Stanza Seven

⁴⁹**Remember your word to your servant.**

It has given me grounds for hope.

⁵⁰**This is my comfort in distress,
that your promise gives me life.**

⁵¹**The arrogant utterly deride me,
but I do not turn away from your law.**

⁵²**When I think of your judgments from of old,
I take comfort, O GOD.**

⁵³**Indignation seizes me because of the wicked,
who forsake your law.**

⁵⁴**Your statutes have been the subject of my songs
in the land of exile.**

⁵⁵**I remember you in the night, O GOD, and cherish your law.**

⁵⁶**This is what counts for me: to obey your precepts.**

For a reflection on 'comfort' (verses 50 and 52) see Psalm 86, pages 266-267. Exiled from his home, the psalmist rejoices that he finds his 'home' in knowing and obeying God's will. No one can take this from him. It gives him 'life' and 'grounds for hope.'

'This is what counts for me: to obey your precepts' (verse 56). Praying this with Jesus we recall his words: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3:35). Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Deuteronomy 8:3; see Matthew 4:4). And Paul writes: 'In Christ Jesus ... the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). Paul speaks of 'the obedience of faith' (Romans 1:5).

Stanza Eight

⁵⁷**YOU, O GOD, are my portion. I promise to keep your word.**

⁵⁸**I implore your favour with all my heart.**

Be gracious to me according to your promise.

⁵⁹**When I think of your ways, I turn my steps to your decrees.**

⁶⁰**I hasten, and do not delay to keep your commandments.**

⁶¹**Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me,**

I do not forget your law.

⁶²**At midnight I rise to praise you**

for your righteous judgments.

⁶³**I am a companion of all who revere ['fear'] you,
who keep your precepts.**

⁶⁴**The earth, O GOD, is full of your love;
teach me your statutes.**

'You, O GOD, are my portion' (verse 57). In Psalm 16 the psalmist says to GOD: 'I have no good apart from you' (Psalm 16, verse 2). Others choose other gods, but 'GOD is my chosen portion and my cup' (Psalm 16, verse 5). In Psalm 73 we read: 'My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever' (Psalm 73, verse 26). God has chosen us as his heritage: 'Blessed and happy is the nation whose God is GOD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage' (Psalm 33:12). And in turn God gives God's Self to us as ours.

'The earth, O GOD, is full of your love' (verse 64). Jesus revealed that it is this love that God wants to give everyone, without exception. George Herbert picks this truth up well in his poem:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack from my first entrance in,

Drew near to me, sweetly questioning if I lacked anything.

'A guest', I answered, 'worthy to be here'. Love said, 'You shall be he'.

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear, I cannot look on Thee'.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, 'Who made the eyes, but I?'

'Truth, Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame go where it doth deserve'.

'And know you not', says Love, 'who bore the blame?' 'My dear, then I shall serve'.

'You must sit down', says Love, 'and taste my meat'. So I did sit and eat.

Stanza Nine

- ⁶⁵**You have dealt well with your servant,
just as you promised.**
- ⁶⁶**Teach me right discernment and knowledge,
to put faith in your commandments.**
- ⁶⁷**Before I was humbled I went astray,
but now I obey your word.**
- ⁶⁸**You are good and your deeds are good;
teach me how to obey.**
- ⁶⁹**The arrogant smear my name with lies,
but with all my heart I keep your precepts.**
- ⁷⁰**Their hearts are cold and closed to good,
but I delight in your law.**
- ⁷¹**It is good for me that I was humbled,
so that I might learn your statutes.**
- ⁷²**Your law is better to me than untold wealth.**

The psalmist talks about being ‘humbled’ (verses 67 and 71). Praying this psalm with Jesus we hear his invitation: ‘Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls’ (Matthew 11:28-29). To be humble is to know that all we are and all we have is gift. It is to know the joy of being dependent, knowing that the One on whom we ultimately depend is God, our Loving Father/Mother. The only hope for the proud is to learn humility (see Matthew 23:12). Paul exhorts us: ‘As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience’ (Colossians 3:12).

‘Teach me how to obey’ (verse 68). Praying this psalm with Jesus, we turn to him and ask him to teach us how to pray. When his disciples asked this of Jesus he replied by telling us to begin, not by looking at ourselves, but by looking towards God, allowing ourselves to be caught up in awe, and wanting the whole world to enjoy God’s holiness and to know the joy of doing God’s will and so bringing about the reign of God’s love (Luke 11:1-2). Only then are we to think of ourselves, trusting our daily needs to God’s love, confident in God’s forgiveness, and in the knowledge that God will be with us in our trials.

Stanza Ten

⁷³**It was your hands that fashioned me.
Give me understanding that I may know your ways
and obey your commandments.**

⁷⁴**Those who revere you see me and rejoice,
because I hope in your word.**

⁷⁵**How right your judgments, O GOD,
how wisely you humble me.**

⁷⁶**Comfort me with your covenant love,
just as you promised.**

⁷⁷**Let your tender compassion cover me, that I may live,
for your law is my delight.**

⁷⁸**Let the arrogant be put to shame,
because they undermine me with guile.
As for me, I meditate on your precepts.**

⁷⁹**Let those who revere you turn to me,
so that they may know your decrees.**

⁸⁰**Keep me true to your statutes, free of all shame.**

‘It was your hands that fashioned me’ (verse 73). In Psalm 64, the psalmist prays: ‘O GOD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand’ (Psalm 64, verse 8). The wise teacher writes: ‘Like clay in the hand of the potter, to be moulded as he pleases, so all are in the hand of their Maker, to be given whatever he decides’ (Sirach 33:13).

‘How wisely you humbled me’ (verse 75; see Stanza Nine).

For a reflection on ‘comfort’ (verse 76) see Psalm 86, pages 266-267.

For a reflection on ‘covenant love’ (verse 76), see Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

For a reflection on God’s ‘tender compassion (verse 77; Hebrew rhm) see Psalm 85, page 261-262.

The psalmist pleads to God to ‘cover him’ with God’s tender compassion. We think of the cover of the ark in the inner temple and the plea to be with God there under the protecting wings of the cherubim. See the reflection on being in the ‘shade of God’s outstretched wings’ in Psalm 61, page 187.

Stanza Eleven

⁸¹I yearn for your salvation; I hope in your word.

⁸²My eyes grow dim from watching for your promise.

I ask, "When will you comfort me?"

⁸³I never forget your statutes.

⁸⁴How many days do I have left?

When will you punish those who persecute me?

⁸⁵The arrogant scheme to trap me; they flout your law.

⁸⁶Your commandments are true. My enemies know only lies.

I am persecuted without cause; be my strength!

⁸⁷They have almost made an end of me;

but I have not forsaken your precepts.

⁸⁸In your covenant love spare my life,

so that I may keep your decrees.

The psalmist knows the connection between covenant love and wanting to keep God's decrees. He knows God. This covenant love is his strength.

Stanza Twelve

⁸⁹**You, O GOD, exist forever;**

your word is firmly fixed in heaven.

⁹⁰**Your faithfulness endures to all generations.**

You have established the earth, and it stands firm.

⁹¹**According to your decree all exist to serve you.**

⁹²**If your law had not been my delight,**

I would have perished in my misery.

⁹³**I never forget your precepts,**

for by them you give me life.

⁹⁴**Save me, for I am yours.**

I seek your precepts.

⁹⁵**The wicked lie in wait to destroy me,**

but I observe your decrees.

⁹⁶**I have seen a limit to all perfection,**

but your commandment is boundless.

‘Your faithfulness endures to all generations’ (verse 90). For a reflection on God’s ‘faithfulness’ see Psalm 116, page 357-359.

‘Save me, for I am yours’ (verse 94). For a reflection on salvation see Psalm 62, pages 189-190. On the universal dimension of salvation see Psalm 87, pages 268-272.

‘I have seen a limit to all perfection’ (verse 96). Jesus invites us to ‘be perfect as your Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48). The kind of perfection to which we aspire is the kind of perfection we see in God as revealed by Jesus: perfection in the gift of self, perfection in love. We are limited in our capacity to love, until we can say with Paul: ‘It is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:21).

Stanza Thirteen

- ⁹⁷**How I love your law!**
It is my meditation all day long.
- ⁹⁸**Your commandment makes me wiser than my foes,**
for it is always with me.
- ⁹⁹**I have more understanding than my teachers,**
for I ponder your decrees.
- ¹⁰⁰**I understand more than the aged,**
because I keep your precepts.
- ¹⁰¹**I keep my steps from every false way,**
in order to follow your word.
- ¹⁰²**I do not turn away from your judgments,**
for you are my teacher.
- ¹⁰³**How sweet are your words to my taste,**
sweeter than honey.
- ¹⁰⁴**Through your precepts I get understanding;**
and so I hate every false way.

They wanted to remind themselves to keep God's law before their eyes and to carry out the law in their actions. Here the psalmist wants to keep the law 'always with me' (verse 98). He 'loves God's law' (verse 97) because it gives meaning to his life and keeps him grounded in God's love. 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey' (verse 103).

The Pharisees in Jesus' time wore, strapped to their foreheads and to their arms, containers holding key texts from their sacred writings (Matthew 23:5). In the Book of Exodus the people are instructed to remember God's freeing them from slavery in Egypt: 'It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of GOD may be on your lips; for with a strong hand GOD brought you out of Egypt' (Exodus 13:9).

Likewise Deuteronomy: 'Hear, O Israel: GOD is our God, GOD alone. You shall love your GOD with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates' (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; see 11:18).

- ¹⁰⁵**Your word is a lamp for my feet
a light for my path.**
- ¹⁰⁶**I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous judgments.**
- ¹⁰⁷**I am severely afflicted.
Give me, O GOD, the life you promise.**
- ¹⁰⁸**Accept, O GOD, my offerings of praise,
and teach me your judgments.**
- ¹⁰⁹**My life is continually at risk,
but I do not forget your law.**
- ¹¹⁰**For me the wicked lay snares,
but I do not stray from your precepts.**
- ¹¹¹**Your decrees are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.**
- ¹¹²**I incline my heart to perform your statutes
forever, to the end.**

‘Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path’ (verse 105). For a reflection on God as our ‘light’ see Psalm 27, page 96.

The psalmist knows that to receive ‘the life promised by God’ (verse 107), he must follow the path laid out for him by God, and revealed in the law. This is not because God’s offer of love is conditional, but because this is the only way we can open ourselves to receive the unconditional offer.

‘Accept, O GOD, my offerings of praise’ (verse 108). The Hebrew title for the book of psalms is ‘songs of praise.’

Stanza Fifteen

¹¹³**I have no love for the deceitful:
my love is for your law.**

¹¹⁴**You are my hiding place, my shield;
I hope in your word.**

¹¹⁵**Go away from me, you who do evil,
that I may keep the commandments of my God.**

¹¹⁶**Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live.
Let me not fail to attain that for which I wait.**

¹¹⁷**Hold me up, that I may be safe
and have regard always for your statutes.**

¹¹⁸**You spurn all who swerve away from your statutes;
their cunning is in vain.**

¹¹⁹**All the wicked of the earth you count as dross;
therefore I cling to your decrees.**

¹²⁰**In awe ['fear'] of you I tremble,
and I revere your judgments.**

We reflected on God's secret hiding place (verse 114) when reflecting on Psalm 31, page 105. This is the place Jesus told us to go to when we want to pray (Matthew 6:6). He promised that he would be there along with his Father and the Spirit of love that is their communion (John 14:16-23).

'Let me not fail to attain that for which I wait' (verse 116). See our reflection on 'hope' in Psalm 62, pages 191-192).

On 'fear of God' (verse 120) see the reflection on Psalm 2, page 24.

Stanza Sixteen

¹²¹**I live by justice and right;
do not abandon me to my oppressors.**

¹²²**Stand up for your servant's welfare;
do not let the godless oppress me.**

¹²³**My eyes tire from watching for your salvation,
and for the fulfilment of your promise.**

¹²⁴**Deal with your servant according to your covenant love,
and teach me your statutes.**

¹²⁵**I am your servant; give me understanding,
so that I may know your decrees.**

¹²⁶**It is time for GOD to act, for they are breaking your law.**

¹²⁷**Truly I love your commandments
more than the finest gold.**

¹²⁸**I direct my steps by all your precepts;
I hate ways that are false.**

For a reflection on 'justice' (verse 121) see Psalm 82, pages 249-251 and Psalm 85, page 263.

