

19. Psalms 53-55

Reflecting on Psalm 53 with Jesus [= Psalm 14]



This 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 psalm it is untrammelled power exercised by those who show no concern for the poor.

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 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

⁵For 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.

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.

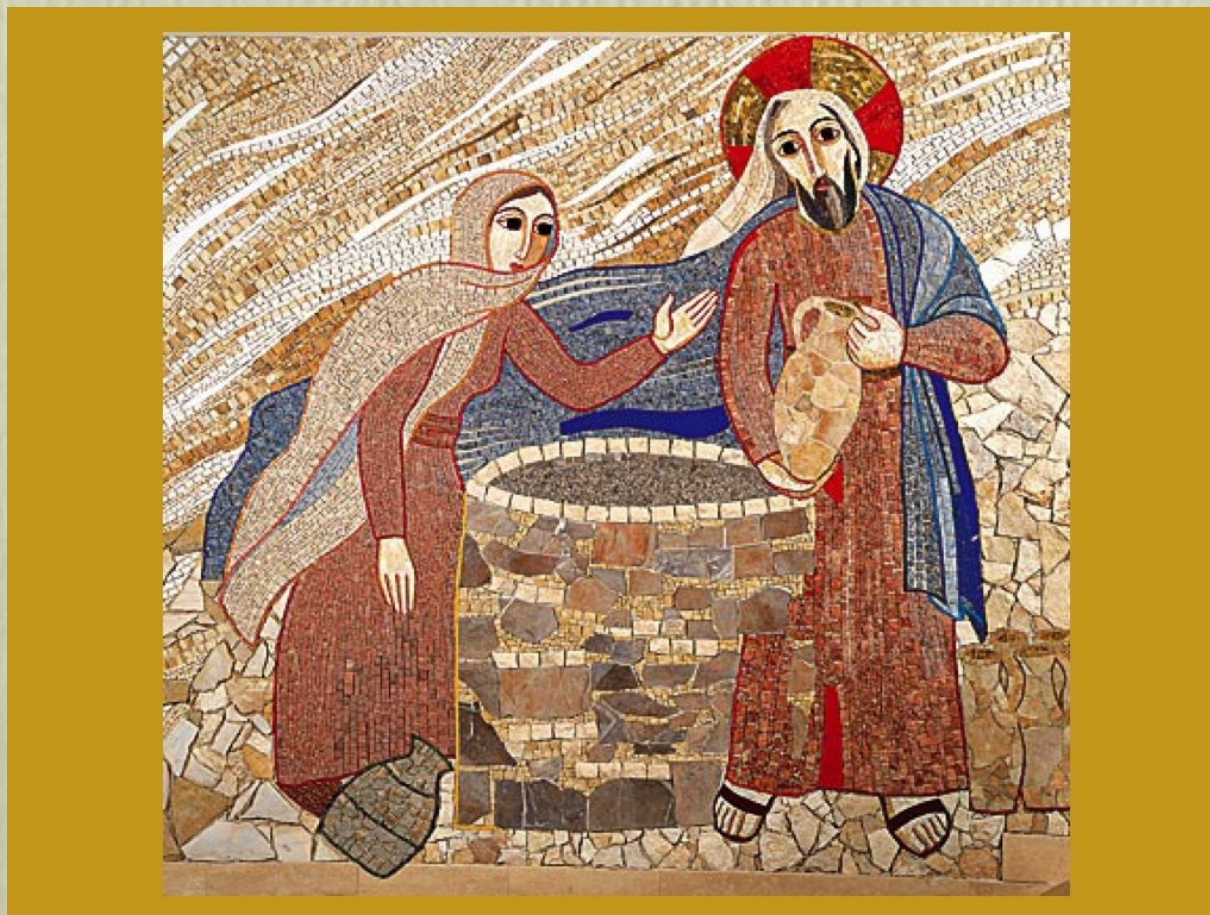


Nicodemus, 'a leader of the Jews' (John 3:1), comes to Jesus by night. Something about Jesus attracts him, but he is bewildered, lost without the security of the system which he has been trained to lead. Jesus speaks of grace as a wind that rises unexpectedly. We have to stop trying to control grace. 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, seemingly 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 that it is Jesus, not Pilate, who 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).



