

07. Psalms 12-15

Praying Psalm 12 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.

Omitted

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

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

¹Sincerity has disappeared from the human race.

²They utter lies to each other.

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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).

⁶GOD's words are pure

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.

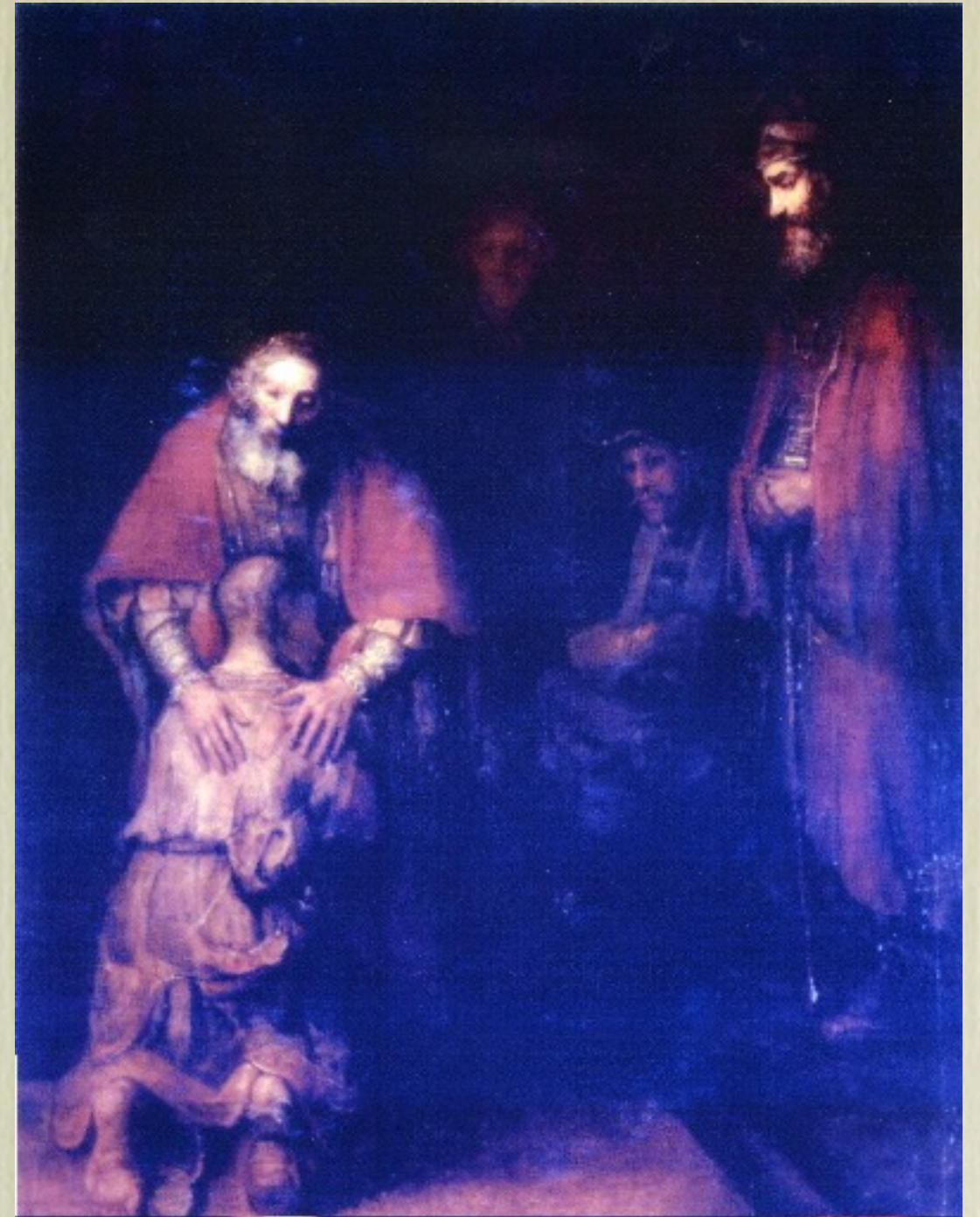
The gospels are full of stories of sinners being healed and welcomed. God responds to our cry for mercy.

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 Paul's 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. Better to discern, as best we can, what is the truthful thing to do, and then do it with all the love we can muster.

