

31. Psalms 94-97

Reflecting on Psalm 94 in Jesus' Company



This is a lament against those who perpetrate injustice, foolishly thinking that God does not notice. The psalmist is pleading with God to intervene to protect the innocent and wipe out the wicked.

The king has two main functions: to protect the people (symbolised by the sword) and to administer justice (symbolised by the sceptre). Human rulers may fail to act justly; not so GOD.

‘Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ (Genesis 18:25).

¹O GOD, reveal yourself, our avenging God!

²Rise up, O judge of the earth.

Give to the arrogant what they deserve!

³How long, O GOD, how long will the wicked strut around?

⁴They bluster and boast, flaunting their evil behaviour.

⁵They crush your people. They oppress your land.

⁶They kill the widow and the stranger. They murder the orphan.

⁷‘GOD is blind,’ they say. ‘The God of Jacob sees nothing.’

⁸Pay attention you fools, you stupid people!

When will you understand?

⁹Does God who made the ear not hear?

Does God who made the eye not see?

¹⁰Does God who corrects the nations not punish?

Does God who teaches humankind lack knowledge?

¹¹GOD knows our thoughts, how empty they are.

¹²Blessed and happy are those whom you discipline, O GOD,
those to whom you give your law.

¹³They find comfort when times are bad,
while a grave is being dug for the wicked.

¹⁴O GOD, you do not forsake your people.
You do not abandon your heritage.

¹⁵The innocent will win back their rights.
There will be a future for the righteous of heart.

¹⁶Who rises up for me against the wicked?
Who sides with me against those who do evil?

¹⁷Without your help, O GOD,
I would be lying silent in the grave.

¹⁸When I feel myself slipping,
your covenant love, O GOD, supports me.

¹⁹When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations lift my spirit.

²⁰Can they claim you for their side,
corrupt officials who do injustice under cover of law?

²¹They band together against the just,
condemning the innocent to death.

²²You, O GOD, are my strength, my God, my rock of refuge.

²³It is your will to wipe them out for the evil they do.
GOD, our God, will wipe them out.

In ancient Israel there was an obligation to avenge the killing of a member of one's clan. This obligation persists even when the killer seeks asylum: 'If someone at enmity with another lies in wait and attacks and takes the life of that person, and flees into one of these cities, then the elders of the killer's city shall send to have the culprit taken from there and handed over to the avenger of blood to be put to death' (Deuteronomy 19:11-12).

In God's blessing of Noah, we hear God say: 'I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human being by a human being shall that person's blood be shed, for in God's own image God made humankind' (Genesis 9:5-6).

On one hand this highlights the sacredness of human life. But on the other it requires a form of revenge. It is not surprising that seeing revenge as a form of justice led to it being projected onto the just God, extending the image of an angry God who punishes bad behaviour, and especially Israel's enemies. Apart from a few verses we cannot hear this psalm coming from Jesus' prayerful heart.

The prophet Nahum writes: 'A jealous and avenging God is GOD, GOD is avenging and wrathful; GOD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. GOD is slow to anger but great in power, and GOD will by no means clear the guilty' (Nahum verses 2-3).

This is a far cry from Jesus' image of God as one who challenges and inspires us not to react violently to violence, and to love our enemies, because God loves them:

‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you’ (Matthew 5:38-42).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:43-48).

¹¹GOD knows our thoughts, how empty they are.

Paul quotes this verse in 1 Corinthians 3:20.

¹⁸Your covenant love, O GOD, supports me.

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your consolations lift my spirit.

Compare: 'You shall be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees' (Isaiah 66:12).

'Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says GOD' (Jeremiah 31:20).

The psalmist complains about ‘corrupt officials who do injustice under cover of law’ (verse 20). The prophets speak out against injustice, especially the injustice that hides behind the law, giving it the semblance of being just.

Isaiah speaks out against those ‘who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes’ (Isaiah 10:1).

Similarly Jeremiah: ‘How can you say, “We are wise, and the law of GOD is with us,” when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie?’ (Jeremiah 8:8).

Praying Psalm 95 with Jesus



This is the third in a series of psalms dedicated to the kingship of GOD. Psalm 93 celebrates in song God's victory and reign. Psalm 94 celebrates God's activity as judge.