For a reflection on 'salvation' (verse 123) see Psalm 62, page 190-191 and Psalm 87, page 268-272.

For a reflection on 'covenant love' (verse 124) see Psalm 85, pages 261-262 and Psalm 61, page 188.

The psalmist calls himself God's 'servant' (verses 122, 124 and 125). Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his gesture of washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper – the action of a servant. He asked us to follow his example: to serve each other. However, he went on to say: 'I am not now calling you servants. I am calling you friends, because I have revealed to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (John 15:15). In its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, the Second Vatican Council wrote: 'From the fulness of his love, God addresses us as his friends, and moves among us in order to invite and receive us into his own company' (*Dei Verbum* n.2).

It is in our coming to know Jesus more intimately that we will come to know all he heard from the Father, having understanding to know God's decrees.

Stanza Seventeen

¹²⁹**Your decrees are wonderful;
I guard them with my life.**

¹³⁰**The unfolding of your word gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.**

¹³¹**Sighing for you, I long for your commandments.**

¹³²**Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I love to call on you.**

¹³³**Keep my steps steady according to your word,
never let evil master me.**

¹³⁴**Redeem me from human oppression,
that I may keep your precepts.**

¹³⁵**Make your face shine upon your servant,
and teach me your statutes.**

¹³⁶**My eyes stream with tears
over those who do not keep your law.**

‘The unfolding of your word gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple’ (verse 130). Praying this with Jesus we recall how ‘Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will”’ (Luke 10:21).

‘Sighing for you, I long for your commandments’ (verse 131). For a reflection on ‘longing’ see Psalm 11, page 46, Psalm 42, pages 133-135, and Psalm 63, pages 194-197.

‘Be gracious to me’ (verse 132). For a reflection on God’s graciousness see Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

‘Make your face shine upon your servants’ (verse 135). For a reflection of the Face of God see Psalm 31, pages 105-106.

‘My eyes stream with tears over those who do not keep your law’ (verse 136). Praying this with Jesus we recall the following scene: ‘As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “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 recognize the time of your visitation from God” (Luke 19:41-44).

Stanzas Eighteen to Twenty-one repeat themes already present in earlier stanzas.

Stanza Eighteen

- ¹³⁷You are righteous, O GOD, and your judgments are right.
¹³⁸You have established your decrees in righteousness and truth.
¹³⁹Zeal consumes me because my foes forget your word.
¹⁴⁰Your promise is well tested, and your servant loves it.
- ¹⁴¹I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.
¹⁴²Your righteousness is everlasting, and your law is true.
- ¹⁴³When trouble and anguish come upon me,
your commandments are my delight.
¹⁴⁴Your decrees are forever righteous;
give me understanding that I may live.

Stanza Nineteen

- ¹⁴⁵With all my heart I cry.
Answer me, O GOD. I will keep your statutes.
- ¹⁴⁶I cry to you; save me, that I may observe your decrees.
¹⁴⁷I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your word.
- ¹⁴⁸I am awake through the night,
meditating on your promise.
¹⁴⁹In your covenant love hear my voice, O GOD;
in your justice preserve my life.
- ¹⁵⁰Those who want to harm me draw near;
they are far from your law.
¹⁵¹But you, O GOD, are close,
your commandments are true.
- ¹⁵²Long ago I learned about your decrees
that you fixed for all time.

Stanza Twenty

- ¹⁵³Look on my oppression and rescue me,
for I do not forget your law.
- ¹⁵⁴Plead my cause and redeem me;
give me the life you promised.
- ¹⁵⁵For the wicked salvation is far off,
for they spurn your statutes.
- ¹⁵⁶Great is your tender compassion, O GOD.
give me life according to your justice.
- ¹⁵⁷Many are my persecutors and my adversaries,
yet I do not swerve from your decrees.
- [¹⁵⁸I look at the faithless with disgust,
because they do not keep your commands.]
- ¹⁵⁹See how I love your precepts.
Let me live in your covenant love.
- ¹⁶⁰Your word is founded on truth;
your righteous judgments endure forever.

Stanza Twenty-one

- ¹⁶¹Princes persecute me without cause,
but my heart stands in awe of your word.
- ¹⁶²I rejoice at your word like one who finds a treasure.
- ¹⁶³I hate and abhor all falsehood, because I love your law.
- ¹⁶⁴Seven times a day I praise you for your just judgments.
- ¹⁶⁵Great peace they have who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.
- ¹⁶⁶I hope for your salvation, O GOD,
and I fulfil your commandments.
- ¹⁶⁷I keep your decrees; I love them dearly.
- ¹⁶⁸I keep your precepts and decrees,
for all my ways are before you.

Stanza Twenty-two

- ¹⁶⁹**Let my cry come before you, O GOD;
give me understanding according to your word.**
- ¹⁷⁰**Let my supplication come before you;
rescue me according to your promise.**
- ¹⁷¹**My lips pour forth praise,
because you teach me your statutes.**
- ¹⁷²**My tongue sings of your promise,
for all your commandments are just.**
- ¹⁷³**Reach out, ready to help me,
for I have chosen your precepts.**
- ¹⁷⁴**I long for your salvation, O GOD,
your law is my delight.**
- ¹⁷⁵**Let me live that I may praise you,
let your judgments help me.**
- ¹⁷⁶**If I go astray like a lost sheep, seek out your servant,
for I never forget your commandments.**

Praying verse 175, we recall Paul's words about setting our hope on Christ so as to live for the praise of God's glory (Ephesians 1:12).

Praying the final verse of Psalm 119 with Jesus, we remember how he went out to rescue the 'lost sheep.' We read: 'When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Matthew 9:36). Jesus speaks of himself as 'the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep' (John 10: 11).

We recall his parable: "'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (Luke 15:3-7).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus 'the great shepherd of the sheep' (Hebrews 13:20). Peter writes: 'You were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls' (1 Peter 2:25).

Praying Psalm 120 (119) with Jesus

¹In my distress I cry to YOU, O GOD, seeking your response:

²O GOD, save me from lying lips and a deceitful tongue.'

³What do you expect to receive from God,
you who use words to deceive?

⁴A warrior's sharp arrows, with blazing, red-hot coals!

⁵Woe is me, that I live as an alien in Meshech,
dwelling among the tents of Kedar!

⁶For too long I have dwelt among those who hate peace.

⁷I call for peace, but they are for war.

This is the first of the psalms that bear the title: 'A Song of Ascents' (Psalms 120-134). A likely explanation of the title is that these psalms were sung in the caravans by pilgrims who were making their way up to the mountainous regions of Judah, to Jerusalem and the temple. Here in Psalm 120 the psalmist is either living in a foreign land, or the behaviour of his neighbours makes it feel that way. He is complaining how hard it is to live as an alien among people who have no regard for truth or peace. In his distress he is crying out to GOD.

Verse 3 has the form of a question. In fact it is an oath. It is the equivalent of saying: 'Let double be done to me if you are not punished!' The desired punishment follows in verse 4.

For a reflection on 'peace' (verse 7) see Psalm 85, page 263. Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his promise: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives' (John 14:27). Paul says of Jesus: 'He is our peace' (Ephesians 2:14). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews offers the following exhortation: 'Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord' (Hebrews 12:14).

Praying Psalm 121 (120) with Jesus

¹I lift up my eyes to the mountains.

Will my help come from there?

²My help comes from GOD,

the Maker of heaven and earth.

³GOD will not let you stumble.

Your guard does not sleep.

⁴Israel's guard neither slumbers nor sleeps.

⁵GOD is your guard, your shade,

always at your side.

⁶The sun will not harm you in the day,

nor the moon in the night.

⁷GOD will keep you from evil,

watching over you always.

⁸GOD will watch over you

as you go out and as you return,

now and forever.

The psalmist has a particularly fine sensitivity to rhythm. Among other elements, he picks up the final phrase of one verse and uses it to introduce the following verse, which expands the idea. The key theme is that GOD is the one who guards [Hebrew *samar*] Israel. This idea is expressed in the name 'Samaria', given to the capital city of the northern kingdom. The statement 'GOD is your guard' (verse 5) is exactly at the centre of the psalm. The psalmist also uses polarity (sun-moon, day-night, going-coming, now-forever) to emphasise the all-encompassing nature of his trust in GOD. This is the second of the psalms that bear the title: 'A Song of Ascents' (Psalms 120-134).

Verses 3 to 8 appear to be words of reassurance from the leader of the pilgrimage.

Special vigilance was expected of the guard during the hours of darkness (verses 3-4). We can all sleep securely, because GOD is watching over us. We call on God 'Awake, awake!' (Isaiah 51:9), but it is we who have not been vigilant, and so God responds 'Rouse yourself, rouse yourself!' (Isaiah 51:17), 'Awake, awake!' (Isaiah 52:1).

That GOD is watching over us is a theme often found in the psalms.

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

'GOD keeps guard over all their bones;
not one of them will be broken' (Psalm 34:20).

'GOD will command the angels
to guard you in all your ways' (Psalm 91:11).

'GOD guards the lives of the faithful' (Psalm 97:10).

'Guard me, O GOD, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent' (Psalm 140:4).

'GOD watches over strangers
and upholds the orphan and the widow' (Psalm 146:9).

In verse 1 the psalmist assured us that GOD, our guard, is not limited by space. In verses 7-8 he states that GOD's protection is not limited by time.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him pray: 'I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I guarded them' (John 17:11-12).

Paul assures us: 'The Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one' (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

Praying Psalm 122 (121) with Jesus

¹What joy when I heard them say,
'Let us go to GOD's house.'

²And now we are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³Jerusalem, you are built as a city
so integrated and compact.

⁴To you the tribes go up, the tribes of GOD.
Israel's law it is, there to praise GOD.

⁵There is the seat of judgment,
the throne of the house of David.

⁶For the peace of Jerusalem pray:
'Prosperity for all who love you!

⁷May there be peace within your walls,
security within your towers.'

⁸For love of family and friends
I pray: 'Peace be within you!'

⁹For love of the house of GOD,
I pray for your welfare.

The pilgrim is singing of Jerusalem. Verses 1-5 focus on the first part of the name 'Jerusalem.' 'Jeru' derives from the Hebrew *yarâ* meaning 'to lay stones', 'to found'. It is similar in sound to the Hebrew word for city, *'îr*. Jerusalem is called simply 'the city' in Psalm 87:1 and 3. Verse 1 recalls the pilgrim's joy when he was invited to join the pilgrimage. Verse 2 expresses his delight at having arrived at his destination. Verses 6-9 focus on '*salem*' (peace), the second part of the name 'Jeru-salem.' For a reflection on peace see Psalm 85, page 263.

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his lament: 'As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace!" (Luke 19:41). 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' (Matthew 23:37). We reflected on Jesus' love for Jerusalem in Psalm 2, page 24.

Praying Psalm 123 (122) with Jesus

**¹I lift up my eyes to you,
to you who are enthroned in the heavens.**

**²A male servant watches his master's hand,
a female servant, the hand of her mistress.
So our eyes look to our God,
waiting for a sign of God's favour.**

³Have mercy upon us, O GOD, have mercy upon us.

**⁴We have had more than we can take
of the scorn and contempt of the proud.**

The psalmist is being humiliated (verse 4). Does he belong to a social class in Judah that is being humiliated by others of their own people (see Nehemiah 5)? He looks to God, knowing that his real value is in relationship to God, and that God will never humiliate him.

'Mercy' (verse 3) translates the Hebrew *hanan* (to be gracious). For a reflection on graciousness see Psalm 85, pages 261-262. The Greek Septuagint translates verse 3 'Kyrie eleison' – words used in the Christian liturgy.

Praying this psalm with Jesus we think of him raised by the Father and enjoying divine intimacy 'enthroned in the heavens' (verse 1). We 'lift up our eyes to him' (verse 1), wanting to share his intimacy with God (verse 4). See the reflection on 'Love's gazing' in Psalm 11, page 46.

We keep our eyes on Jesus for we want to do the will of his Father as he reveals it to us. We want to be like servants, ready to do the will of their master or mistress. Jesus was 'obedient to the point of dying' (Philippians 2:8). We pray for the grace to share in Jesus' obedience.

