

03a. Introducing the Psalms



Naming God

God's sacred 'name' ('HaShem'): the Hebrew word יהוה [YHWH]



This is a personal address for God, generally regarded as a verbal form derived from the root היה (hyh): 'to be/to cause to be'.



‘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).

Moses was the one chosen to carry out God’s will and God assured him: ‘I will be **אֶהְיֶה** with you’ (Exodus 3:12). Moses wanted to know God’s name but had to be content with knowing that **אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה** (Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν): ‘**I will be who I will be**’. ‘You shall say to the Israelites, “I will be **אֶהְיֶה**, has sent me to you ... **יְהוָה** [YHWH], 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 write **יהוה** the scene of the burning bush is meant to come to mind, and so the image of a God who is determined to liberate us from slavery, indeed from anything that stops us ‘living to the full’ (John 10:10), in intimate communion with God and so in a rich and truthful relationship with creation, especially with the people who inhabit our lives.



Throughout this translation God is referred to as follows as

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

(372 times)

GOD (upper case) translates the Hebrew יהוה (YHWH) (758 times)

{ יהוה Spoken: אֲדֹנָי ('Adonai) = 'Κύριος' = LORD }

When GOD is being addressed,

I have sometimes replaced GOD with YOU.

God* translates the Hebrew word for lord ('Adonai). (38 times)

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

Psalm

The word 'psalm' comes from the Greek verb psallein, meaning to pluck a stringed instrument with the fingers.

Later it was used more generally for 'to make music' or 'to sing'.

psalterion is a harp.

psalmos refers to the plucking with the fingers, and later to the song plucked in this way.



Sing psalms (*psalmos*) and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody (*psallein*) to the Lord in your hearts' (Ephesians 5:19).

Jesus speaks of the Book of Psalms in Luke 20:42: 'David himself says in the book of Psalms, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand".',

and again in Luke 24:44: 'Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.'

- Some of the psalms are not so much prayers as reflections on God's action in creation and in the history of the people of Israel, or on the meaning of life, or on the advantages of living in accordance with the covenant
- Others celebrate the position of the king and Jerusalem and the temple in the life of the people.
- Most of the psalms, however, are prayers addressed to God which found their way into, or were composed for, the liturgical prayer of the community of ancient Israel and Judah.

The psalmists did not know Jesus. Their image of God is sometimes very different from that of Jesus. Jesus did not see God as a warlord who can be called on to destroy enemies. Jesus did not see God as consumed with vengeance, as punishing sin, as controlling.

I have attempted to leave out sentiments that Jesus could not have prayed, so that we, as Christians, can continue the ancient tradition of adapting the psalms in the light of new experience. In this case it is the experience of Jesus.

o3b Psalms 1 and 2

Praying Psalms 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 (יְהוָה)
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.

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

Psalms 1 is a reflection on a choice that each of us faces:
a choice between a way of behaving that leads to life
and a way of behaving that leads to destruction.

The psalmist is congratulating those who choose life, as
well as reminding us that we have a sure guide in the
Torah (the 'law') in which God has revealed the way that
leads to life.

scoff with cynics.

Jesus 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.

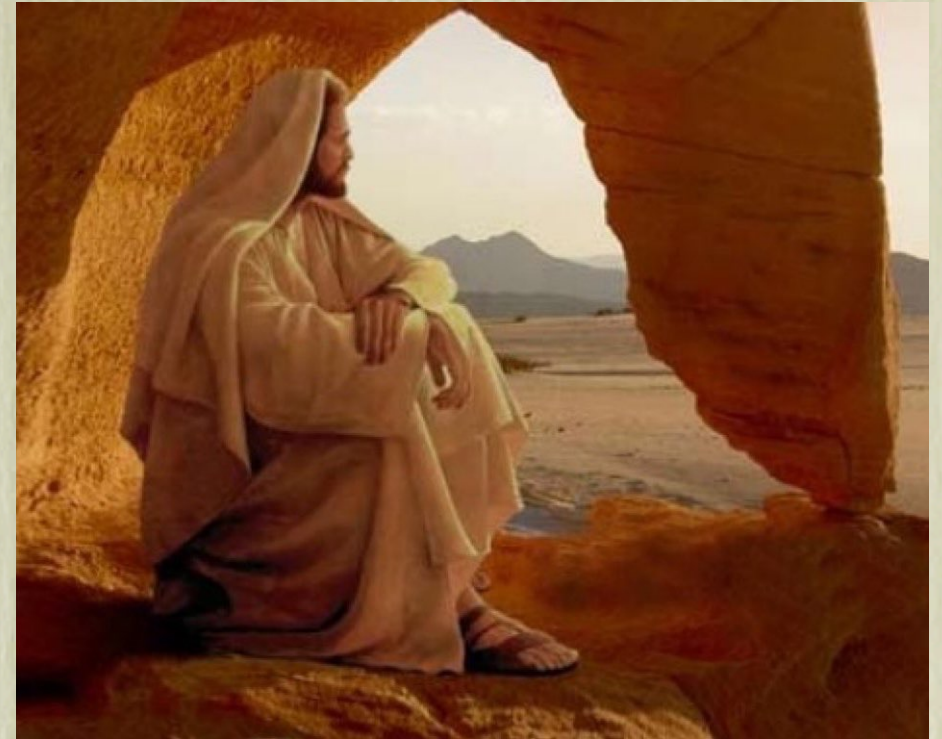
This psalm provides a basic perspective in which we are to pray the rest of the psalms in the Psalter, for the psalms, each in their own way, speak of the various ways in which God has revealed God's will and the various responses of the human heart to this revelation.