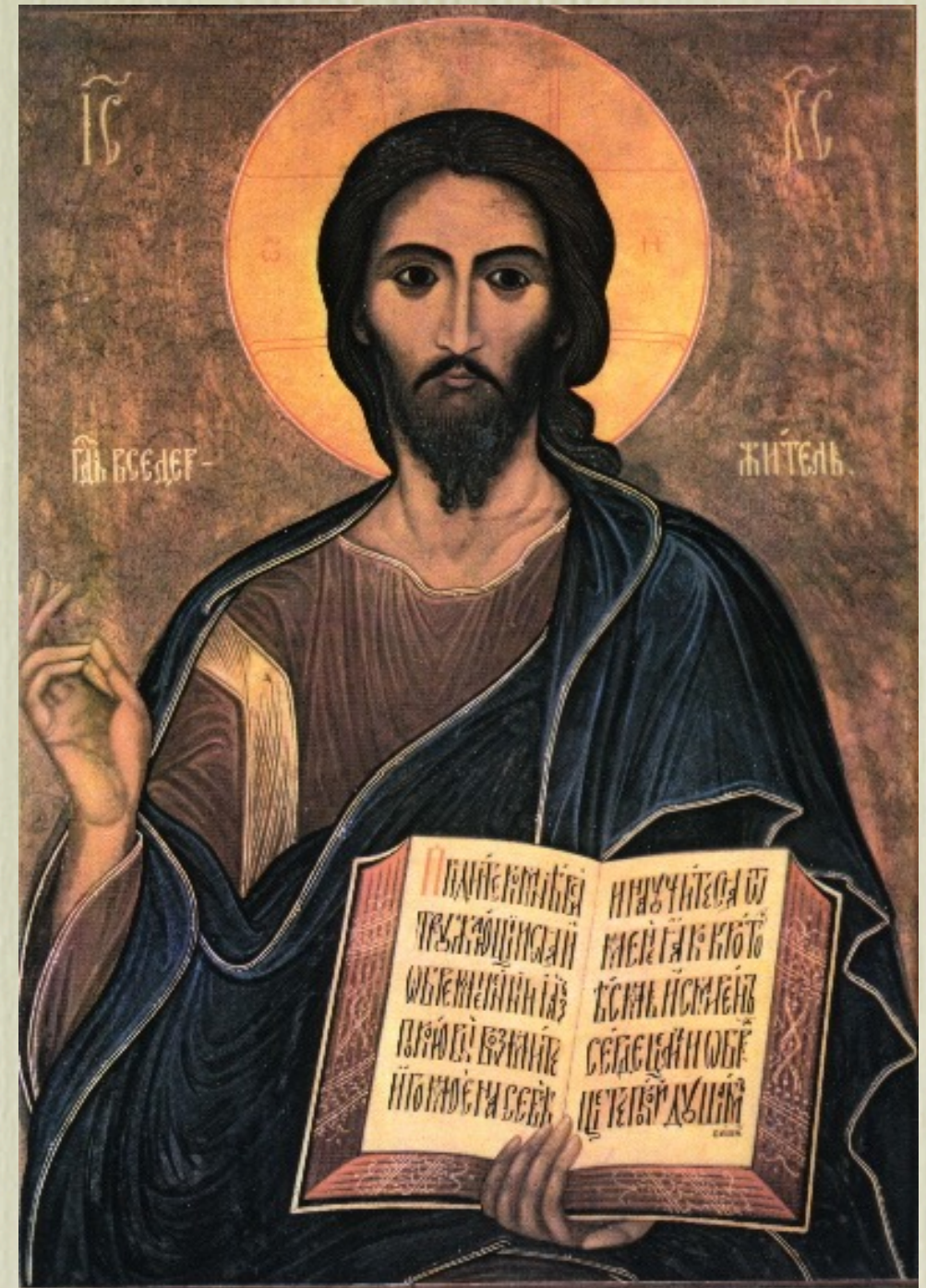
Jesus revealed God as Self-giving Love. Creation is an explosion of this Self-giving. We become what we are called to be to the extent that we love, that is, to the extent that we ‘participate in the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).