Psalm 95 is in two parts. In the first part (verses 1-7) the psalmist invites us to join in praise of GOD, the great King, Creator of the Universe. Then comes a warning (verses 7-11). Those who were freed from slavery in Egypt failed to enter the Promised Land because they failed to heed God's word. Let not the same happen to us. If we think that we can engage in the liturgy without listening to God, we are putting God to the test in failing, once again, to place our trust in God. We may be entering the physical building of the temple, but we are not entering the promised land or true rest and we could once again lose what God is offering us as a gift: the rest that consists in living in communion with God.

¹Come, let us sing joyfully to GOD;
let us shout with joy to the Rock who saves us!

²Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving,
singing joyfully to the sound of music!

³For GOD is the High God, Sovereign over all the gods.

⁴God's hand holds the depths of the earth,
and the heights of the mountain peaks.

⁵The ocean belongs to the One who shaped it,
and the dry land to the One who formed it.

⁶Come, let us worship and bow low,
let us kneel before GOD, our Maker!

⁷This is our God, our Shepherd.
We are the sheep fed by God's hand.

⁷O that today you would listen to God's voice!

⁸'Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on that day at Massah in the wilderness.

⁹There your ancestors tested me,
though they had seen my deeds.

¹⁰For forty years I was sickened by that generation
and I said, 'They are a people whose hearts are astray,
they pay no regard to my ways.'

¹¹I took an oath that they would never enter my rest.

This psalm opens the Divine Office (the Prayer of the Church) each day. The same warning holds. We are entering into God's presence. It is imperative that we listen to God's voice, or our 'prayer' is empty and profitless.

'GOD is the High God, Sovereign over all the gods' (verse 3).

'Great is GOD, and greatly to be praised;
to be revered above all the gods' (Psalm 96:4).

'All gods bow down before him' (Psalm 97:7).

'This is our God, our Shepherd. We are the sheep fed by God's hand' (verse 7).

'Know that GOD is God. It is GOD who made us. We belong to GOD. We are GOD's people, the sheep of GOD's fold' (Psalm 100:3).

‘O that today you would listen to God’s voice!’ (verse 7).

‘O that my people would listen to me,
that Israel would walk in my ways! (Psalm 81:13).

‘I took an oath that they would never enter my rest’ (verse 11).

God’s rest is the model and the guarantee of the rest experienced by those who are in communion with God:

‘You have not yet come into the rest and the possession that GOD, your God, is giving you’ (Deuteronomy 12:9).

‘Blessed be GOD, who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised’ (1Kings 8:56).

‘Thus says GOD: “Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.” But they said, “We will not walk in it” (Jeremiah 6:16).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him say: ‘Come to me all you who labour 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).

Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them’ (Revelation 14:13).

There is a commentary on Psalm 95:7-11 in the Letter to the Hebrews 3:7 - 4:11. The author sees the failure of the people as a failure to believe: ‘They were unable to enter because of unbelief’ (Hebrews 3:19). He exhorts his fellow Christians: ‘Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God’ (Hebrews 3:12). He concludes his reflections with the exhortation: ‘Let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs’ (Hebrews 4:11).

Psalm 95

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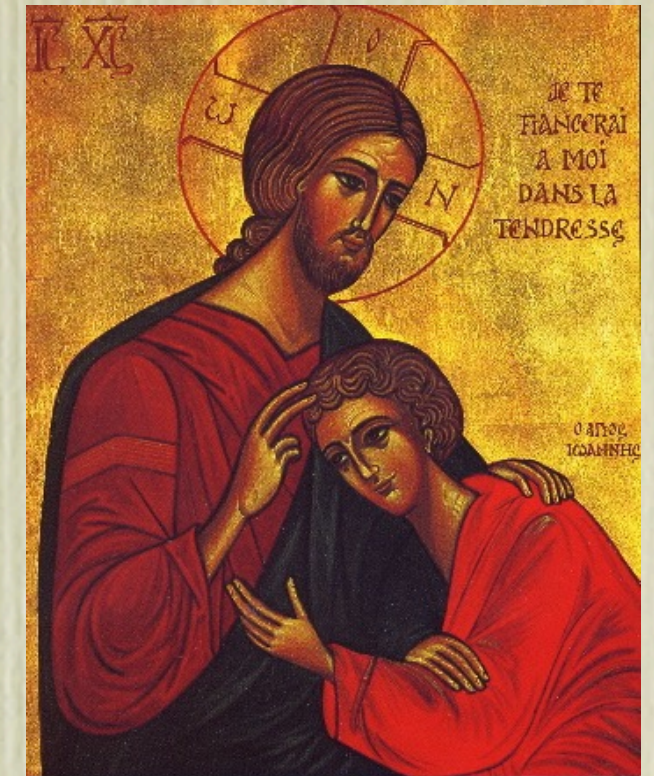
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and I said, 'They are a people whose hearts are astray,
they pay no regard to my ways.'