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

Jesus found 'delight' in listening to every word that came to him from God. The Gospel writers speak of God's Spirit descending upon him at his baptism, when 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



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’.

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.

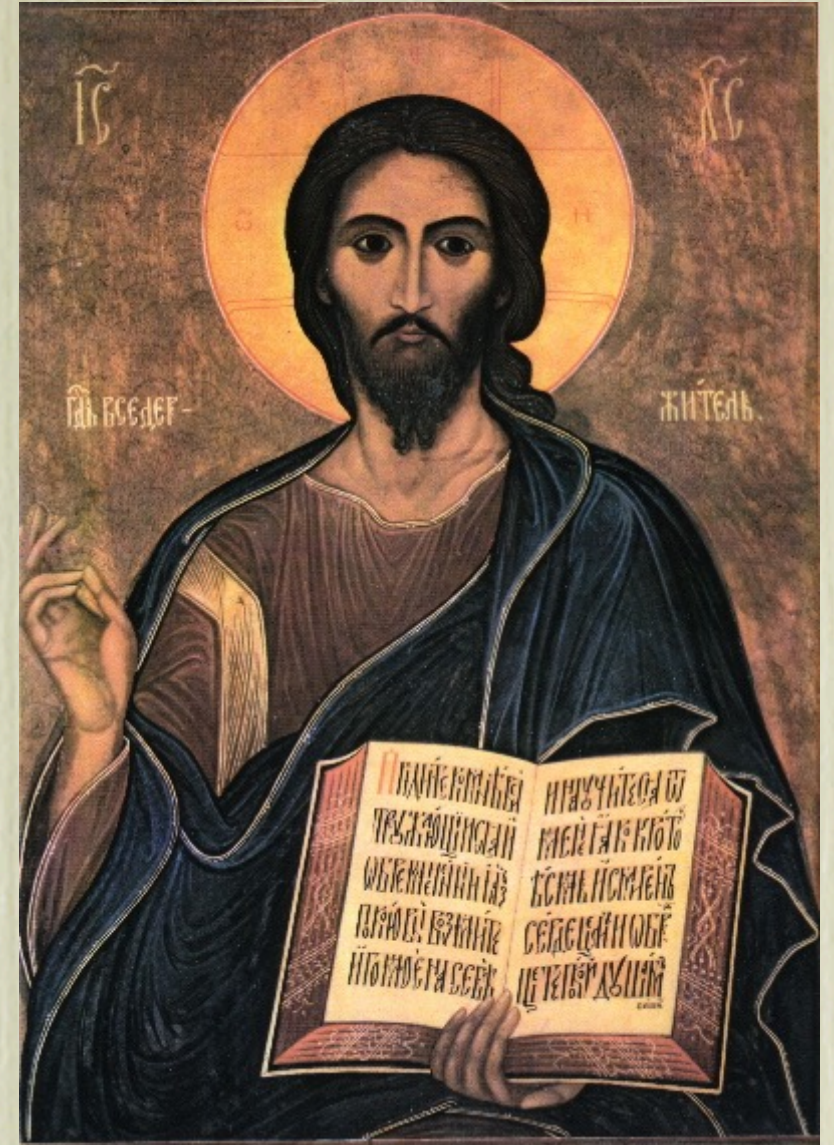
³If you do this, you will be like a tree planted by running water,
bearing fruit in season, its leaves always green,
its yield always abundant. All that you do will prosper.

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).



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.

⁶The way of sinners leads only to destruction.