Obedience is basic to Christian living. Obedience to God is as basic to prayer (including, of course, praying the psalms) as it is to every other aspect of our lives. Since 'there are many paths along this way of the Spirit' (Teresa of Avila Foundations 5.1), it is important that we follow the path along which God draws us. The goal of prayer is communion with God which John of the Cross defines as 'an habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God' (Spiritual Canticle 28.10). John is very direct: 'What does it profit you to give God one thing if God asks another of you? Consider what it is that God wants, and then do it. You will as a result better satisfy your heart than with whatever it is towards which you yourself are inclined (Sayings of light and love 70).

Teresa concludes her Life with the following prayer: 'May it please the Lord that I might succeed in doing the Lord's will in everything' (Life 40.24). In her Interior Castle she writes: 'The whole aim of any person who is beginning prayer – and don't forget this because it is very important – should be to prepare yourself with determination and every possible effort to bring your will into conformity with God's will. The greatest perfection attainable along the spiritual path lies in this conformity ... In perfect conformity to God's will lies all our good' (Interior Castle II.1.8).

This teaching on the radical importance of obedience is repeated by two Carmelite saints from the modern era. Having mentioned her spiritual yearnings, Therese of Lisieux writes: 'Now abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervour except the accomplishment of God's will in my soul, without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way' (Story of a Soul). Her contemporary, Elizabeth of the Trinity writes: 'The soul must surrender itself to the Divine will completely, passionately, so as to will nothing else but what God wills' (Heaven in Faith). In the final retreat before her death, she uses the image of harp string that is tuned so that it can sound the note intended by Christ when he chooses to play upon it, and she adds: 'The soul remains under his touch like a lyre, and all his gifts to it are like so many strings which vibrate to sing, day and night, the praise of his glory' (Complete Works Volume 1, page 158).

The importance of listening attentively

Communion in love between two people is possible only to the extent that they are able to listen to each other and are committed to do so. It is the transcendent God who takes the initiative in communicating with us, and God does so through God's Word and through God's Spirit. How can we respond if we are not listening for God's invitation to share God's life and to enjoy the intimacy of communion with God in prayer?

It is not accidental that the word for obedience in the Hebrew Bible is identical with the word for listening. Listening from the heart is essentially what obedience requires. In the Greek New Testament the word 'to obey' is based on the word 'to listen' with a prefix which adds the idea of listening from a position of submission. Our English word 'obedience' derives from the Latin, which, once again, is based on the word for 'listening'. In Latin the prefix 'ob' adds the idea of listening that is from right up close. To obey God is to be close to God and to be listening for the slightest expression of God's will, with the desire and intention of doing what God inspires us to do with all our heart and with joy, knowing that God's will is the most liberating thing we can do.

Jesus' obedience and the obedience he expects of his disciples

Jesus, whose prayer we are invited to share, constantly insists on the central importance in his life and in ours of wanting only what God wants and of being committed in all things to doing God's will. In essence Jesus is calling us to be attentive to the movements of God in our hearts and in our world. The reason for this is obvious. God is love and God is creating us moment by moment in love and for love. To be guided by God's inspiration is to be guided along the path of holiness. To resist God's inspiration is to resist the gravity of grace drawing us into divine communion.

Let us listen to Jesus as he resists the tempter: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4). Elsewhere we hear Jesus say: 'My food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete his work (John 4:34). It was the same, even when he found himself facing crucifixion: 'Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done' (Matthew 26:39, 42).

Jesus asks the same of his disciples: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

Obedience from the heart

God does not want us to obey blindly or automatically, without engaging our heart. God's will is discovered in the circumstances of our lives, but always invites a response from the heart. This is what we mean by conscience: an attentive listening to the movements of our heart that are inspired by God. If we are attentive to our heart and listen to the directions of God that are picked up by our conscience, and if we humbly and faithfully respond from our heart to these inspirations, we are promised a special blessedness.

If we are wondering how we are to listen to God and how we are to know God's will, we have the basis for an answer already. God is inspiring each of us, pouring God's loving Spirit into our hearts in the very best way, and wants us to welcome this gift and respond. We do not have to begin the conversation. Our primary task is to listen. To do this, we must, first of all, learn to live an attentive, reflective life, and to do this we must resist the temptation to live our life away from our hearts, for God is speaking to our heart.

The kanji for the Japanese 'busy' is made up of two elements. One stands for heart and the other for destruction. If we are 'busy' we are in danger of destroying our heart. Most of us live in cities, away from the natural, and generally slow-moving, rhythms of nature. Life is getting faster and faster, and it getting easier to flick a switch and fill up our time with whatever distraction is on hand. The speed of change has swept us up and gobbled us up. It is possible to spend a whole day without encountering moments that invite us to quiet reflection. We sense that this is not good. We sense that our heart is being destroyed. At the same time, to call a halt and make time and space to connect with our inner spirit can be quite difficult. At least many people find it so. My sense is that this is mostly because we are afraid of what we might find when we go deep into our hearts. This is our biggest mistake. When we are halfway in we do discover stuff we are not happy with. If only we dared to go right in! For then we would find what God sees. Then we would share in God's delight. Then we would discover the founts of energy that would enable us to make the changes that are necessary if we are to do what Jesus wants us to do: 'to live to the full'(John 10:10). If only we would make space for prayer, we would be in a position to hear God and respond to God, the source of our life who initiates the conversation and the communion.

Listening to others

Furthermore, we must realise that if God is speaking to us God is speaking also to others. We should listen attentively to those whose words issue from their prayer, for God speaks to us through them. In fact, because we are so prone to self-deception, God will always confirm God's inspirations to us by also inspiring those who genuinely care for our soul and are concerned for our spiritual growth.

John of the Cross writes: 'God is so content that the rule and direction of human beings be through other human beings, and that we be governed by human reason, that God definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence upon supernatural communications, or be confirmed in their strength and security, until they pass through the human channel of the mouth of another human being. As often as God reveals something, God confers upon the soul a kind of inclination to manifest this to someone appropriate. Until this is done, we usually go without complete satisfaction, for it is not received from another person like ourselves' (Ascent II.22.9).

We find an example of this in the conversion of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. He experienced Jesus in a dramatic and extraordinary way. Yet when he asked: 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' (Acts 22:10), Jesus did not tell him directly. Rather he told him to go into Damascus, and there a man called Ananias would tell him what to do.

So the more attentive we are to others and especially to the community of faith in which Christ has promised to be present, the more we will be able to listen to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4). To be obedient, therefore, we must be attentive to all the ways in which God speaks to us. While we listen to others, however, it is essential that we are also in touch with our own heart and listen there for the echo inside us, the echo that says 'Yes' or 'No' or 'Perhaps' to what we hear. The Spirit helps us to discern God's word in the many words that continually impact upon us.

Both Teresa and John consider the role of a spiritual director or confessor. We are, indeed, blessed if we can find a soul-companion to whom we can open our heart, holding nothing back and knowing that we are loved whatever our weakness or confusion. This is a safeguard against self-reliance. It offers to God a channel of grace that is free from our inherent capacity for self-deception.

Being a soul-companion for another person is a delicate art. People are as diverse as flowers and God has mysterious ways of leading each one into communion. If someone has entrusted the care of their soul to you, you should act towards them out of spiritual love: a love that is free of self-interest, seeking only their spiritual good. If we are to be helped by a soul-companion, we will need to have faith that God is working in and through them. We need to be simple and straightforward, revealing the state of our soul as we see it. How can the director, confessor or soul-companion be an instrument of the Physician of our soul if we are not honest or are selective in what we choose to reveal? If we have chosen to open our heart in trust to a spiritual guide with whom our soul feels at home, God will not let us down if we humbly listen to the words that come to us through the one to whom we are opening our soul.

As we listen to his or her words, let us listen to the echo of those words, the echo that arises in our heart. If we are humble, honest and prayerful, the Spirit of him who loves us will use the director's response to guide us.

Discerning what it is that God wills

Discerning God's will is sometimes quite difficult. People can be very confident that they are doing God's will, when it is obvious that they are deceiving themselves. On the other hand, people can be very unsure of themselves when it is clear that they are doing God's will. How do we know? What does doing God's will look like? Are there signs that show us that we are not doing God's will?

Much of what we have already touched on in this reflection is relevant here. We need to live an attentive, reflective life in touch with our own heart. We need to have an expectation that God is revealing God's will to us, and we need to be listening for it. However, we need to guard against putting too much trust in our own convictions. The fact that we judge that we are living a prayerful life is no guarantee that it is God's will that we are pursuing in our day to day life. Since God's will is revealed to us also through others, our listening to others, including spiritual direction, is essential.

Suffice to add here that we must see what happens when we do what we think God is calling us to do. Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians is useful here. He writes: 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23).

If it truly is God's will that we are doing, we will find ourselves growing in these virtues. If, by contrast, we find ourselves becoming less loving, we should have another look. It is likely that we are being deceived and are in fact resisting God's inspiration and not carrying out God's will. Likewise, if we are experiencing a disturbance and lack of joy that won't go away, we should look again at what we are doing. If we are doing God's will, even when this involves the cross, there will be a profound joy and a profound peace that sustains us below the pain and difficulty. Jesus felt abandoned on the cross but he was still able to address God as 'Father'; he was still able to commend his spirit into God's care. The same goes for the other virtues mentioned by Paul. Jesus said: 'It is by their fruits that you will know them' (Matthew 7:16).

Obedying a loving God

God is love. God is no lover of distraction, waste and mediocrity. God loves us and wants us to live as we have seen Jesus live: lives that are self-giving, life-giving and love-giving. God is love. Created in the image of God, we, too, are love. Love is not something we have. It is what we are. No wonder we want to receive love and give love. No wonder we are profoundly disturbed when we find ourselves unable to give or receive love. May we learn, like Jesus, to want God's will with all our minds, hearts, soul and strength. After all, it is God who creates us, holds us in being and draws us into the fullness of divine communion. To welcome God's offering of love is the path to maturity and to peace. It is the way of holiness. Wanting what God wants is wanting what is truly best for us and for our world.

Praying Psalm 124 (123) with Jesus

¹If GOD had not been on our side –
this is Israel's song –

²if GOD had not been on our side,
when enemies attacked us,
³they would have swallowed us alive,
when their anger was kindled.

⁴The flood would have swept us away,
the torrent gone over us;
⁵we would have been overwhelmed
by the raging waters.

⁶Blessed be GOD,
who did not give us as a prey to their teeth.
⁷We escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler.
The snare was broken, and we escaped.

⁸We called on GOD, who came to our aid,
GOD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

This is a hymn of thanksgiving to GOD for having saved the people from extreme danger.

The psalmist has experienced 'GOD on his side' (verse 1). Jesus' disciples came to see this even more profoundly through their experience of Jesus. So can we as we pray the psalm with him. At the Last Supper Jesus promised that after his death he would go before them into Galilee (Matthew 26:32), and his last words to them were: 'I am with you always to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).

Fire (verse 3) and water (verses 4-5) are the two elements most commonly used to describe destruction.

For the image of a bird escaping from the snare of a fowler (verse 7) see Psalm 57:6 and Psalm 91:1.

For a reflection on salvation see Psalm 62, pages 189-190.

Verse 8 is found also in Psalm 121:2.

Praying Psalm 125 (124) with Jesus

¹Those who trust in GOD are like Mount Zion.
They stand firm forever.

²As the mountains encircle Jerusalem,
so you, O GOD, embrace your people,
now and always.

³The rule of the wicked will not rest
on the land allotted to the just,
lest the righteous turn to evil.

⁴Do good, O GOD,
to those who are good, whose hearts are true.

⁵Peace be upon Israel!

Omitted

⁵Those who turn aside to their crooked ways,
may GOD send them to join the wicked.

This is a hymn of trust (verses 1-3), leading to a prayer of petition (verses 4-5). The prayer arises out of a situation in which some Jews, including those in power (verse 3), have given up their faith under foreign influence. It may come from the period of the Maccabees. The author looks to God's justice to set things right.

For a reflection on trust see Psalm 27, page 96.

The psalmist knows that God's judgment is just. He prays, therefore, that God would see to it that those who 'turn aside to their crooked ways' would suffer the judgment of the wicked (verse 5). We hear Jesus reaching out to them in love, wanting them to repent of their evildoing and find life for themselves, to the benefit of all. As Christians we join him in this prayer.

