

20. Psalms 56-60

Praying Psalm 56 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.*

[refrain: see verses 10-11]

⁴*I trust in God, and am not afraid.*

What can mere mortals do to me?

‘If God is for us, who is against us?’ (Romans 8:31)

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.* [refrain: see verses 3-4]

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!

⁸You have kept an account of my turmoil.
You have kept a record of my tears.

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.

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.

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.

Psalm 56

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for my enemies attack me.
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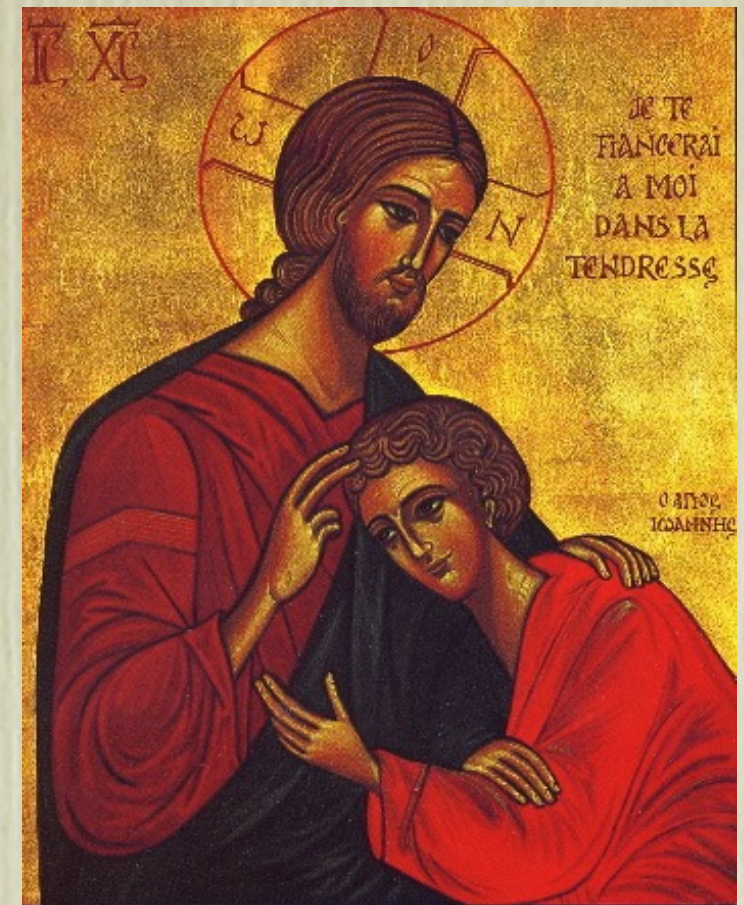
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and enjoy the light of the living.

Praying Psalm 57 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.* [see verse 11]

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.* [see verse 5]

¹In the shadow of your wings I take refuge,
till the destructive storms pass by.

The psalmist is taking refuge in God's presence till a calamity passes. It seems he is being falsely accused (verse 4).