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).



Praying Psalm 54 with Jesus



¹O God (אֱלֹהִים), 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* (אֲדֹנָי) sustains my life.

⁶With a free heart I will sacrifice to you.

I will give thanks to you, O GOD (יְהוָה), 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.

also omitted

⁷I have seen the downfall of my foes.

This is a psalm of supplication. 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.



Psalm 54

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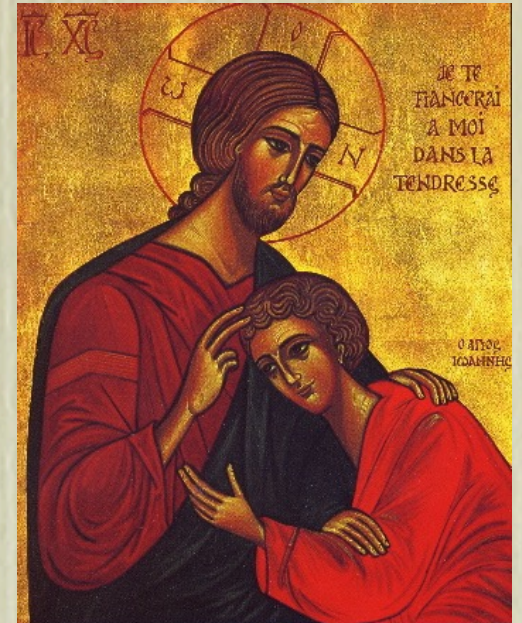
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Praying Psalm 55 with Jesus



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.

⁹I see violence (1) and strife (2) in the city.

¹⁰Day and night they patrol, high on the city walls.

Crime (3) and injustice (4) flourish inside.

¹¹There are nothing but ruins (5) in the city.

Cruelty (6) and fraud (7) are present wherever I look.

¹²If it were one of my enemies insulting me,
then I could bear it.

If it were an opponent who was behaving insolently towards me,
then I could walk away.

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

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

¹⁶As for me, I call upon God. GOD will save me.
¹⁷Evening, morning and noon I complain and lament.
¹⁸God will redeem me unharmed from the battle I wage.
Many are arrayed against me, but God hears my cry.

²⁰They have no reverence ['fear'] for God.
They betray their friends. They break the covenant.
²¹Their speech is softer than butter, but their heart is set on war.
Their words flow smoother than oil, but they are naked swords.

²²Cast your burden on GOD, who will sustain you.
God will never permit the just to fall.
My God, I place all my trust in you.

Verse 15 is not in the liturgy.

¹⁵Let death catch them unprepared.

*Let them go down alive to the grave;
for evil dwells in their homes
and malice in their hearts.*