For a reflection on justice see Psalm 82, pages 249-251.

For a reflection on good government see Psalm 101, page 310.

For a reflection on peace see Psalm 85, page 263.

Praying Psalm 126 (125) with Jesus

¹When GOD restored the fortunes of Zion,
it seemed like a dream.

²Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
on our lips there were songs.

It was said among the nations,
'What marvels GOD worked for them.'

³Indeed, GOD has done great things for us.
We celebrate with joy.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O GOD,
like the watercourses in the desert.

⁵May those who are sowing in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

⁶They went out weeping,
bearing seed for sowing.
They come back, they come back, full of song,
carrying their sheaves.

This is a hymn of joy at the wonder of the return from Exile, when GOD faithfully carried out his promise to restore the fortunes of his chosen people. It was almost too good to be true (verse 1). Back home there is still much to be done. Hence the plea for a further restoration (verses 4-5), for an abundant harvest of joy. For a reflection on joy see Psalm 65, page 201.

Verses 5-6 recall an earlier psalm: 'Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the dawn' (Psalm 30:5).

Psalm 126 reminds us that the marvels God works, the great things done for the people are actually in the to-ing and fro-ing of everyday life, in the everyday ordinary yet absolutely essential sowing of seed and reaping of the harvest. This is another reminder of a God who is very much 'with us' (see the commentary on Psalm 124).

Praying Psalm 127 (126) with Jesus

¹If GOD does not build the house,
in vain do its builders labour.
If GOD does not guard the city,
in vain do the guards keep vigil.

²In vain is your earlier rising, your going later to rest,
you who toil for the bread you eat.
Those loved by GOD
receive love's gifts even while they slumber.

³Children are a gift from GOD,
a blessing for those who bear them.

⁴Like arrows in the hand of an archer
are children born to the young.

⁵Blessed and happy are those
whose quiver is filled with these arrows.
They will have no cause for shame
when they face their foes at the gate.

The psalmist is pointing out that all our human efforts are worthless if we are not relying on GOD. Verse 2 ('Those loved by God receive love's gifts even when they slumber') reminds us that what ultimately matters is our communion with GOD.

Where the above translation has 'children' in verses 3 and 4 the Hebrew has 'sons'. They were ignorant of the process of procreation. a tree produces a seed and the earth receives and nurtures it. They thought the male was the only source of human life and that the role of the female was to receive and nurture this life. In light of what we now know there is no place for this cultural bias favouring the male.

Praying Psalm 128 (127) with Jesus

¹How good it is to revere ['fear'] GOD,
to live in accordance with God's will.

²You will eat the fruit of your labour.
In everything you will prosper.

³Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
in the heart of your home.
Your children like shoots of the olive,
around your table.

⁴May this blessing be on those
who revere ['fear'] GOD:

⁵May GOD bless you from Zion.
May you see Jerusalem prosper.

⁶May you see your children's children.'

On Israel, peace!'

This is a psalm celebrating the positive value of work and the blessing and the joy of family life, including the family of Israel centred in the mother-city, Jerusalem.

One theme expressed in this psalm is that genuine communion with God involves ethical obligations, 'living in accordance with God's will' (verse 1). This involves 'labour' (verse 2). If we obey God's wise will, our lives will be blessed and happy.

Another theme is that of the vine and the olive (verse 3). The vine is a symbol of the joy experienced by Israel in the love of God for his people Israel (Isaiah 32:12). The olive is a symbol of fruitful Israel (Jeremiah 11:16).

The blessing and the intimacy of which this psalm speaks invites reflection on the Church as the bride of Christ.

'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish ... For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body' (Ephesians 5:25-27, 29-30).

Saint Cassiodorus writes of the ultimate reality of the Church:

‘The gathering of all faithful saints in one soul and one heart, the bride of Christ, the Jerusalem of the life to come.’

Psalm 128 also invites us to reflect upon an ancient tradition in the Christian community which speaks of God and of Christ as our Mother. In his commentary on Psalm 101:7, ‘I am made like to the pelican in the desert’ (the Hebrew is Psalm 102:7, and has ‘owl’), Augustine writes: ‘Christ exercises fatherly authority and maternal love just as Paul is also father and mother ... through his gospel preaching.’ Augustine is referring to Paul’s statement to the Thessalonian community: ‘We were gentle among you, like a mother tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God ... As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children’ (1 Thessalonians 2:7-11).

Saint Anselm writes:

‘You, too, good Jesus, are not you also a mother? Is not he a mother who like a hen gathers his chicks beneath his wings (Matthew 23:37)? Truly, Lord, you are a mother too’ (*Proslogion*, line 446).

For a reflection on ‘Fear of God’ (verses 1 and 4) see Psalm 2, page 24; also Psalm 33, page 110 and Psalm 47, page 146.

For a reflection on peace see Psalm 85, page 263.

Reading Psalm 129 (128) with Jesus

Part One: The oppression suffered by the people

¹They attacked me from my youth – so says Israel –

²but they have not prevailed against me.

³They ploughed my back with deep furrows,

⁴but GOD, who is just,

has broken the yoke of the wicked.

Part Two: The psalmist wants to see the oppressors punished

⁵May all who hate Zion be repulsed.

⁶Let them be like grass on the rooftop,

that withers before it flowers.

⁷The reapers do not get to handle the grass,

nor is it bound into sheaves.

⁸Those who pass by do not say:

‘The blessing of GOD be upon you!

In GOD’s name we bless you!’

This is a prayer that those who oppose Jerusalem will be thwarted and deprived of God’s blessing. The people have been treated cruelly. They have been used as slaves, yoked like farm animals, pulling the plough and turning the mill wheel.

The psalmist wants ‘all who hate Zion’ (verse 5) to wither (verse 6), to miss out on a harvest (verse 7) and to be deprived of a blessing (verse 8). They do not belong to the people, and so are separated from GOD.

The psalm is not found in the Christian Lectionary. It appears in the Prayer of the Church in the Prayer during the Day for Thursday Week 4. From a human point of view, the feelings are understandable, but fall short of Jesus’ exhortation that we love our enemies (see Matthew 5:43-48). Reflecting on this psalm with Jesus we hear his words from the cross to those who were responsible for his being crucified: ‘Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34).

Praying Psalm 130 (129) with Jesus

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O GOD.

²God*, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive to my pleading!

³If you, O GOD, should mark our guilt,
who would survive?

⁴But with you there is forgiveness.

For this we revere you.

⁵I wait for you, I long for you, O GOD.

I count on your word.

⁶I am longing for you

more than watchmen for daybreak,

more than watchmen for daybreak.

⁷O Israel, hope in GOD

For with GOD there is covenant love,

and great power to redeem.

⁸Israel indeed will be redeemed

from all its iniquity.

Traditionally, Psalm 130 is numbered among the penitential psalms (see also Psalms 6, 12, 38, 51, 102 and 143). Though Jesus is innocent (see the reflection on Psalm 6, pages 33-34), he prays this psalm in solidarity with us sinners.

The psalmist is deeply aware of the terrible consequences of sin. Relying on God's goodness, he cries out to God in his distress, and calls on Israel to do the same in the certain knowledge that God will redeem his people. A key image is that of 'watching'. God is watching the sinner (verse 3) and the sinner is watching for God (verse 6).

'Forgiveness' (verse 4) is something that characterises God. As sinners we must approach God humbly in the hope of receiving this gracious gift. For a reflection on forgiveness see Psalm 65, page 200. Praying this psalm with Jesus we remember that 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:2). 'Christ gave himself a ransom for all' (1 Timothy 2:6). '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). 'By your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation' (Revelation 5:9).

'God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins' (Colossians 1:14).

While waiting with expectant hope for God's mercy, however, we are not to be presumptuous: 'Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?' (Romans 2:4).

The sinner is watching eagerly for the dawning of God's mercy and the liberation this will surely bring. As Christians we think of the morning of Jesus' resurrection and we look forward to the morning of our own. For a reflection on longing (verse 5) see Psalm 11, page 46, Psalm 42, pages 133-135, and Psalm 63, pages 194-197.

For a reflection on hope (verse 7) see Psalm 62, pages 191-192.

In verse 7 personal prayer expands out to include the whole assembly. Forgiveness is an expression of God's covenant love and an experience of liberation. For a reflection on covenant love see Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

Verse 8 is the only text in the Hebrew Scriptures in which redemption is extended to *all* sin.

Praying Psalm 131 (130) with Jesus

¹O GOD, I am not proud,
holding my head too high,
reaching beyond my grasp.

²I have calmed myself and stilled my longing.
I am at peace, like a weaned child
resting in its mother's arms.
My whole being is at rest.

³O Israel, hope in GOD, now and forever.

The psalmist is humbly aware of his limitations and dependence on God. His confidence is not based on himself but on God's presence and care for him.

In place of 'calmed' (verse 2) the Greek Septuagint has 'humbled' – one of only two texts in the Septuagint that use the verb 'tapeinophroneô', meaning 'to think of oneself in a lowly way'. The other text is Proverbs 29:23: 'One who is lowly in spirit will obtain honour.' In the Greek world humility was considered a vice, the equivalent of having low self-esteem. In Jesus it took on a new meaning. Jesus was happy to be dependent like a child. He delighted in calling God 'Abba!' for he knew God's unconditional love. He was content to rely on this love. For a reflection on humility see Psalm 18, page 67.

The child has been weaned, but the mother is still there for the child, who is calm, at peace, and 'resting in its mother's arms.' So the psalmist calms his desires, his irrational fears and the turmoil of his feelings, resting and placing his 'hope' in God. For a reflection on hope see Psalm 62, pages 191-192.

By extension one can see God as a mother and the psalmist as a child being calmed by God.

'It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took him up in my arms ... I led him with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to him like a person who lifts an infant to her cheek. I bent down to him and fed him' (Hosea 11:3-4).

'It was you who took me from the womb; you entrusted me safe on my mother's breasts. Placed on your lap from my birth, since my mother bore me you have been my God' (Psalm 22:9-10).

'You will be suckled and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you' (Isaiah 66:12-13).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall his words: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18:3).

Praying Psalm 132 (131) with Jesus

¹O GOD, remember David
and the many hardships he endured;
²and how he swore an oath to you,
O Mighty One of Jacob:

³I will not enter my house
or lie down on my bed;
⁴I will not close my eyes, nor will I sleep,
⁵till I find a place for GOD,
a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob.'

⁶We heard of the ark in Ephrathah;
we found it in the fields of Yearim.

⁷Let us go to GOD's house;
let us kneel at GOD's footstool.'

⁸Rise up, O GOD, and go to your resting place,
you and the ark of your might.

⁹Let your priests be properly attired,
and your faithful shout for joy.

¹⁰For your servant David's sake
do not deny audience to your anointed one.

¹¹You once swore to David
and you do not break your word:
'A son of yours I will set on your throne.

¹²If your heirs keep my covenant
and the decrees that I have made,
their sons also, forever more,
will sit on your throne.'

¹³GOD has chosen Zion for his residence:

¹⁴'This is my resting place,
I have chosen to live here forever.

¹⁵I will bless it abundantly.

Its poor will have food.

¹⁶Its priests I will clothe with salvation.

Its faithful will shout for joy.

¹⁷Here David's stock will flower.

I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.

¹⁸His enemies I will cover with disgrace,

but on him the royal crown will shine.'

Psalm 132 is a ceremonial chant recalling the transfer of the ark to David's city (2 Samuel 6) and then to the temple (1 Kings 8). It recalls the link between David's desire to build God a house and God's promise to build a house (that is, a dynasty) for David (2 Samuel 7).

The transfer of the Ark to Jerusalem is being recalled, and perhaps ceremonially re-enacted. 'Ephrathah' (verse 6) is the region of Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem (see 1 Chronicles 4:4). David came from this area. 'Yearim' (verse 6) refers to Kiriath-yearim where the ark was installed after being captured back from the Philistines (1 Samuel 6:21 - 7:2).

The 'faithful' (verse 9; Hebrew *hasidim*) are those who welcome God's covenant love (Hebrew *hesed*) and are faithful to the covenant. For a reflection on 'faithful' (also verse 16) see Psalm 116, pages 357-359. For a reflection on covenant love see Psalm 85, pages 261-262. For covenant love and faithfulness see Psalm 61, page 188.