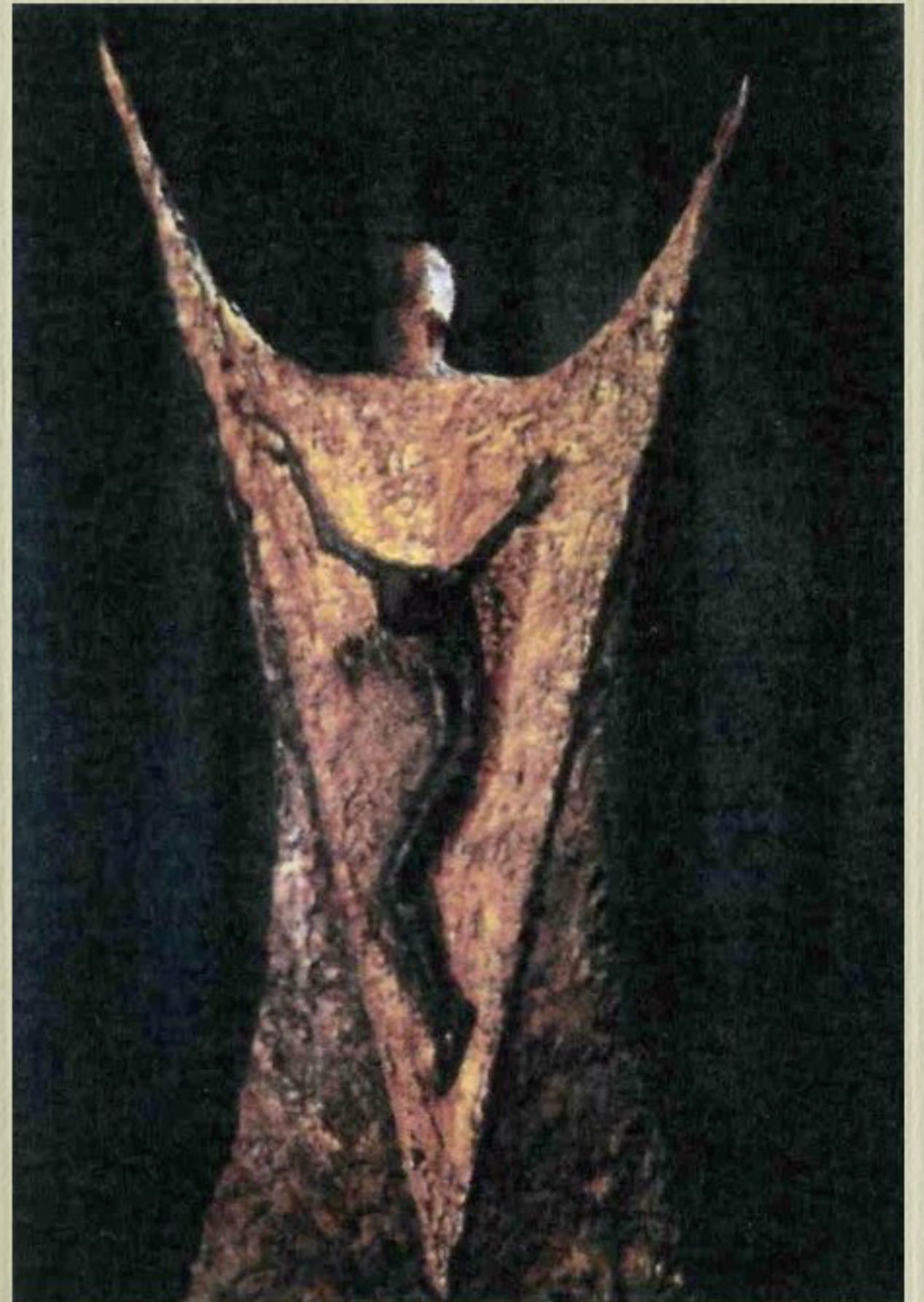
The judgment, according to custom, will take place in the morning at the city gate. The psalmist pleads with God to intervene on his behalf to ensure a just verdict. He trusts that God's faithful covenant love will dispel the darkness with the rising sun.

^{5&11}*Arise, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory shine on earth.*

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).

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.



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).

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

‘We act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And 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 4:4-6

‘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.

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.

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 Christ.’

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 Jesus 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 Jesus. 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 Jesus. 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).

Psalm 57

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

Where else can I hide?

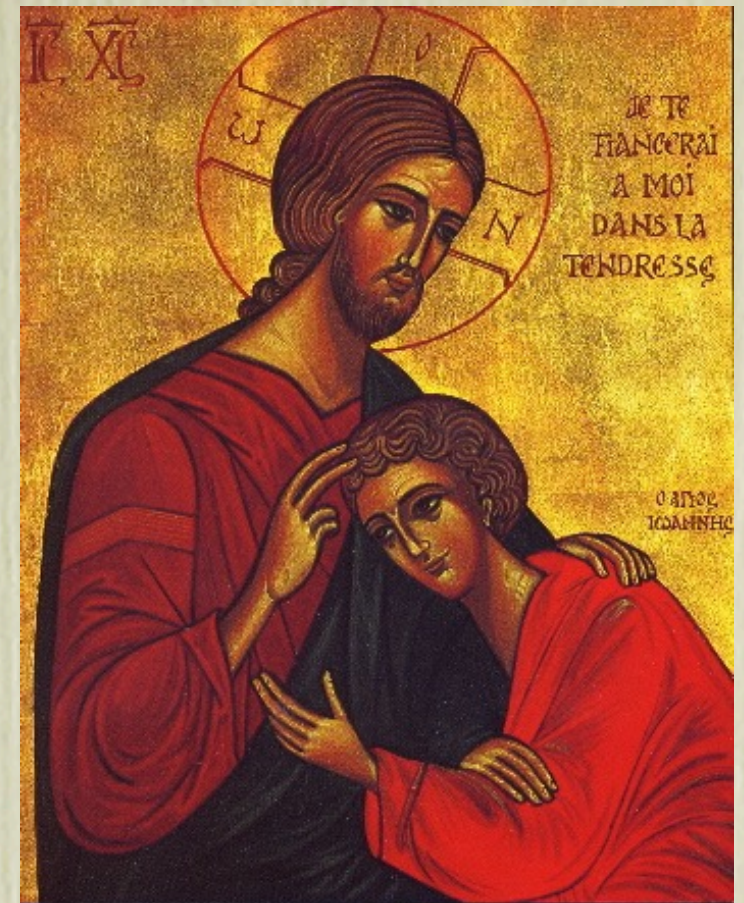
In the shadow of your wings I take refuge,
till the destructive storms pass by.

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.* [see verse 11]



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.*

Reflecting on Psalm 58 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.