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Praying Psalm 96 with Jesus



¹Sing to GOD a new song! Sing to GOD, all the earth.

²Bless GOD's holy name!

Proclaim God's saving presence from day to day.

³Tell among the nations God's glory,

God's marvellous deeds all over the world.

⁴Great is GOD, and greatly to be praised;

to be revered above all the gods.

⁵Yes, the gods (plural of אֱלֹהִים) of the world are idols.

It was GOD who made the heavens.

⁶It is the same GOD of majestic light

who fills the temple with beauty.

⁷Acknowledge GOD, you nations,

acknowledge GOD's glory and might.

⁸Acknowledge the glory due to GOD!

Bring an offering. Enter the courts.

⁹Worship GOD in holy splendour.
Tremble before God, all the earth.

¹⁰Say among the nations, 'GOD is king!'
The world is firmly established.
God will judge the peoples with equity.

¹¹Let the heavens rejoice and be glad,
let the sea and all within it roar.

¹²Let the field and all it bears rejoice.

Then will all the trees of the forest sing for joy
¹³before GOD, who is coming to judge the nations.
God rules the world with justice,
and judges the nations in accord with the truth.

This is the fourth in a series of psalms to GOD as king. The psalmist calls the heavens and the earth and all peoples to acclaim GOD the Creator who is coming to judge the world. God's reign is universal, serene and secure.

The psalmist is calling on the nations to worship GOD:
'Acknowledge GOD, you nations' (verse 7).

'All the nations you formed will come
and bow down before you, God*.

They will glorify your name' (Psalm 86:9).

'Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!

Praise the name of GOD which alone is exalted,
whose glory is above earth and heaven' (Psalm 148:11, 13).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall that we are to be judged by how our lives are in accordance with his.

‘The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son’ (John 5:22).

‘The Father has given the Son authority to execute judgment’ (John 5:27).

‘The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge’ (John 12:48).

Preaching in Athens, Paul states: ‘God has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead’ (Acts 17:31).

Paul writes of 'Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead' (2 Timothy 4:1).

'He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (1 Corinthians 15:25).

'God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Colossians 1:13).

In the Book of Revelation we read: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever' (Revelation 11:15).

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²Bless GOD's holy name!

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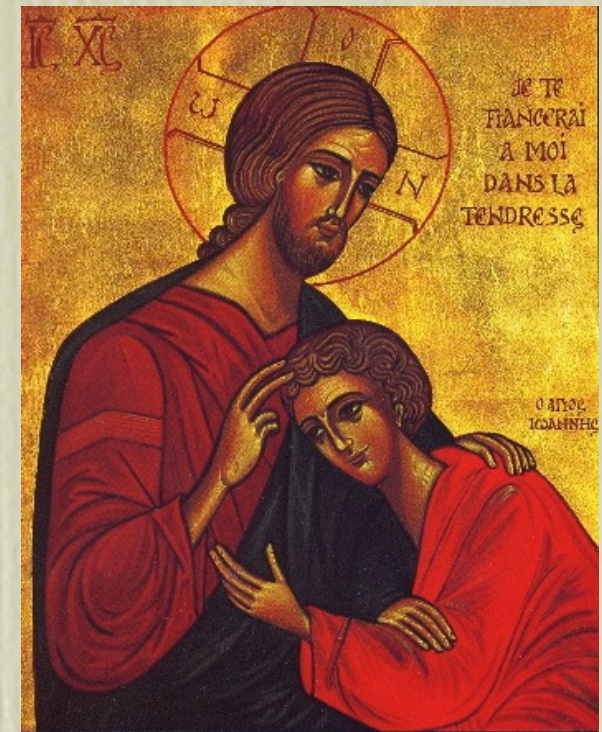
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God rules the world with justice,
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Praying Psalm 97 with Jesus



¹GOD is king! Let the earth rejoice. Let all the coastlands be glad.