Verses 11-12 give a powerful affirmation of faith at a time when there was no king in Judah. God's promises are always unconditional. However they are effective only when welcomed - and this involves an 'if' - 'If your heirs keep my covenant and the decrees that I have made' (verse 12). The writers of the New Testament saw this promise realised in Jesus, the son of David. In his address on the Feast of Pentecost, Peter stated: 'Since he was a prophet, David knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne ... Let the entire house of Israel know that God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2:30, 36).

'Its priests I will clothe with salvation' (verse 16). For a reflection on salvation see Psalm 62, pages 190-191.

'I have prepared a lamp for my anointed' (verse 17). See Psalm 18: 'It is you, O God, who light my lamp; it is you who illumine my darkness' (Psalm 18:28). For a reflection on light see Psalm 27, page 96.

Praying Psalm 133 (132) with Jesus

¹How good and pleasant it is to live in communion!

²It is like precious oil poured on Aaron's head,
running down his beard and the collar of his robe.

³It is like the dew of Hermon,
falling on the mountains of Zion.
There GOD gives blessing: life forever.

Psalm 133 is a celebration of family, of nation, of cultic community. As Christians we pray it with Jesus, thinking of the Church of the Risen Christ. Is the psalmist expressing longing for the reunification of northern and southern kingdoms? (see Isaiah 11:13 and Ezekiel 37:22-23). He is expressing the importance and joy of unity in the community. Praying this psalm with Jesus we think of Paul's beautiful words to the Christian community in Philippi: "If then there is any appeal in Christ, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition. Do not strive after or seek to find your value in things that are worthless, but in humility regard others above yourselves, so that not everyone is focused on themselves, but each is looking to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:1-5).

The fragrance of the 'precious oil' (verse 2) passes from the priestly mediator right through to the assembly. The collar of the priest's robe is embroidered with twelve precious stones for the tribes of Israel. Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall Paul's words: 'Through us Christ spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him' (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Our thoughts as we pray this psalm are on the Church, the Body of Christ: 'I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose' (1 Corinthians 1:10). 'Love never stops caring. Love always acts in a kind way. Love does not act out of jealousy or envy. Love does not boast, or behave in an arrogant way. Love does not act indecently, or insist on its own way. Love does not give way to irritation or brood over wrongs. Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

For a reflection on the communion we have in God see Psalm 16, pages 59-60 and Psalm 73:23-28, page 222.

Praying Psalm 134 (133) with Jesus

¹Come, bless GOD
you who minister in GOD's house,
who stand watch throughout the night.

²Lift up your hands in the holy place,
and praise GOD.

³I pray that GOD, the Maker of heaven and earth,
will bless you from Zion.

This is the last of the group of psalms (120-134) which bear the title 'A Song of Ascents.' The pilgrims have reached their destination, 'GOD's house' (verse 1), 'the holy place' (verse 2). They can rest secure because God is guarding them (see Psalm 121).

When we are invited to 'bless God' we are being invited to praise and thank God for the blessings that God showers upon us. Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall the welcome offered in Jesus' parable of the Final Judgment: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' (Matthew 25:34). We recall also Paul's words: '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).

Praying Psalm 135 (134) with Jesus

¹Praise GOD (Alleluia!), O servants of GOD,

²you who stand in the house of GOD,
in the courts of the house of our God.

³Praise GOD who is good;
sing to our beautiful GOD,

⁴who has chosen Israel as a treasured possession.

⁵I know GOD is great;
our God*, the greatest of the gods.

⁶Whatever GOD wills GOD does,
in heaven and on earth, and in the depths of the sea.

⁷GOD summons the clouds from the ends of the earth;
releasing lightning and rain, and wind from their storehouse.

The traditional legend

⁸It was GOD who struck down the first born of Egypt,
humans and animals alike;

⁹who sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt,
against Pharaoh and all his servants;

¹⁰who struck down many nations
and killed mighty kings,

¹¹Sihon, king of the Amorites, Og, king of Bashan,
and all the kings of Canaan;

¹²who gave their land to Israel for them to possess.

Verses 8-12 repeat the classical account of the miraculous beginnings of Ancient Israel. The account of GOD striking down the firstborn of Egypt is found in Exodus 12:29. It is a dramatic way of stating that God's chosen people (God's firstborn) are the Israelites, not the Egyptians. The story of the war between the Israelites and King Sihon is found in the Book of Numbers 21:21-32 and in Deuteronomy 2:26-37. The story of the war with King Og is found in the Book of Numbers 21:33-35 and in Deuteronomy 3:1-7. We are dealing here with legend, not history.

The Exodus occurred most probably in the Late Bronze period (13th century BC). The Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein and the Israeli historian Neil Silberman in their book *The Bible Unearthed* (The Free Press, 2001) write: 'Excavations at Tel Heshban south of Amman showed that there was no Late Bronze city there, not even a small village ... The plateau of Transjordan was very sparsely inhabited in the Late Bronze Age. In fact most parts of the region, including Edom, which is mentioned as a state ruled by a king in the biblical narrative, were not even inhabited by a sedentary population at that time. To put it simply, archaeology has shown that there were no kings of Edom there for the Israelites to meet' (page 64).

GOD did not 'strike down the firstborn of Egypt', nor did GOD 'strike down many nations and kill many kings.' GOD did not strike down 'all the kings of Canaan and give their land to Israel for them to possess.' In using this language, the psalmist is making sure that all credit for the founding of Israel must go to GOD. Unfortunately the cost for doing so is to distort the image of God as a warrior warlord. This is not Jesus' image of God, and so fails as Christian prayer.

**¹³Your name, O GOD, endures forever,
your renown, throughout all ages.**

**¹⁴You vindicate your people,
and comfort your servants.**

**¹⁵The gods of the nations are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.**

**¹⁶They have mouths, but they do not speak;
eyes, but they do not see;**

**¹⁷ears, but they do not hear,
nostrils, but they do not breathe.**

**¹⁸Those who make them become like them,
as do all who put their trust in them.**

**¹⁹House of Israel, bless GOD!
House of Aaron, bless GOD!**

**²⁰House of Levi, bless GOD!
You that revere ['fear'] GOD, bless GOD!**

**²¹Blessed from Zion be GOD, who resides in Jerusalem.
Praise GOD! (Alleluia!)**

Psalm 135

Psalm 135 is an invitation to the assembly to praise GOD, the Creator and Liberator of his people Israel. It abounds in quotations and traditional statements of faith.

Praying it as Christians we think of the risen Jesus: 'He was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 1:4). 'He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Corinthians 15:25).

The invitation to join in praising GOD is followed by an expression of faith in the fact that Israel is precious to GOD. 'Treasured possession' (verse 4) translates the Hebrew *sēgulla*, which occurs only here in the psalms and only a handful of times in the Hebrew Bible. The classical text is in the Book of Exodus: 'If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples' (Exodus 19:5). We find it in Deuteronomy: 'You are a people holy to GOD, your God, who has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession' (Deuteronomy 7:6; also 14:2; 26:18). The prophet Malachi declares: 'They shall be mine, says our Mighty GOD, my special possession' (Malachi 3:17).

For a reflection on 'comfort' (verse 14) see Psalm 86, pages 266-267.

Verse 18 ('Those who worship false gods become like them, as do all who put their trust in them') has a warning for us all. We are expert in creating false gods. We need to be constantly attentive and weed out our false images before they take deep root.

For a reflection on 'fear of GOD' (verse 20) see Psalm 2, page 24; also Psalm 33, page 110 and Psalm 47, page 146.

Praying Psalm 136 (135) with Jesus

Psalm 136 is a hymn of joyous admiration which finds expression in wave after wave of jubilant thanksgiving.

¹Give thanks to GOD who is good!

Your covenant love endures forever!

²Give thanks to the God of gods!

Your covenant love endures forever!

The response appears in other psalms: 'Give thanks to GOD who is good. Your covenant love endures forever' (Psalm 106:1). 'Give thanks to GOD who is good. Your covenant love endures forever' (Psalm 107:1). 'Give thanks to GOD who is good. Your covenant love endures forever' (Psalm 118:1). 'Your covenant love, O GOD, endures forever' (Psalm 138:8)

It is possible that the litany form with the assembly proclaiming after each statement 'Your covenant love endures forever' was used with a variety of repeated responses in other psalms, without appearing in the text.

The history of Israel is part of Jesus' history and so the history of his disciples. We can sing this hymn thinking also of the Passover effected by Jesus, and the many wonderful ways in which God has proved victorious in the obstacles that have faced us on our journey to the enjoyment of communion with God.

Part One: God the Creator (verses 4-9)

⁴You alone create all that is!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁵Your wisdom it was made the skies!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁶You established the earth on the seas!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁷It was you who made the great lights!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁸The sun to rule in the day!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁹The moon and stars in the night!

Your covenant love endures forever!

Part Two: God the Liberator (verses 10-22)

- ¹⁰**Egypt's first-born you struck!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ¹¹**You brought Israel out from their midst!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ¹²**All with your mighty power!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ¹³**You divided the Red Sea in two!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ¹⁴**You made Israel pass through the midst!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ¹⁵**You drowned Pharaoh and his army in the sea!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ¹⁶**Through the desert your people you led!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ¹⁷**Nations in their greatness you struck!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ¹⁸**Kings in their splendour you slew!**
Your great love endures forever!
- ¹⁹**Sihon, the king of the Amorites!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ²⁰**Og, the king of Bashan!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ²¹**You let Israel inherit your land!**
Your covenant love endures forever!
- ²²**To keep it as their own!**
Your covenant love endures forever!

For a reflection on the traditional legend of the beginnings of Ancient Israel see the commentary on verses 8-12 of Psalm 135, pages 412-413.

Part Three: Concluding Verses

²³**You remembered us in our distress!**

Your covenant love endures forever!

²⁴**You rescued us from our foes!**

Your covenant love endures forever!

²⁵**You give food to all living things!**

Your covenant love endures forever!

²⁶**We give thanks to our God in heaven,**

Your covenant love endures forever!

Praying these concluding verses with Jesus, we think of his agony and passion, and how God ‘remembered him in his distress’ (verse 23). and ‘rescued him from his foes’ (verse 24) in raising him from the dead.

God’s ‘giving food to all living things’ (verse 25) is dramatically expressed in the scenes of the feeding in the wilderness. The first (Mark 6:30-44) is in Jewish territory; the second (Mark 8:1-10) is in Gentile territory. In both scenes Jesus is moved with God’s compassion (see Mark 6:34 and 8:2). We also recall Jesus’ words after the account of the multiplication of bread given us by John: ‘My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven ... The one who eats this bread will live forever’ (John 6:55-58).

Indeed, God’s ‘covenant love endures forever.’

Praying Psalm 137 (136) with Jesus

¹By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept remembering Zion.

²On the willows we hung up our harps.

³Our captors called for songs of joy: 'Sing us a song of Zion!'

⁴How could we sing a song of our GOD on alien soil?

⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

⁶If I fail to remember you, let my tongue cleave to my mouth –
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

(Verses 7-9 are not in the liturgy.)

⁷Remember, O GOD, the Edomites
on the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!'
Down to its foundations!'

⁸Babylon, you devastator!
Blessed and happy are those who repay you
for what you have done to us!
⁹Blessed and happy will they be who take your children
and dash them against the rock!

This is one of the finest lyric poems of the Psalter. It is a lament or elegy, a resistance song for those in exile who refused to give up hope of returning to Jerusalem.

For a reflection on Jesus' love for Jerusalem see Psalm 2, page 23.

In 1578 John of the Cross composed a ballad on Psalm 137. The first seven verses are inspired by Psalm 137 verses 1-2.

1. By the rivers of Babylon I sat down weeping,
there on the ground.
2. I remembered you, O Zion whom I love, and in that sweet memory,
I wept the more.
3. I removed my festive garments, and put on the clothes of a slave.
I hung on the green willows the music which gave me joy.
4. I put it aside in hope for that which I hoped for in you.
There love wounded me and took away my heart.
5. I begged love to kill me, since it had wounded me so.
I cast myself into its fire, knowing that it burned,
6. removing the guilt of the young bird that would die in its flame.
I was dying in myself, and breathing in you alone.
7. I died within myself for you, and for you I came back to life,
because the memory of you gave life and took it away.