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

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

Psalm 12

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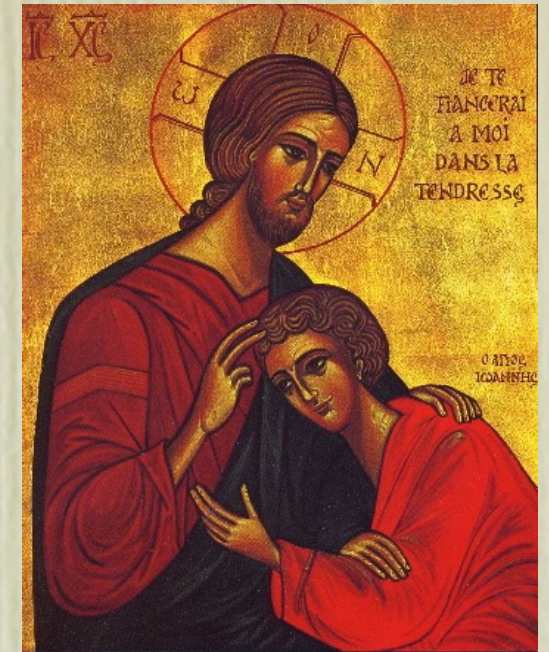
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It is you who protect us from those who do evil.

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while the worthless are highly prized.



Praying Psalm 13 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.

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).

³Shed your light on me

‘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).

‘I will sleep the sleep of death’ (verse 3)

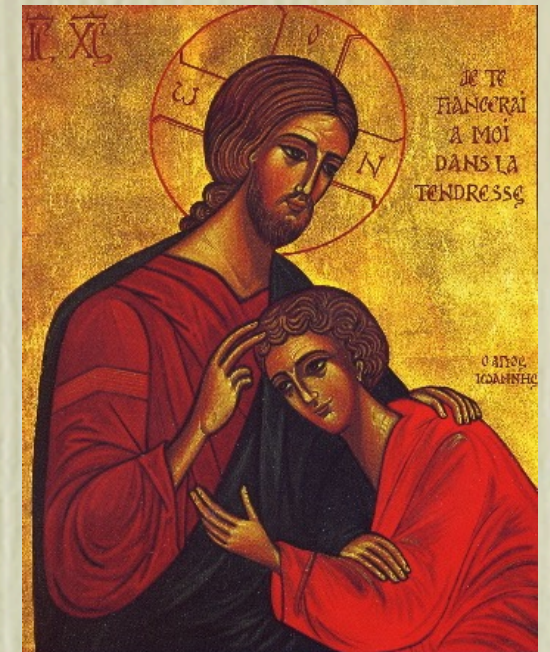
The resurrection of Jesus confirms our belief that death is not ‘a sleep from which there is no awakening’ (Jeremiah 51:39).

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

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

Psalm 13

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Praying Psalm 14 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, they 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.

¹Fools tell themselves '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. He 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 control it.



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 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).

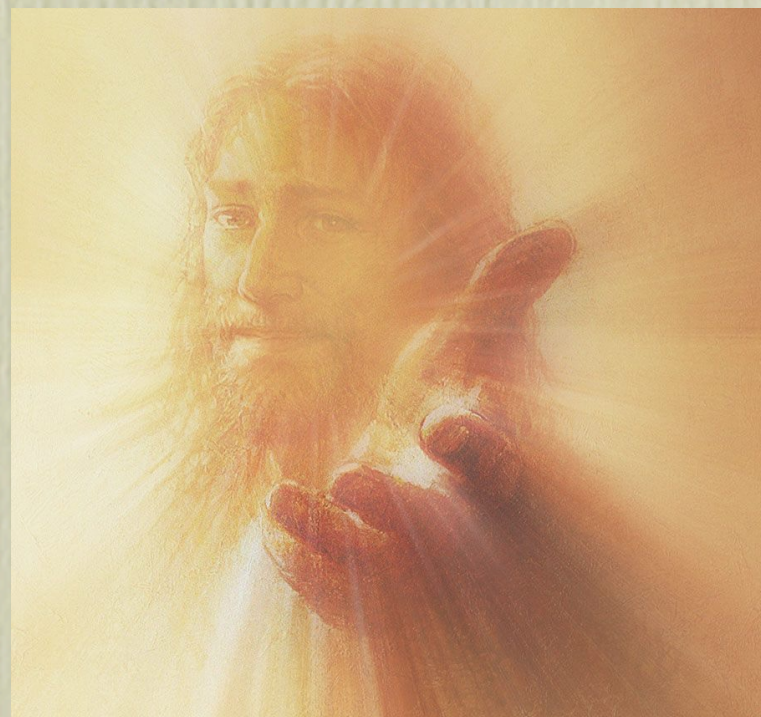


An underground stream fed into the pool at Beth-Zatha. Sometimes, apparently at random, the water in the pool would bubble up. The story went around that this was God's doing and that the first person to get into the pool when this happened would be cured. In desperation crowds of sick people gathered 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.