²Cloud and darkness are God's raiment,
Justice and right are the foundations of God's kingdom.

³Fire consumes all resistance.

⁴God's lightning lights up the world. The earth sees and trembles.

⁵Mountains melt like wax before GOD, before the God* of all the earth.

⁶The heavens proclaim the justice of God.
All the peoples behold God's glory.

⁷Worshippers of images are put to shame,
those who boast of their worthless idols.
You gods, bow down before GOD!

⁸Zion hears and is glad,
the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments, O God.

⁹For you indeed are GOD,
Most High over all the earth;
exalted far above any god.

¹⁰GOD loves those who hate evil,
guards the lives of the faithful,
and rescues them from the power of the wicked.

¹¹Light dawns for the righteous,
and joy for the upright of heart.

¹²Rejoice in GOD! Praise God's holy name.

This is the fifth of a series of psalms celebrating God's kingship. It celebrates God's justice which vindicates those who are loyal to the covenant. All other gods and all those who do evil cower before the manifestation of God the judge.

Other psalms also see in the power of nature a manifestation of God's presence.

'God, you tore open the heavens, and came down;
a black cloud under your feet.

You rode on the back of a cherub
and came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.

You made darkness your covering,
wrapped in a canopy of thick black storm clouds.

Lightning announced God's presence,
with hailstones and flashes of fire.

GOD thundered in the heavens,
the voice of the Most High resounded' (Psalm 18:9-13).

‘Your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook’ (Psalm 77:18).

‘The mighty God, the High GOD, speaks, summoning the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

Our God is coming and will not be silent.

First comes a devouring fire; then a mighty tempest.

From on high God summons the heavens and the earth
to witness the judgment of the people’ (Psalm 50:1-4).

‘Justice and right are the foundations of God’s kingdom’ (verse 2).

‘Justice and right judgment are the foundation of your throne; kindness and faithfulness go before you. Blessed and happy are the people who acclaim you. O GOD, they will walk in the light of your countenance’ (Psalm 89:14-15).

You gods, bow down before GOD!

Hebrews 1:6 quotes this verse, following the Septuagint Greek version: ‘Let all God’s angels bow down before him.’

⁸Zion hears and is glad, the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments, O God.

⁹For you indeed are GOD,
Most High over all the earth; exalted far above any god.

Jerusalem rejoices to witness the judgments of the Most High.

‘Let Mount Zion be glad, let the towns of Judah rejoice because of
your judgments’ (Psalm 48:11).

‘Let them know that you alone, whose name is GOD, are the Most
High over all the earth’ (Psalm 83:18).

Praying the psalm with Jesus we think of him who is: ‘a light for
revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people
Israel’ (Luke 2:32).

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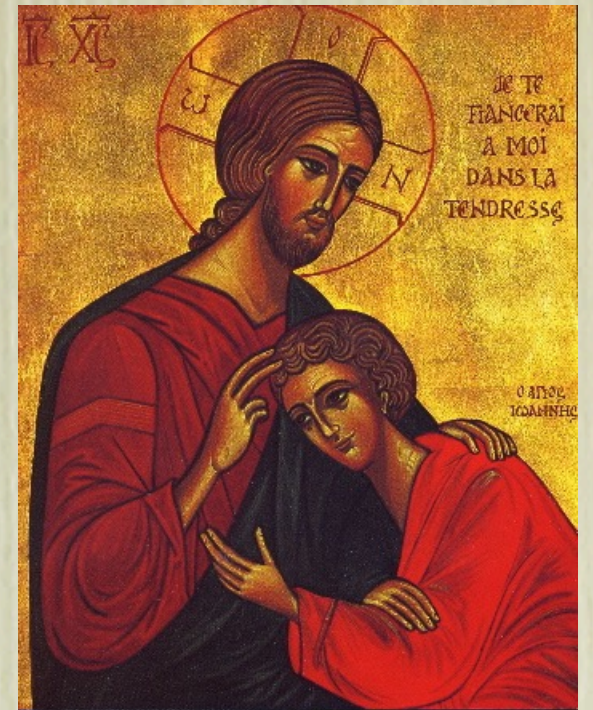
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