

45. Psalms 140-143

Praying Psalm 140 with Jesus



¹Deliver me, O GOD, from those who do evil;
protect me from the violent.

²They plan evil in their hearts;
they are always stirring up strife.

³Their tongues strike like a snake,
with the venom of the viper on their lips.

⁴Guard me, O GOD, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent, who plan my downfall.

⁵The arrogant have hidden a trap for me.
With ropes they have spread a net.
They have set snares along my path.

⁶I say to GOD, ‘You are my God.

Listen to my supplications.’

⁷GOD, my God* (יְהוָה), my strong deliverer,
on the field of battle you shield my head.

⁸Do not grant the desires of the wicked;
do not let their plots succeed.

¹²I know that GOD upholds the cause of the needy,
and executes justice for the poor.

¹³The righteous give you thanks.

The upright live in your presence.

(Verses 9-11 are omitted. They are not in the liturgy.)

*⁹Let not those who surround me triumph;
let the mischief of their lips rebound to harm them.*

*¹⁰Heap burning coals upon them.
Let them be flung into pits, no more to rise.*

*¹¹Do not let the slanderer settle in the land.
Let evil stalk the violent and drive them to their ruin.*

The psalmist is pleading for GOD's protection. Verses 9-11 are not consistent with Jesus' response to the suffering inflicted on him, or of the response he asks from his disciples. We can pray verses 12-13. The psalmist is confident that GOD will hear his pleading. He 'knows that GOD upholds the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor' (verse 12). He identifies with 'the righteous who give thanks', the 'upright who live in God's presence' (verse 13).

Praying these words with Jesus we hear him say: 'Blessed and happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Matthew 5:8), and, 'If you love me, you will be loved by my Father, and I will love you and reveal myself to you' (John 14:21).

Psalm 140

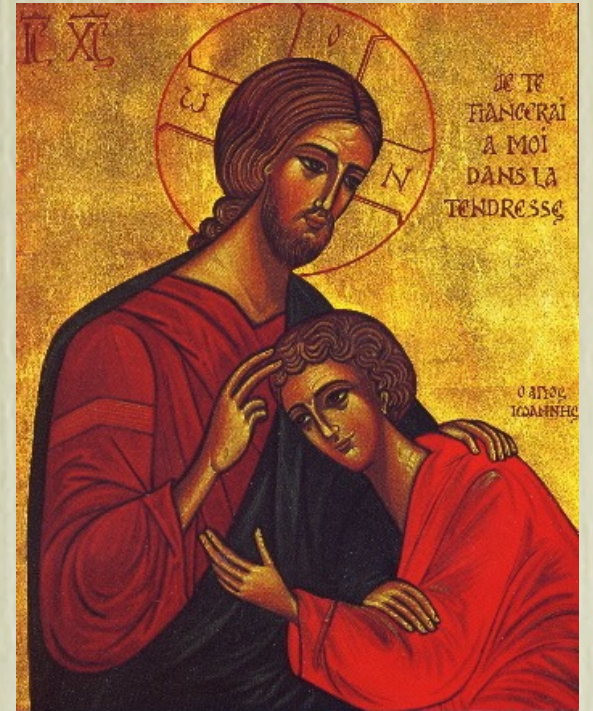
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and executes justice for the poor.

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The upright live in your presence.

Praying Psalm 141 in Jesus' Company



¹I call upon you, O GOD; come quickly to me!

Listen, as I call to you.

²Let my prayer rise to you like incense,
the lifting up of my hands like an evening sacrifice.

³O GOD, set a guard on my lips.

Watch my every word.

⁴Do not let my heart turn to any evil,
or consider doing what is wrong.

Let me never join the wicked
to indulge in their feasting.

⁵If the just correct me,

I take their rebuke as a kindness,

but the oil of the wicked will never anoint my head.

My prayer is continually against their wicked deeds.

⁶When they are handed over to those who will condemn them,
then they will learn that I have spoken the truth.

⁷Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the ground,
so will their bones be strewn at the mouth of the grave.

⁸But my eyes are turned toward you, O GOD (יְהוָה), my God* (אֱלֹהֵי);
in you I seek refuge. Do not leave me defenceless.