From John's ballad, some further verses inspired by Psalm 137 verses 5-6:

11. May my right hand be forgotten
– the hand I used with such love when home in you –
12. if I do not remember you, my greatest joy,
or if I celebrate one day of festival, or feast at all without you.
13. Blessed is He in whom I have placed my trust.
14. He will gather his little ones, and me, who wept because of you,
to the rock who is Christ, for whom I abandoned you, O Babylon.

Praying Psalm 138 (137) with Jesus

¹I thank you, O GOD, with all my heart,
for you have heard me.
In the presence of the gods I sing of you.

²I bow toward your holy temple,
giving thanks for your covenant love and faithfulness.
You display to all the glory of your name and your word.

³On the day I called, you answered,
you increased the strength of my soul.

⁴All earth's kings will praise you, O GOD,
when they hear your word of command.

⁵They sing of your ways: 'How great is the glory of GOD.'

⁶Though high up, you watch over the lowly.
Though far away, you keep an eye on the haughty.

⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you reach out and save me.

⁸You, O GOD, will fulfil your purpose for me.
Your covenant love, O GOD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

The psalmist is praising and thanking God for God's covenant love, trusting that God will not forsake him and 'will fulfil God's purpose for me' (verse 8). We recall the words of Jeremiah: 'Surely I know the plans I have for you, says GOD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope' (Jeremiah 29:11).

For a reflection on thanksgiving (verse 1) see Psalm 21, page 75.

The psalmist is placing GOD before other gods (verse 1) in obedience to the Decalogue (Exodus 20:3). Compare Psalm 96:4-5.

'Bowing toward the temple' (verse 2) was a traditional custom (see 1Kings 8:31, 33, 38,44, 48; Daniel 6:10).

For a reflection on 'covenant love' (verses 2 and 8) see Psalm 85, pages 261-262. For a reflection on 'covenant love and faithfulness' (verse 2) see Psalm 61, page 188. For a reflection on 'faithfulness' (verse 2) see Psalm 116, pages 357-359.

For a reflection on 'glory' (verses 2 and 5) see Psalm 57, pages 178-180.

Verse 8 lifts the psalm above the stereotyped earlier phrases, and is one of the finest expressions of hope in God to be found in the Bible. For a reflection on hope see Psalm 62, pages 191-192.

What God has done for us gives us the courage to keep trusting that the purpose of God, the 'Father of mercies' (2 Corinthians 1:3) will, finally, be realised in our lives. In the meantime, we are strengthened to trust that 'nothing will separate us from God's love' (Romans 8:35). 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:6).

Praying Psalm 139 (138) with Jesus

¹O GOD, you search me and you know me.

²It is you who know when I sit and when I stand.
You discern my inmost thoughts.

³You know if I am journeying or resting.
You know everything I do.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
you know, O GOD, what I am about to say.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶I find this overwhelming,
beyond my understanding.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I scale the heavens, you are there;
if I lie in the grave, you are there.

⁹If I were to take the wings of the dawn
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there you would lead me,
your right hand would hold me fast.

¹¹If I think night will hide me,
and darkness give me cover,

¹²to you darkness is not dark;
the night is as bright as the day.

¹³It was you who formed every part of me,
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I thank you for the wonder of my being,
for the wonders of all your creation.

¹⁴You watched my body taking shape,
when I was being formed in secret,
¹⁵You saw my body grow according to your design,
intricately woven, hidden from sight.

¹⁶All of my life was written in your book;
all the days that were prepared for me,
before any of them existed.

¹⁷How precious are your thoughts.
They are like countless grains of sand.

¹⁸To finish counting them
I would have to be, like you, eternal.

* * * * *

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴See if I follow crooked paths.
Lead me along your ancient way.

(Verses 19-22 are omitted. They are not used in the liturgy)

¹⁹O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would go away.

²⁰They speak of you maliciously,
and rise up against you to do evil!

²¹How I hate those who hate you, O God!
How I loathe those who defy you!

²²I hate them with a deadly hate.
I count them my enemies.

This is one of the most beautiful of the psalms. From beginning to end it is a reflection on God's knowing us. In the Scriptures to 'know' is not the same as to 'know about'. True, as the psalm says, God does know all about us. But the focus is not so much on information as on intimacy (see especially verses 13-15). We cannot escape God's gaze. We cannot hide from God. For a reflection on Love's gazing see Psalm 11, page 47.

Not that the psalmist wants to escape or hide. He prays in the concluding stanza: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts' (verse 23). He is confident that he is not 'following crooked paths.' He wants God to 'lead me along your ancient way' (verse 24). The language is reminiscent of Jeremiah: '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' (Jeremiah 6:16).

The psalmist senses God's hand upon him, and finds this 'overwhelming, beyond my understanding' (verses 5-6). He knows that God is leading him: 'your right hand holds me fast' (verse 10). How is it possible that the Transcendent God could have such a personal and intimate communion with us? We recall Paul's words: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!' (Romans 11:33).

'To you darkness is not dark; the night is as bright as the day' (verse 12). In his First Letter John writes: 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5). Nicodemus 'came to Jesus by night' (John 3:1). Jesus speaks to him about being 'born of the Spirit' (John 3:6), and goes on to say: 'This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God' (John 3:19-21). The psalmist wants God to scrutinise him. He is confident that God will see that he has not followed 'crooked paths' (verse 24). In the Book of Revelation the Risen Jesus declares: 'I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve' (Revelation 2:23).

Jesus wants his disciples to be 'the light of the world' (Matthew 5:14), and Paul pleads with the Christians of Philippi to be 'blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world' (Philippians 2:15).

Let us pray this psalm with Jesus, asking him to gaze into our hearts. Pray that he will pour his Spirit into our hearts to purify them of whatever it is that is blocking our welcoming of grace and our revealing this grace to others. Pray that he will find delight in seeing how transparent our souls are in knowing God, in knowing ourselves, and in knowing others.

Praying Psalm 140 (139) with Jesus

¹Deliver me, O GOD, from those who do evil;
protect me from the violent.

²They plan evil in their hearts;
they are always stirring up strife.

³Their tongues strike like a snake,
with the venom of the viper on their lips.

⁴Guard me, O GOD, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent, who plan my downfall.

⁵The arrogant have hidden a trap for me.
With ropes they have spread a net.
They have set snares along my path.

⁶I say to GOD, 'You are my God.
Listen to my supplications.'

⁷GOD, my God*, my strong deliverer,
on the field of battle you shield my head.

⁸Do not grant the desires of the wicked;
do not let their plots succeed.

(Verses 9-11 are omitted. They are not in the liturgy.)

⁹Let not those who surround me triumph;
let the mischief of their lips rebound to harm them.

¹⁰Heap burning coals upon them.
Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise.

¹¹Do not let the slanderer settle in the land.
Let evil stalk the violent and drive them to their ruin.

¹²I know that GOD upholds the cause of the needy,
and executes justice for the poor.

¹³The righteous give you thanks.
The upright live in your presence.

The psalmist is pleading for GOD's protection. As noted, verses 9-11 are not consistent with Jesus' response to the suffering inflicted on him, or of the response he asks from his disciples. We can pray verses 12-13. The psalmist is confident that GOD will hear his pleading. He 'knows that GOD upholds the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor' (verse 12). He identifies with 'the righteous who give thanks', the 'upright who live in God's presence' (verse 13).

Praying these words with Jesus we hear him say: 'Blessed and happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Matthew 5:8), and, 'If you love me, you will be loved by my Father, and I will love you and reveal myself to you' (John 14:21).

Praying Psalm 141 (140) in Jesus' Company

¹I call upon you, O GOD; come quickly to me!

Listen, as I call to you.

²Let my prayer rise to you like incense,

the lifting up of my hands like an evening sacrifice.

³O GOD, set a guard on my lips.

Watch my every word.

⁴Do not let my heart turn to any evil,

or consider doing what is wrong.

Let me never join the wicked

to indulge in their feasting.

⁵If the just correct me,

I take their rebuke as a kindness,

but the oil of the wicked will never anoint my head.

My prayer is continually against their wicked deeds.

⁶When they are handed over to those who will condemn them,
then they will learn that I have spoken the truth.

⁷Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the ground,
so will their bones be strewn at the mouth of the grave.

⁸But my eyes are turned toward you, O GOD, my God*;

in you I seek refuge. Do not leave me defenceless.

⁹Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me,
from the snares of those who do evil.

(Verse 10 is omitted. It is not in the liturgy)

¹⁰Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I escape.

The psalmist is under pressure to join forces with ‘those who do what is wrong’ (verse 4). They are enticing him to ‘indulge in their feasting’ (verse 4). He is severely tempted to go along with them; hence the intensity of his plea.

‘Do not let my heart turn to any evil’ (verse 4). The psalmist wants GOD to keep guard not only over his mouth, but also over his heart that he will not let attachment to pleasures distract him from obedience to the Torah.

He would prefer that the ‘just’ correct him (verse 5) than that he would betray the Torah. The author needs their correction to strengthen him against the temptations of the ‘good life’. He continues to pray against the disgraceful behaviour of those attempting to win him over to their cause (verse 5). When they fall they will realise that he has, indeed, ‘spoken the truth’ (verse 6).

He anticipates the judgment of God upon the wicked. They will be flung headlong as from a precipice into the gaping hole of the realm of the dead (verse 7).

There are sentiments in this psalm that do not fit with Jesus’ prayer. But we can pray it in his company. The psalm is a reminder to us of the fact that, living as we do in a world polluted by sin, it is difficult to avoid breathing in the contagion. We need to correct each other in love. One would hope that there was someone in our lives who cared enough about us to point out the error of our ways. If we don’t care that someone is behaving badly, we must not love that person very much.

Matthew chapter 18 has some wisdom to offer us on this matter. Matthew 18:1-5 records Jesus’ call for humility. If we correct someone from an assumed position of superiority, it is surely not going to work, for we will be putting the other person down and the person who is being corrected will experience the need to protect himself or herself from our put down. If we lack humility, if we think that we are better than the other person, it is better for us to leave the correction to someone else. Our pride cannot but distort our judgment.

After speaking of the need for humility, Jesus goes on to warn against giving scandal (Matthew 18:6-9). It is true that sometimes people are scandalised even though what is happening is in fact very good. The Pharisees were scandalised when Jesus ate with sinners and when he healed on the Sabbath. This was because of their narrow view of God and their refusal to look at what was really happening. We cannot please everyone. However, if people of good will, the people Jesus describes as ‘the little ones who believe in me’, are scandalised by the way in which we correct others, we can be sure that there is something wrong with our way of going about things.

Finally, having warned us not to look down on any person, Jesus speaks about the shepherd who goes off searching for the one stray sheep and reminds us: ‘It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost’ (Matthew 18:14).

Jesus also speaks about forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35). If we are going to correct people we must be ready to forgive them when they apologise and change their behaviour.

It is in this setting and against this background that Matthew gives us Jesus' words concerning how we should correct one another (Matthew 18:15-20).

Jesus' suggestion is that if a problem arises between two members of the Christian family, they should try to sort it out between themselves, with all humility and respect and readiness to forgive. Normally this would resolve the matter. However, sometimes things are too confused to be resolved in this way. Jesus suggests that we then seek the help of two or three others. If that doesn't work the matter should be taken to the community of those whom he calls elsewhere his 'brothers and sisters' (Matthew 12:50). We are to be brothers and sisters to each other.

If the person who is being corrected refuses to take any notice of the community, he or she is to be treated as a 'Gentile or a tax collector' (Matthew 18:17). Jesus may be telling the members of the community that their obligation ceases and that they must leave the unrepentant person to God. Hopefully, the good shepherd (Matthew 18:12-13) will find other ways to bring the unrepentant sinner back.

Central to this matter is the presence of Jesus among his disciples. The psalmist tells us that 'God dwells in the holy temple' (Psalm 11:4). Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon (died 135AD) says: 'When two are seated and discuss the Torah, the Shekinah resides among them' (The Sentences of the Fathers, III.3). Similarly, Jesus says: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' One recalls the child whom Jesus placed 'among them' (Matthew 18:2). Gathered around Jesus, his disciples experience the glory of Jesus' humble prayer, and, in the words of Paul: 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Please God, within the community there will be people who know and love us and who are willing to point out when we are falling short of living the life of a disciple. They want to see us in close companionship with Jesus. Please God we, too, will have the courage and the concern to go out after the straying sheep and point out the way back to the community and to Jesus. May we all do this humbly and with love and ever eager to forgive and to welcome each other to reconciliation.