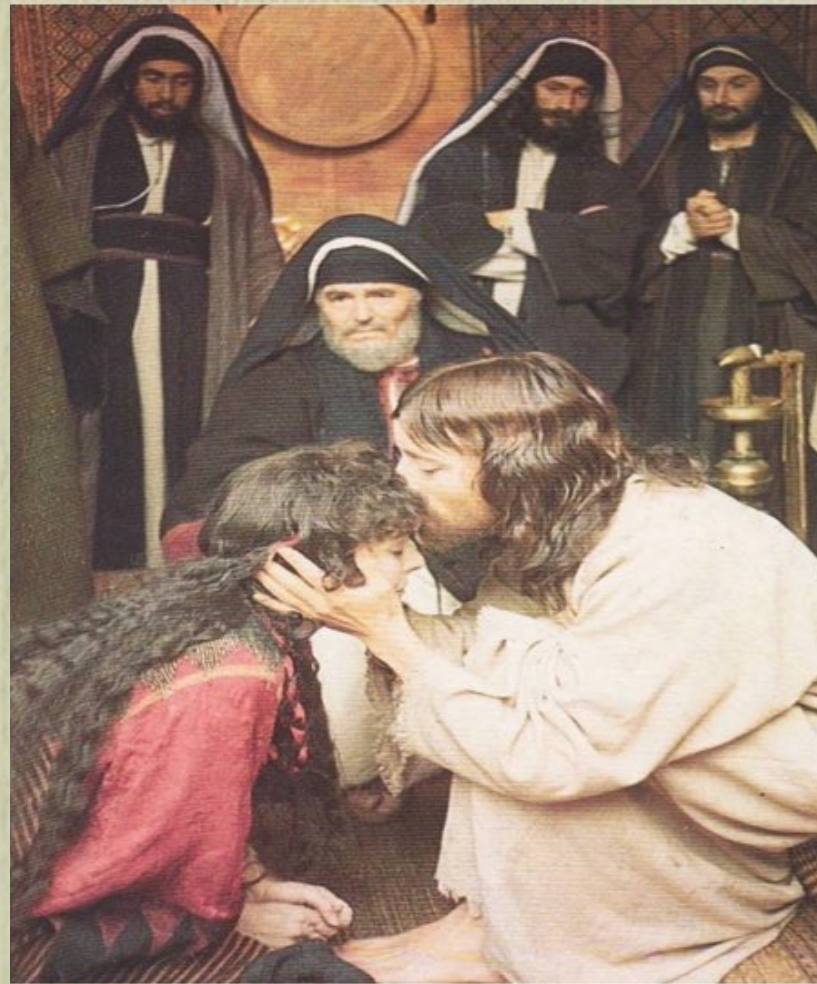
When Jesus finds us ‘**lingering in the way of sinners**’ he reached out to us, offering us the love we need to break with sin and enjoy the kind of communion with God that he himself knows.

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.

Jesus is 'the gate'(John 10:7), 'the way'(John 14:6).



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).

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).

Look to Jesus and be radiant.

See ‘the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6)

Contemplate Jesus’ mother as the perfect disciple:

‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word’ (Luke 1:38).

‘Blessed is she who believed
that there would be a fulfilment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord’ (Luke 1:45).

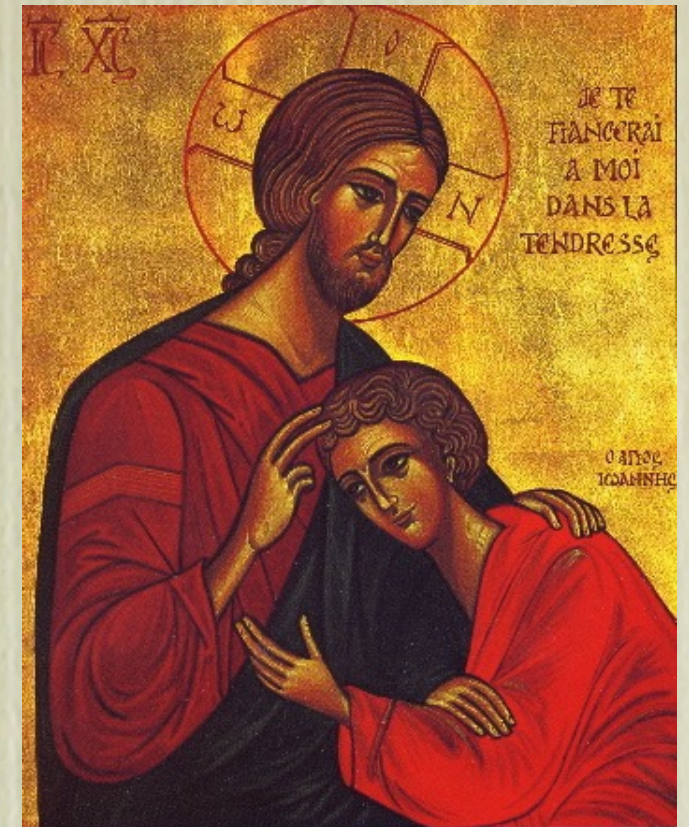
Psalm 1

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.