Omitted

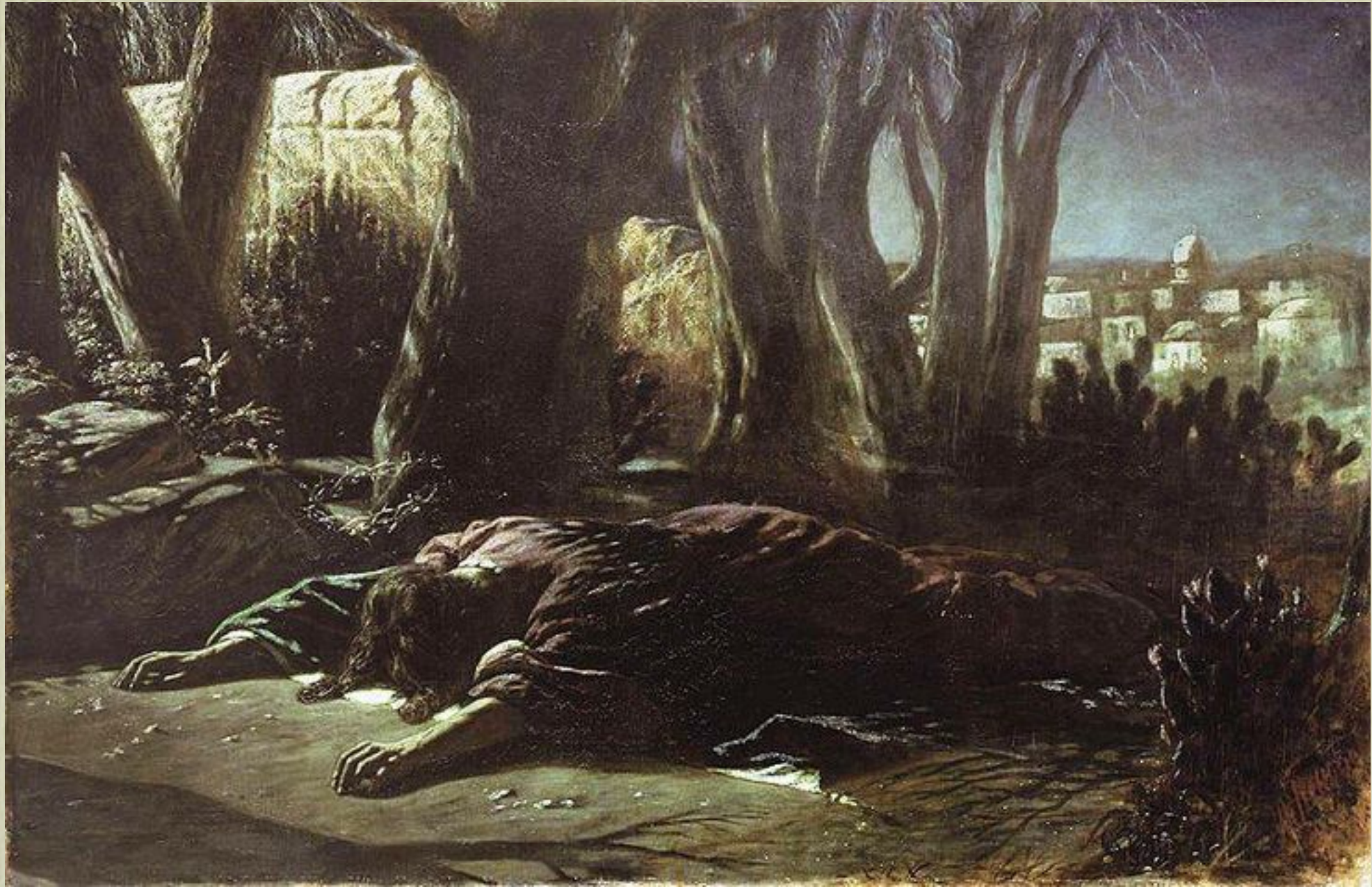
*¹⁹God, who is enthroned from of old, will hear me,
and will bring them down,
because they do not amend their ways,
nor do they fear God.*

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

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



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).



We hear Jesus praying in his Agony

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. 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).

Jesus' 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).

²²Cast your burden on GOD, who will sustain you.
God will never permit the just to fall.

This 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:

²³'My God, I place all my trust in you.'

Psalm 55

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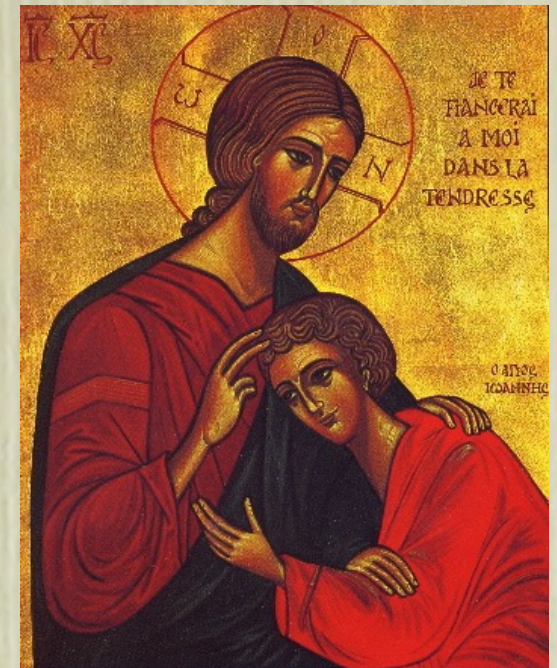
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and the devouring tempest,
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for I see violence and strife in the city.

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