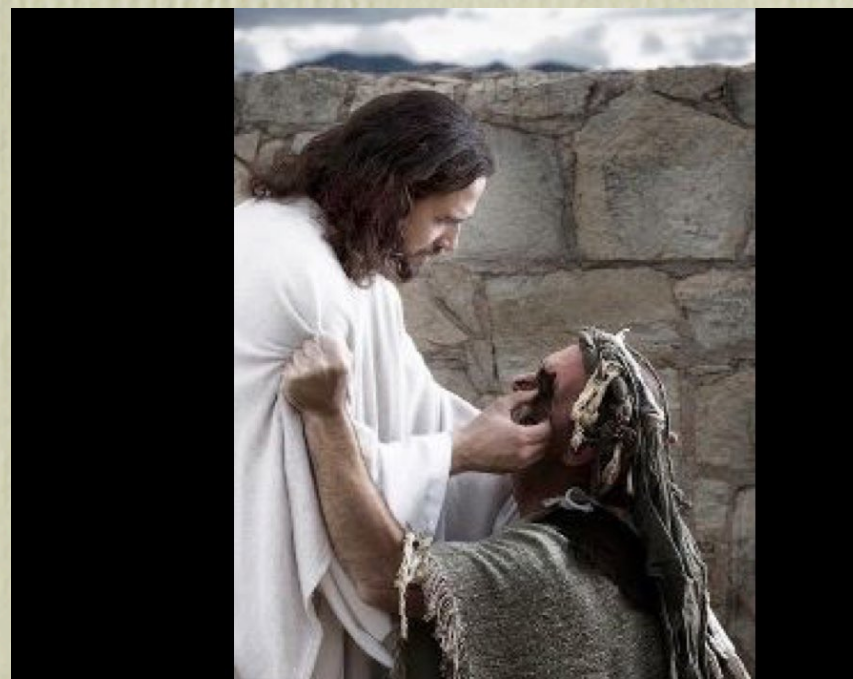


On the eighth day of the New Year Festival, the day of Rejoicing in the Torah, everyone was gathering at the temple. There is nothing wrong with celebrating, but Jesus' disciples had come to know a better way, a way that nourished their longing for communion with God. John has Jesus crying out: 'Let 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 attitudes and 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-union with God.

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).