⁹Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me,
from the snares of those who do evil.

(Verse 10 is omitted. It is not in the liturgy)

¹⁰Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I escape.

The psalmist is under pressure to join forces with ‘those who do what is wrong’ (verse 4). They are enticing him to ‘indulge in their feasting’ (verse 4). He is severely tempted to go along with them; hence the intensity of his plea.

‘Do not let my heart turn to any evil’ (verse 4). The psalmist wants GOD to keep guard not only over his mouth, but also over his heart that he will not let attachment to pleasures distract him from obedience to the Torah.

He would prefer that the ‘just’ correct him (verse 5) than that he would betray the Torah. The author needs their correction to strengthen him against the temptations of the ‘good life’. He continues to pray against the disgraceful behaviour of those attempting to win him over to their cause (verse 5). When they fall they will realise that he has, indeed, ‘spoken the truth’ (verse 6).

He anticipates the judgment of God upon the wicked. They will be flung headlong as from a precipice into the gaping hole of the realm of the dead (verse 7).

There are sentiments in this psalm that do not fit with Jesus' prayer. But we can pray it in his company. The psalm is a reminder to us of the fact that, living as we do in a world polluted by sin, it is difficult to avoid breathing in the contagion. We need to correct each other in love. One would hope that there was someone in our lives who cared enough about us to point out the error of our ways. If we don't care that someone is behaving badly, we must not love that person very much.

Matthew chapter 18 has some wisdom to offer us on this matter. Matthew 18:1-5 records Jesus' call for humility. If we correct someone from an assumed position of superiority, it is surely not going to work, for we will be putting the other person down and the person who is being corrected will experience the need to protect himself or herself from our put down. If we lack humility, if we think that we are better than the other person, it is better for us to leave the correction to someone else. Our pride cannot but distort our judgment.

After speaking of the need for humility, Jesus goes on to warn against giving scandal (Matthew 18:6-9). It is true that sometimes people are scandalised even though what is happening is in fact very good. The Pharisees were scandalised when Jesus ate with sinners and when he healed on the Sabbath. This was because of their narrow view of God and their refusal to look at what was really happening. We cannot please everyone. However, if people of good will, the people Jesus describes as 'the little ones who believe in me', are scandalised by the way in which we correct others, we can be sure that there is something wrong with our way of going about things.

Finally, having warned us not to look down on any person, Jesus speaks about the shepherd who goes off searching for the one stray sheep and reminds us: 'It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost' (Matthew 18:14).

Jesus also speaks about forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35). If we are going to correct people we must be ready to forgive them when they apologise and change their behaviour.

It is in this setting and against this background that Matthew gives us Jesus' words concerning how we should correct one another (Matthew 18:15-20).

Jesus' suggestion is that if a problem arises between two members of the Christian family, they should try to sort it out between themselves, with all humility and respect and readiness to forgive. Normally this would resolve the matter. However, sometimes things are too confused to be resolved in this way. Jesus suggests that we then seek the help of two or three others. If that doesn't work the matter should be taken to the community of those whom he calls elsewhere his 'brothers and sisters' (Matthew 12:50). We are to be brothers and sisters to each other.

If the person who is being corrected refuses to take any notice of the community, he or she is to be treated as a 'Gentile or a tax collector' (Matthew 18:17). Jesus may be telling the members of the community that their obligation ceases and that they must leave the unrepentant person to God. Hopefully, the good shepherd (Matthew 18:12-13) will find other ways to bring the unrepentant sinner back.

Central to this matter is the presence of Jesus among his disciples. The psalmist tells us that 'GOD dwells in the holy temple' (Psalm 11:4). Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon (died 135AD) says: 'When two are seated and discuss the Torah, the Shekinah resides among them' (The Sentences of the Fathers, III.3). Jesus says: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' One recalls the child whom Jesus placed 'among them' (Matthew 18:2). Gathered around Jesus, his disciples experience the glory of Jesus' humble prayer, and, in the words of Paul: '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' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Please God, within the community there will be people who know and love us and who are willing to point out when we are falling short of living the life of a disciple. They want to see us in close companionship with Jesus. Please God we, too, will have the courage and the concern to go out after the straying sheep and point out the way back to the community and to Jesus. May we all do this humbly and with love and ever eager to forgive and to welcome each other to reconciliation.