¹*You gods, are your verdicts just? Do you judge people fairly?*

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

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

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

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

⁶*O God, break their teeth. GOD, tear out the fangs of the young lions!*

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

⁸*Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime;*

like the aborted foetus that never sees the sun.

⁹*Sweep them away like bushes caught in a sudden whirlwind,*

like wild beasts, like a funeral pyre!

¹⁰*The just will rejoice when they see vengeance done.*

They will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.

¹¹*People will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the just;*

surely there is a God who judges the earth.'

Surrounded by violence and injustice, the psalmist can see little good in the human race. He blames the gods and calls on GOD to act by sweeping the evil away and ensuring a reward for the just. The final verse sums up his sentiments: ‘Surely there is a reward for the just; surely there is a God who judges the earth.’ As we reflect on the psalm we would do well to reflect on the fact that the evil that the psalmist is complaining about is not all ‘out there’. It can be found also ‘within’.

The same applies when we pray in the ‘Our Father’: ‘rescue us from evil’ (Matthew 6:13). Our main need is to be rescued from the evil that seeks to find residence in our own heart.

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

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

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

Praying excerpts from Psalm 59 with Jesus



The following verses are not found in the Church's liturgy

⁵*Awake 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.*

⁷*There they are, snarling, their mouths filled with daggers –*

for they think 'Who will hear us?'

⁸*But you laugh at them, O GOD; you hold the nations in disdain.*

¹¹*Do 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.*

¹²*The 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.

¹³*Annihilate 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.*

¹⁵*They roam about in search of food, and growl if they do not get their fill.*

Verses included in the Church's liturgy in the Prayer of the Day, Friday Week 2.

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.

⁹*O my strength*, I watch for you. [refrain: see verse 17]
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.

¹⁷*O my strength*, I will sing praises to you. [refrain: see verse 9]

For you, O God, are my fortress,

You show me covenant love.

*⁹O my strength, I watch for you. ¹⁷O my strength, I will sing praises to you.
For you, O God, are my fortress. For you, O God, are my fortress,
You show me covenant love. You show me covenant love.*

The refrain 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).

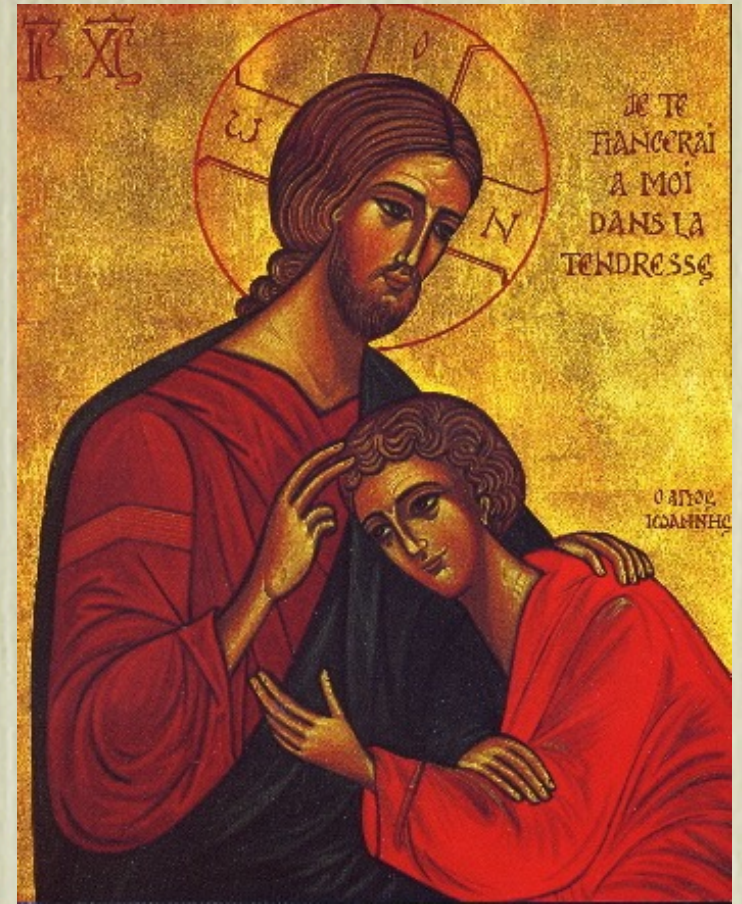
The refrain concludes with the words: ‘**My God, you show me covenant love.**’ In verse nine the psalmist is on the watch for God. In verse seventeen he sings in praise of God. His trust has brought him peace. He knows that GOD heeds his plea.

Psalm 59

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.

⁹*O 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.

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Every morning I will acclaim your love.

For you have been a fortress for me,

a refuge in the day of my distress.

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For you, O God, are my fortress,

You show me covenant love.

Reflecting on Psalm 60 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. Verses 5-12 are found also in Psalm 108:6-13.

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.