Praying Psalm 142 (141) with Jesus

¹I pray, O GOD, I plead, I cry for mercy.

²I pour out all my troubles and tell of my distress.

³My spirit is faint. You know how I live.

You know the traps laid to ensnare me.

⁴See what they are doing!

There is no one who takes my part.

I have no means of escape.

I have no one to care for me.

⁵Urgently I cry to you, O GOD: 'You are my refuge.

You are all I have in the land of the living.'

⁶Give heed to my cry, for I am brought very low.

Rescue me from those who are hunting me down,

for they are too strong for me.

⁷Free me from this prison!

Then I will thank you.

The righteous will gather round me

to thank you for your kindness to me.

This is an intense plea – one of the most poignant and moving in the Book of Psalms. The psalmist is deeply 'troubled' and in severe 'distress' (verse 2). There is no escape. He cannot go forward. There is no going back because of those pursuing him (verse 6), and there is no help to right or to left. Help can come only from above. Note the lack of any plea that enemies be punished. We can surely pray this Psalm with Jesus in times of our own distress, trusting that God will hear our pleas.

Like Jesus on the cross, the psalmist is exhausted (verse 3). All he can do is cry out to God, which he does 'urgently' (verse 5). He is totally alone. 'No one takes his part'. There is 'no one to care for him' (verse 4), except God. Such is his trust in God's love that he can say: 'You are all I have in the land of the living' (verse 5). He begs God to free him (verse 7), and promises his own personal gratitude and that of the community. For a reflection on gratitude see Psalm 21, page 75.

Praying Psalm 143 (142) with Jesus

¹Hear my prayer, O GOD,
In your faithfulness be attentive to my prayer.
In your righteousness respond to my plea.

[²Do not judge me harshly, for no one is just in your sight.]

³The enemy pursues me, crushing my life to the ground,
making me sit in darkness like the dead, long forgotten.

⁴My spirit faints within me; my heart is numb.
⁵I remember the days of old. I ponder all your deeds.
I reflect on what you have done.

⁶To you I stretch out my hands.
For you I am thirsting like a parched and weary land.

⁷Answer me quickly, O GOD. My spirit is failing.
Do not hide your face,
or I shall be like those who go down to the grave.

⁸Let me hear of your covenant love in the morning,
for in you I trust.
Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.

⁹Rescue me, O GOD, from my enemies.
I have fled to you for refuge.

¹⁰Teach me to do your will, for you are my God.
Let your good spirit lead me in ways that are level and smooth.

¹¹For your name's sake, O GOD, preserve my life.
In your righteousness rescue me from my troubles.

(Verse 12 is omitted. It is not in the liturgy.)

¹²In your covenant love cut off my enemies,
destroy all who are against me, for I am your servant.

This is a supplication of one who is in a grave situation, persecuted by enemies (verses 3 and 9). It is possible that he is to face judgment 'in the morning' (verse 8), and is pleading with God to be there on his side. He relies on the faithfulness and justice of God.

'In your faithfulness be attentive to my prayer' (verse 1). For a reflection on God's faithfulness see Psalm 61, page 188 and Psalm 116, pages 357-359.

Aware that he is not innocent, he pleads with God not to judge him harshly, for 'No one is just in your sight' (verse 2). This is quoted by Paul in Romans 3:20.

'To you I stretch out my hands. For you I am thirsting like a parched and weary land' (verse 6). The psalmist's plea is very real. It consumes his whole body. For a reflection on longing ('thirsting') for God see Psalm 11, page 46; also Psalm 42, page 133-135 and Psalm 63, page 196.

In his acute distress the psalmist prays to God: 'Do not hide your face' (verse 7). See Psalm 31, pages 105-106.

For a reflection on God's 'covenant love' (verse 8) see Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

For a reflection on 'trust' see Psalm 27, page 96.

'Teach me to do your will, for you are my God' (verse 10). For a reflection on obedience see Psalm 123, pages 393-397.

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall the many times during his public ministry that he had to face criticism, rejection and persecution. We think especially of his trial before the Jewish Council and Pilate and his crucifixion. Though he felt abandoned even by God, he never lost faith in God's faithfulness and love. We ask Jesus to share his faith with us.

Praying Psalm 144 (143) with Jesus

¹Blessed be GOD, my rock, who trains my arms for battle,
²my covenant Lover, my fortress, my stronghold, my deliverer,
my shield, my refuge – You give me victory.

³O GOD, what are we human beings? Why do you care for us?
We are subject to death. Why do you think of us?

⁴We are no more than a breath; our days like a passing shadow.

⁵Lower your heavens, O GOD, and come down.
Touch the mountains. Wreath them in smoke.

⁶Flash your lightning. Rout the foe.
Let fly your arrows. Put them to flight.

⁷Reach down from on high. Rescue me from alien foes,
⁸*who speak nothing but lies, and swear that their words are true.*

⁹I sing a new song to you, O God.
I play on a ten-stringed harp.

¹⁰You are the one who gives victory to kings.
You rescue your servant David.

¹¹Save me from the cruel sword, deliver me from foreigners,
who speak nothing but lies, and swear that their words are true.

¹²May our sons flourish like saplings,
grown tall and strong from their youth.
May our daughters be graceful as columns,
adorned for a palace.

¹³May our barns be filled with produce of every kind.
May our sheep increase by thousands,
¹⁴and may our cattle be heavy with young.

May there be no breach in the walls,
no cry of distress in our streets.

¹⁵Blessed and happy the people on whom such blessings fall,
the people whose God is GOD.

Psalm 144 is a prayer for the prosperity of God's people, and the protection of the king. GOD is portrayed as a Warrior Warlord (verses 1-2 and 6). This is an image that we find throughout the psalms, but it does not fit with the God revealed by Jesus, and it is not appropriate as Christian prayer.

The psalmist is amazed that the Transcendent God would care for us mortal human beings. This is a theme that recurs in the psalms: 'What are we, mortal human beings, that you are mindful of us, that you care for us?' (Psalm 8:4). 'We human beings are no more than a breath. We pass away like a shadow' (Psalm 39:5-6). 'Our years come to an end like a sigh' (Psalm 90:9). My days are like a lengthening shadow; I wither away like grass' (Psalm 102:11).

His foes raise their right hands and swear by God, but their words are not to be trusted. Their right hand holds a sword that they turn against their king (verses 8 and 11).

In verses 12-15 the psalmist prays for God's blessing. Praying this psalm with Jesus we reflect on the blessings poured out on us from the Risen Jesus:

'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love, destining us for adoption as sons for himself through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he determined in himself as a plan for the fullness of time. His plan is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we Jews, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you Gentiles also, hearing the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believing in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as those who are God's possession to the praise of his glory' (Ephesians 1:3-14).

Praying Psalm 145 (144) with Jesus

¹I will extol you, my God and king,

²and never cease praising you.

³GOD is great and greatly to be praised;

a greatness that cannot be measured.

⁴One generation proclaims to the next what you have done,
recounting your mighty deeds.

⁵I ponder on the glorious splendour of your majesty.

I tell the tale of your wonderful deeds.

⁶They manifest your awesome power,
revealing your greatness.

⁷They celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and sing of your justice.

⁸GOD is gracious and tenderly compassionate,
long-suffering, abounding in covenant love.

⁹GOD is good to all, tenderly compassionate to all creation.

¹⁰All your creation praises you, O GOD,
and all your faithful bless you.

¹¹They speak of the glory of your reign,
and tell of your might.

¹²They make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your reign.

¹³Yours is an everlasting kingdom,
your dominion endures through all generations.
YOU are faithful in all your words, gracious in all your deeds.

¹⁴GOD upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.

¹⁵The eyes of all creatures look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.

¹⁶You open wide your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.

¹⁷GOD is just in every way,
offering covenant love in everything GOD does.

¹⁸GOD is near to all who call,
who cry to God from their hearts.

¹⁹GOD fulfils all our desires; hears our cry and saves us.

²⁰GOD watches over all who love,
but the wicked are destroyed.

²¹My lips will praise GOD,
and everyone will bless GOD's holy name
forever, for ages unending.

Psalm 145

A key theme in Psalm 145 is that of totality and comprehensiveness. This is expressed by the acrostic form (the first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the second verse with the second letter; and so on). Totality is also clearly stated in the following verses:

‘I will extol you, my God and king, and never cease praising you’ (verses 1-2).

‘GOD is faithful in all his words, loving in all his deeds’ (verse 13).

‘Everyone will bless GOD’s holy name forever, for ages unending’ (Psalm 21).

Psalm 145 is a psalm praising GOD, the king:

‘I will extol you, my God and king’ (verse 1).

‘They speak of the glory of your reign,
and tell of your might.

They make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your reign.

Yours is an everlasting kingdom,
your dominion endures through all generations’ (verses 11-13).

The reign of GOD is gracious, for he cares for and saves especially the weak and needy:

‘GOD upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.
The eyes of all creatures look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
You open wide your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing’ (verses 14-16).

‘GOD fulfils all our desires; hears our cry and saves us.
GOD watches over all who love’ (verses 19-20).

Various characteristics of GOD are praised:

1. GOD is great and powerful.

‘GOD is great and greatly to be praised;
a greatness that cannot be measured.
One generation proclaims to the next what you have done,
recounting your mighty deeds.
I ponder on the glorious splendour of your majesty.
I tell the tale of your wonderful deeds.
They manifest your awesome power, revealing your greatness’ (verses 3-6).

‘They speak of the glory of your reign, and tell of your might.
They make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your reign’ (verses 11-12).

2. GOD's glory.

'I ponder on the glorious splendour of your majesty' (verse 5).

'They speak of the glory of your reign, and tell of your might.
They make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your reign' (verses 11-12).

3. GOD is good.

'They celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness' (verse 7).

'GOD is good to all' (verse 9).

4. GOD is just.

'They sing of your justice' (verse 7).

'GOD is just in every way' (verse 17).

5. GOD is gracious.

'GOD is gracious' (verse 8).

'YOU are gracious in all your deeds' (verse 13).

6. GOD is tenderly compassionate.

'GOD is tenderly compassionate (verse 8).

'GOD is tenderly compassionate to all creation' (verse 9).

7. GOD is long-suffering.

'GOD is long-suffering' (verse 8).

8. GOD's covenant love

'GOD is abounding in covenant love' (verse 8).

'GOD offers covenant love in everything GOD does' (verse 17).

9. GOD is faithful.

'You are faithful in all your words' (verse 13).

10. GOD is close.

'GOD is near to all who call, who cry to God from their hearts' (verse 18).

11. GOD is holy.

'Everyone will bless GOD's holy name' (verse 21).

‘God is gracious and tenderly compassionate, long-suffering, abounding in covenant love’ (verse 8). This is the creedal formula found throughout the Hebrew Bible. See reflection on Psalm 85, pages 261-262. As we pray this with Jesus we recall scene after scene where we see Jesus’ tender compassion, remembering Jesus’ words: ‘If you see me, you see the Father’ (John 14:9).

Commenting on God’s tender compassion and long suffering love (verse 9), Origen, the first great Christian Scripture scholar, in his commentary on Ezekiel writes:

‘The Father, God of the universe, long suffering, full of mercy and compassion - is it possible that he does not suffer in any way? Do you not know that when he undertook human affairs he underwent human suffering? If people call on him he is moved with compassion and shares their pain, he suffers greatly from love and enters into the experience of things which, because of the greatness of his nature, he cannot of himself experience. For our sakes he takes upon himself human suffering’ (PG 13,715).

‘All your faithful bless you’ (verse 10). These are the *hasidim* – those who welcome God’s covenant love (*hesed*) and are faithful to the covenant.

‘You are faithful in all your words’ (verse 13). For a reflection on faithfulness see Psalm 116, pages 357-359.

‘You satisfy the desire of every living thing’ (verse 16). For a reflection on longing see Psalm 11, page 46; also Psalm 42, pages 133-135 and Psalm 63, pages 194-197.