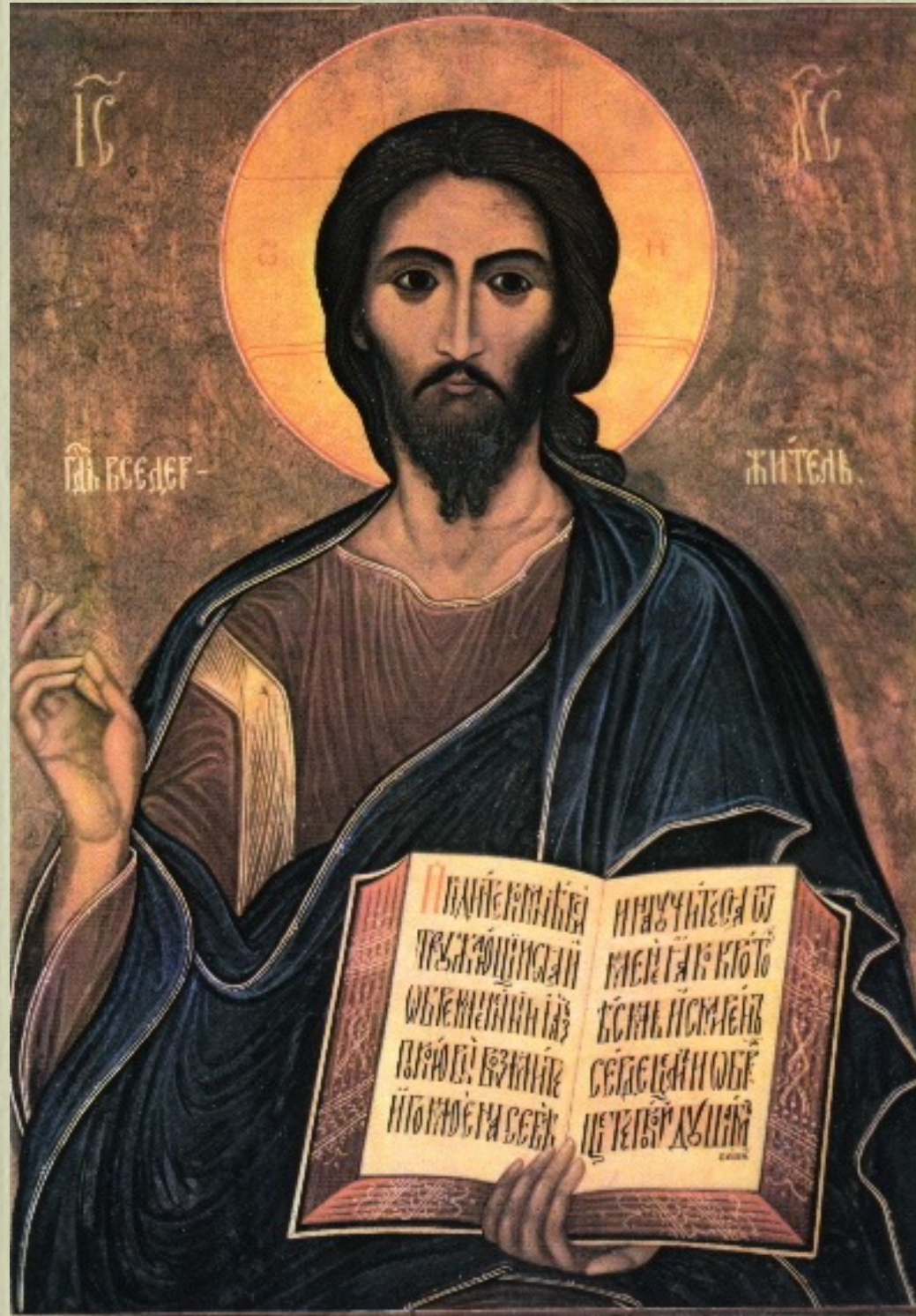
²Find your delight in the law of God
Meditate on it night and day.

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.



Praying excerpts from Psalm 2 with Jesus



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

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

⁷This is what GOD (יְהוָה) 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

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

³*'Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast off their yoke.'*

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

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

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

¹¹*Serve GOD with fear, with trembling kiss God's feet,*

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

Paul recognised Jesus as the Messiah

Peter at Caesarea Philippi

In Acts 4:25-27 Luke has the Jerusalem community praying to God, and quoting this psalm, and comments: '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).

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

God's passionate concern for justice. God's initiative is always to put things right.

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.

¹¹Serve GOD [with fear]

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 (from) GOD

Over and above a sense of awe in God's presence
and a profound humility before God,
'fear of the Lord' includes a hatred of sin
and a real fear of one's capacity
to turn from grace and lose one's way.

¹¹and you will be blessed and happy.

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).

Psalm 2

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

⁶'It 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.

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