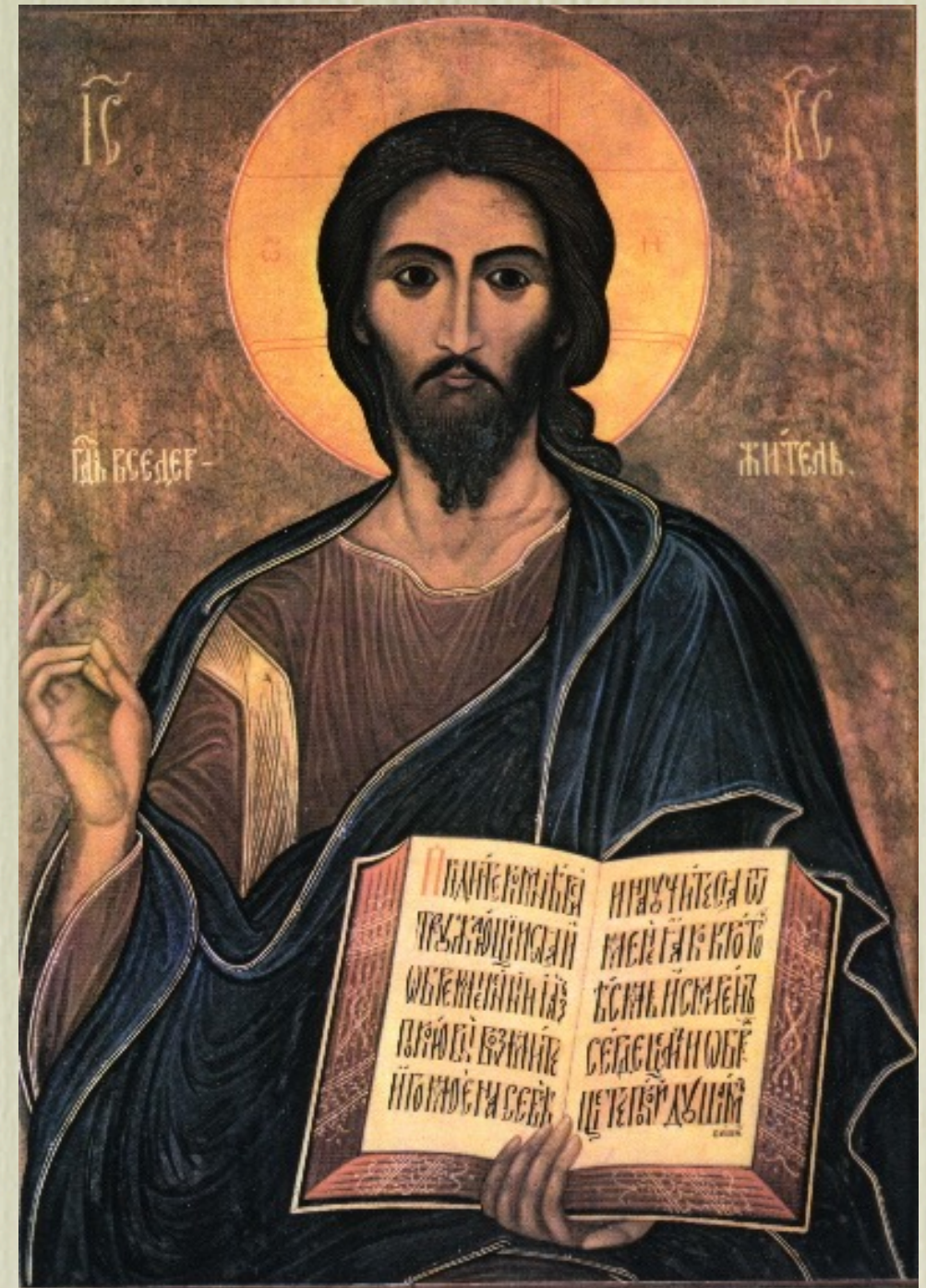
Jesus revealed God as Self-giving Love. Creation is an explosion of this Self-giving. We become what we are called to be to the extent that we love, that is, to the extent that we ‘participate in the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).

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.

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

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).



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).

Psalm 14

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

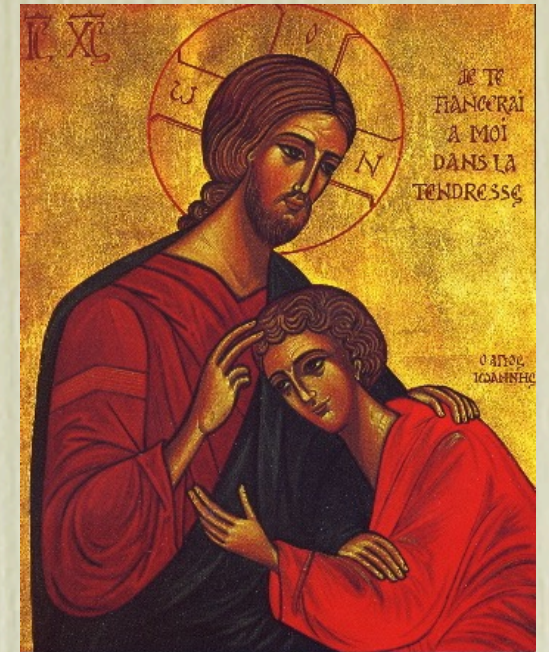
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They devour my people like so much bread.
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but know that GOD is their refuge.



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.

Praying Psalm 15 with Jesus



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

²Those who live with integrity;
who do what is right;
who speak the truth with courage;
³who do not spread slander;
or abuse friends; or cast a slur against a neighbour;

⁴who honour those who live their faith in ['fear'] GOD;
who stand by their word, whatever the cost;
⁵who lend without seeking interest;
who refuses to accept a bribe to condemn the innocent.

Such are the just. They stand firm for ever.

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.

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).

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 with courage**' (verse 2).

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.’

1. 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.

2. Acting against the habit can be very difficult indeed.

3. When we manage to resist we are taking a step to breaking the habit, but we have not yet acquired the contrary virtue.

4. 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.'

3who does not spread slander

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).

³who despises those not approved by God.

Jesus' teaching disagrees with the psalmist here. 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).

⁴who honours those who live their faith in ['fear'] GOD

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.

4who stands by their word [oath] whatever the cost

Concerning oaths, Jesus has this to say: ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall 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 [‘do’] 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).

Psalm 15

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