For a reflection on God’s covenant love’ (verses 8 and 12) see Psalm 85, pages 261-262).

‘God is near to all who call, who cry to God from their hearts’ (verse 18). How the psalmist would have loved to see Jesus! Jesus himself said: ‘Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it’ (Matthew 13:17). How near God comes to us in Jesus!

‘Everyone will bless God’s holy name’ (verse 21). For a reflection on holiness see Psalm 99, pages 303-307.

Praying Psalm 146 (145) with Jesus

¹Praise GOD (Alleluia). Praise GOD, O my soul!

²I will sing praises to GOD all my life long,
making music to my God while I live.

³Put no trust in princes, in human beings who must die.

⁴When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that day their plans come to nothing.

⁵Blessed and happy are those who are helped by Jacob's God,
whose hope is in GOD,

⁶who made the heavens, the earth and the seas,
and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever.

⁷GOD keeps faith forever.

GOD is just to the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry, and sets prisoners free.

⁸GOD opens the eyes of the blind.

GOD lifts up those who are bowed down.

GOD loves the righteous.

⁹GOD watches over strangers

and upholds the orphan and the widow.

GOD thwarts the path of the wicked.

¹⁰GOD reigns forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise GOD (Alleluia)!

Psalm 146 is an invitation to praise GOD because of who GOD is – a God who cares for those who place their trust in him.

‘Blessed and happy are those who are helped by Jacob’s God’ (verse 5). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: ‘Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16).

In verses 7-9 the psalmist lists ten characteristics of God.

1. ‘God keeps faith forever’ (verse 7). This means that God will keep all the promises he has ever made to you and to your children and to the world. We will never be without God’s love, no matter how dark the road may seem. Can we believe this when things are going hard for us? Sometimes we have found ourselves unable to keep promises we have made - and sometimes it is because the promises turned out to be unwisely made. Sometimes circumstances that are too complex to unravel have simply brought us to exhaustion and we have had to let promises go. Could we look at the central promises that are still functioning in our lives? Relying on God’s grace could we ask to be more open to the Spirit which God is certainly offering us to find more effective ways of keeping the promises which we made in baptism and confirmation to carry on Jesus’ mission of love in this world. Praying the psalm with Jesus we hear his exhortation: ‘Believe in God and believe in me’ (John 14:1).

2. ‘God is just to the oppressed’ (verse 7). If we believe that God executes right judgment for the oppressed, then a lot of people must not be listening or responding to grace. If we were, the world would not be such an unjust place. Is God asking me or you to reach out in one or other area of oppression and do what we can, always respecting persons and in love, to put injustices right? Little help is gained by being overwhelmed by a huge list. God is the one who is just to the oppressed, so the real question is: Is God inspiring me, or us as a community, to do something in a specific area. If so am I willing to listen and to begin responding? We are mindful of Jesus’ words: ‘Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?’ (Luke 18:7).

3. ‘God gives food to the hungry’ (verse 7). Praying this with Jesus we recall the scenes where Jesus gave food to the hungry (see Mark 6:34-44; 8:1-10). We recall also the Last Supper when, in ritual, Jesus gave himself in such a way that he would always be with us, nourishing a hunger and a thirst that is for more than food and drink. Can we love God without sharing his longing to reach out to meet people’s hunger - for bread, for love, for a listening ear, for dignity, for a place and a home?

4. ‘God sets prisoners free’ (verse 7). If so many people are locked into racism and prejudice and destructive addictions, and inability to forgive, it is not because grace is lacking. It must be because so many are insensitive to grace and failing to respond to the inspiration of God’s loving Spirit to go out and help unlock the prisons that we create in our fear.

We recall Matthew's introduction to Jesus' ministry in Galilee: 'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned' (Matthew 4:16). Luke sets out Jesus' agenda in a scene in the Capernaum synagogue: '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).

5. 'God opens the eyes of the blind' (verse 8). Jesus caused the 'blind' to 'see' (Matthew 9:30; 11:5; 20:29-34). We think too of Paul's enlightenment on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:3).

6. 'God lifts up those who are bowed down' (verse 8). We recall Jesus' words as he heals a crippled woman: 'Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' (Luke 13:16).

7. 'God loves the righteous' (verse 8). Jesus made it clear that God loves everyone, including those we might think of as God's enemies. What is special about the 'righteous' is that they welcome God's love, whereas the unrighteous are closed to it.

8. 'God watches over strangers' (verse 9). We think of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Also Jesus' exhortation: 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind' (Luke 14:12-13). Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall Jesus' parable about the Ultimate Judgment: 'The king will say to those at his right hand, '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).

9. 'God upholds the orphan and the widow' (Verse 9). Jesus points to a widow as the one who perfectly exemplifies the essence of discipleship: 'A poor widow came and put in two copper cent pieces. Jesus called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury' (Mark 12:42-43).

10. 'God thwarts the path of the wicked' (verse 9). The scene of the repentant thief who was crucified with Jesus reveals God's love for each of us, right to the end (Luke 23:39-43). But love does not impose itself. Like the thief we must open our hearts to welcome the love we are offered. The path of sin leads only to death, the death of separation from God.

'God reigns forever' (verse 10). '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).

Praying Psalm 147 (146 and 147) with Jesus

For the second time, the Greek Septuagint has two psalms where the Hebrew has one (see Hebrew Psalm 116, which is Greek Psalms 114 and 115). The result is that by the end of Psalm 147, the Greek is no longer numbered one behind the Hebrew.

Part One (verses 1-11; Greek Bible Psalm 146)

Part One is a call to praise GOD who sustains his creation and cares for those who look to God for love.

¹Praise GOD (Alleluia)!

**How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for our God is gracious. To God our praise is due.**

²GOD builds up Jerusalem, and bring back Israel's exiles.

³GOD heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds.

**⁴GOD determines the number of the stars,
calling each by name.**

**⁵Great and almighty is our God*,
with wisdom that can never be measured.**

**⁶GOD lifts up the oppressed,
[but humbles the wicked to the dust.]**

**⁷O praise GOD in song,
giving thanks with all your heart.
Make melody to our God on the lyre.**

**⁸It is GOD who covers the heavens with clouds,
preparing rain for the earth, making grass grow on the hills.**

**⁹GOD gives the animals their food,
and the young ravens when they cry.**

¹⁰GOD's delight is not in horses, or in a warrior's strength.

**¹¹GOD takes pleasure in those who revere ['fear'] GOD
in those who trust in GOD's covenant love.**

* * * * *

Part Two (verses 12-20; Greek Bible Psalm 147: 1-9)

Part Two continues the theme of GOD as creator with the focus more on Jerusalem and on the special care GOD has for his chosen people.

¹²**Praise GOD, Jerusalem! Zion, praise your God,
¹³who strengthens the bars of your gates,
 and blesses your children within you.**

¹⁴**GOD grants peace on your borders,
 and feeds you with finest wheat.**

¹⁵**GOD sends out a word to the earth,
¹⁶showers down snow like wool,
 and scatters hoar-frost like ashes.**

¹⁷**GOD hurls down hail like crumbs.
 The waters are frozen at GOD's touch.
¹⁸GOD sends out the command, and melts them.
 At GOD's breath the ice melts and the rivers flow.**

¹⁹**GOD speaks words to Jacob, statutes and ordinances to Israel –
²⁰words unknown to other nations. Praise GOD (Alleluia)!**

‘God builds up Jerusalem, and bring back Israel’s exiles’ (verse 2). There were those in the early Christian community who shared the perspective of the psalmist. Others saw that the God revealed by Jesus welcomed people into communion as they are. They did not need to change their culture to belong to the Christian movement. What was required of them was that they open their hearts to Jesus’ Spirit and learn to love as Jesus loved.

‘God heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds’ (verse 3). We see this beautifully revealed in the ministry of Jesus. Matthew writes: ‘When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’ (Matthew 9:36). ‘Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick’ (Matthew 14:14). ‘Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way”’ (Matthew 15:32).

Paul calls on us as disciples of Jesus to open our hearts to make space for Jesus’ compassion: ‘As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion’ (Colossians 3:12).

For a reflection on ‘Fear of God’ (verse 11) see Psalm 2, page 24; also Psalm 33, page 110 and Psalm 47, page 146.

For a reflection on ‘covenant love’ (verse 11) see Psalm 85, pages 261-262.

Praying Psalm 148 with Jesus

¹Praise GOD (Alleluia)! Praise GOD from the heavens,
from the heights.

²Praise GOD, all you angels,
all you heavenly beings!

³Praise GOD, sun and moon.
Praise GOD, you glittering stars.

⁴Praise GOD, you highest heavens
and you waters above the heavens!

⁵Let them praise GOD,
for GOD commanded and they were created.

⁶It was GOD who established them,
fixing their place forever and ever.

⁷Praise GOD from the earth
you creatures of the deep,
⁸fire and hail, snow and frost,
storms and winds, carrying out GOD's commands.

⁹Praise GOD you mountains and hills,
you fruit trees and cedars,
¹⁰you wild beasts and tame, reptiles and birds.

¹¹Praise GOD you princes and judges,
you rulers and subjects,
¹²men and women, old and young.

¹³Let them praise GOD, who alone is exalted,
whose glory is above the earth and the heavens.

¹⁴GOD gives strength to the nation,
and glory to the faithful of Israel,
a people who are close to GOD.
Praise GOD (Alleluia)!

Psalm 148

Humankind, acting like a conductor, summons all of creation to offer praise to God, and orchestrates the choirs of heaven and of earth to produce a cosmic harmony in honour of the Creator.

The disciples' experience of Jesus led them to expand their notion of God to include Jesus. Paul invites us to praise God incarnate in Jesus: 'God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that 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 2:9-11).

Praying Psalm 149 with Jesus

¹Praise GOD (Alleluia)! Sing to GOD a new song.
Praise GOD in the assembly of the faithful.

²Let Israel exult in its Maker.
Let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

³Let them dance for GOD,
make melody with timbrel and harp.

⁴GOD delights in the people, and crowns the poor with victory.

⁵O you faithful exult in your glory. Take your rest and sing for joy.

⁶Let the praises of God resound on your lips.

Verses 7-9 are omitted

⁷Brandish swords in your hands,
to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,

⁸to bind their kings in chains, and their nobles in fetters of iron,

⁹to execute on them the judgment decreed.

This is your glory, you faithful of God. Praise GOD (Alleluia)!

‘Praise GOD in the assembly of the faithful’ (verse 1). The ‘faithful’ (hasidim) are those who live by the ‘covenant love’ (hesed) of God. The psalmist is calling on them to defend Zion with their lives (verses 7-9).

‘Let them dance for GOD’ (verse 3). Is this a sword dance – a ritual celebration of victory in battle?

The sentiments of verses 7-9 need radical re-interpretation in the light of Jesus’ teaching. During his arrest in Gethsemane Jesus said to one of his followers: ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword’ (Matthew 26:52). Paul speaks about ‘the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’ (Ephesians 6:17). In the Letter to the Hebrews, too, the ‘sword’ is God’s word (see Hebrews 4:12). Also in the Book of Revelation: ‘From his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force’ (Revelation 1:16; see 2:12).

Praying Psalm 150 with Jesus

¹Praise GOD (Alleluia)! Praise God in the sanctuary!
Praise God in the mighty firmament!

²Praise God's mighty deeds!
Praise God's surpassing greatness!

³Praise God with trumpet blast!
Praise God with lute and harp!

⁴Praise God with tambourine and dance!
Praise God with strings and pipe!

⁵Praise God with the beating of drums!
Praise God with the clashing of cymbals!

⁶Let everything that lives and breathes praise GOD!
Praise GOD (Alleluia)!

This, the last psalm in the psalter, is a hymn praising GOD in the temple that GOD has chosen as his abode. The psalmist, however, is going beyond the temple building. He is calling on the temple of heaven (verse 1), and the temple of the whole of creation (verse 6) to acclaim God's 'surpassing greatness' (verse 2).

As we come to this psalm, praying it with Jesus, we pray that our whole lives will be, in Paul's words, for the praise of God's glory: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love, destining us for adoption as sons for himself through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he determined in himself as a plan for the fullness of time. His plan is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we Jews, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you Gentiles also, hearing the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believing in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as those who are God's possession to the praise of his glory' (Ephesians 1:3-14).

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