

25. Psalms 74-77

Reflecting on Psalm 74 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.

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 apart from a few verses it 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.
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?

¹² Yet you, O God, are our King from of old,
bringing salvation to the land.

¹³ You divided the sea by your might.

You broke the heads of the dragons in the sea.

¹⁴ You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

¹⁵ You opened springs and torrents;
you dried up flowing streams.

¹⁶ Yours is the day, yours the night;
you established the moon and the sun.

¹⁷ You 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 God has done, to reject what God has chosen, to repudiate what God has redeemed, to choose a 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 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.

The psalmist says that ‘God puts one person down, and lifts up another.’ Luke quotes an early Christian hymn which 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).

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 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.

⁸In the hand of GOD is a jug filled with drugged wine.

The image of God holding a jug containing whatever we have to pass through, 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.

²‘I, your God, choose the time to set things right.

³Even were the earth to totter, I will secure its foundations.

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).

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and to the wicked, "Do not flaunt your power.

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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.

Psalms 75



Reflecting on Psalm 76 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.

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 (70IBC).

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.

Praying Psalm 77 with Jesus



The psalmist is desperate. He lies awake at night worrying about his situation which is such that he wonders whether God no longer cares for him. 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. It is God who keeps the heart of the psalmist alert and his eyes open, longing to see, even though he cannot find words and his experience of God is tenuous and uncertain. The psalmist struggles to make sense of what is happening.

The psalmist's problem is that God seems to be acting contrary to how God has revealed God's Self to be. 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.

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.

The psalmist tries to sustain his spirit by recalling the wonderful ways in which GOD showed his care at the time of the Exodus from Egypt.

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.

¹⁹Your way led through the sea,
your path through the mighty waters;
yet no one saw your footprints.

This 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.

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).

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle (continued)

‘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?’ (I.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).

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.

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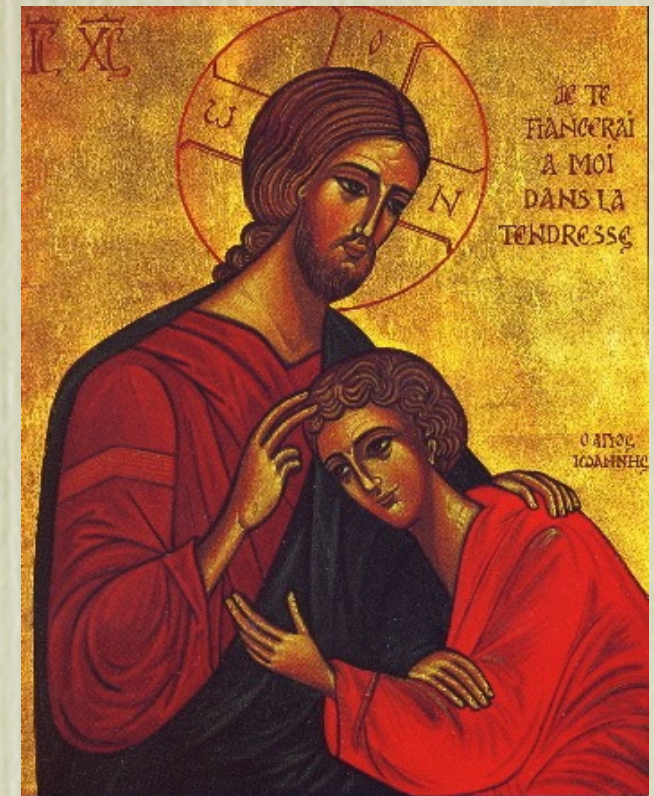
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Psalm 77



⁸Perhaps God's covenant love to me is exhausted,
God's promises have come to an end?

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