Psalm 141

¹I call upon you, O GOD; come quickly to me!

Listen, as I call to you.

²Let my prayer rise to you like incense,
the lifting up of my hands like an evening sacrifice.

³O GOD, set a guard on my lips.

Watch my every word.

⁴Do not let my heart turn to any evil,
or consider doing what is wrong.

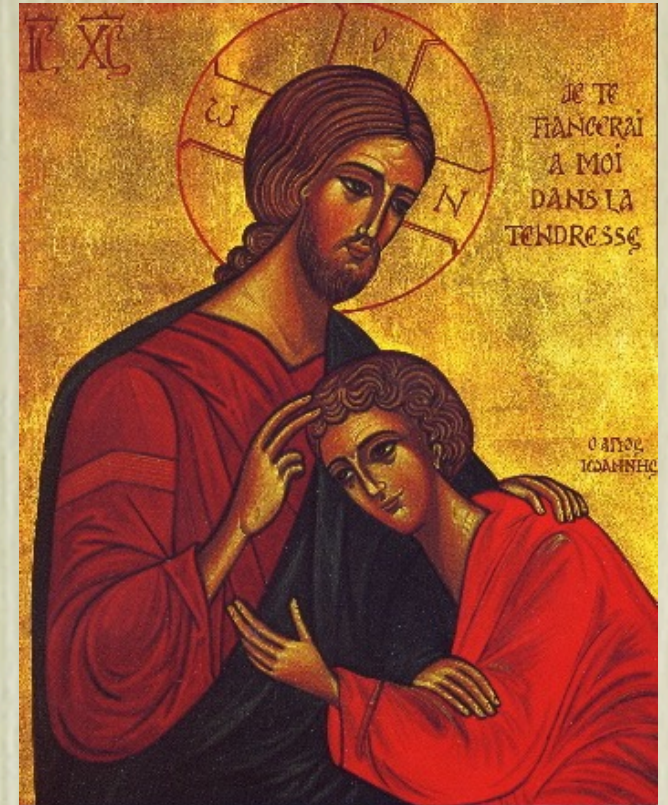
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⁷Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the ground,
so will their bones be strewn at the mouth of the grave.

⁸But my eyes are turned toward you, O GOD, my God*;
in you I seek refuge. Do not leave me defenceless.

⁹Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me,
from the snares of those who do evil.

Praying Psalm 142 with Jesus



- ¹I pray, O GOD, I plead, I cry for mercy.
²I pour out all my troubles and tell of my distress.
³My spirit is faint. You know how I live.
You know the traps laid to ensnare me.
- ⁴See what they are doing!
There is no one who takes my part.
I have no means of escape.
I have no one to care for me.
- ⁵Urgently I cry to you, O GOD: 'You are my refuge.
You are all I have in the land of the living.'

⁶Give heed to my cry, for I am brought very low.
Rescue me from those who are hunting me down,
for they are too strong for me.

⁷Free me from this prison!
Then I will thank you.
The righteous will gather round me
to thank you for your kindness to me.

This is an intense plea – one of the most poignant and moving in the Book of Psalms. The psalmist is deeply ‘troubled’ and in severe ‘distress’ (verse 2). There is no escape. He cannot go forward. There is no going back because of those pursuing him (verse 6), and there is no help to right or to left. Help can come only from above. Note the lack of any plea that enemies be punished. We can surely pray this Psalm with Jesus in times of our own distress, trusting that God will hear our pleas.

Like Jesus on the cross, the psalmist is exhausted (verse 3). All he can do is cry out to God, which he does ‘urgently’ (verse 5). He is totally alone. ‘No one takes his part’. There is ‘no one to care for him’ (verse 4), except God. Such is his trust in God’s love that he can say: ‘You are all I have in the land of the living’ (verse 5). He begs God to free him (verse 7), and promises his own personal gratitude and that of the community.

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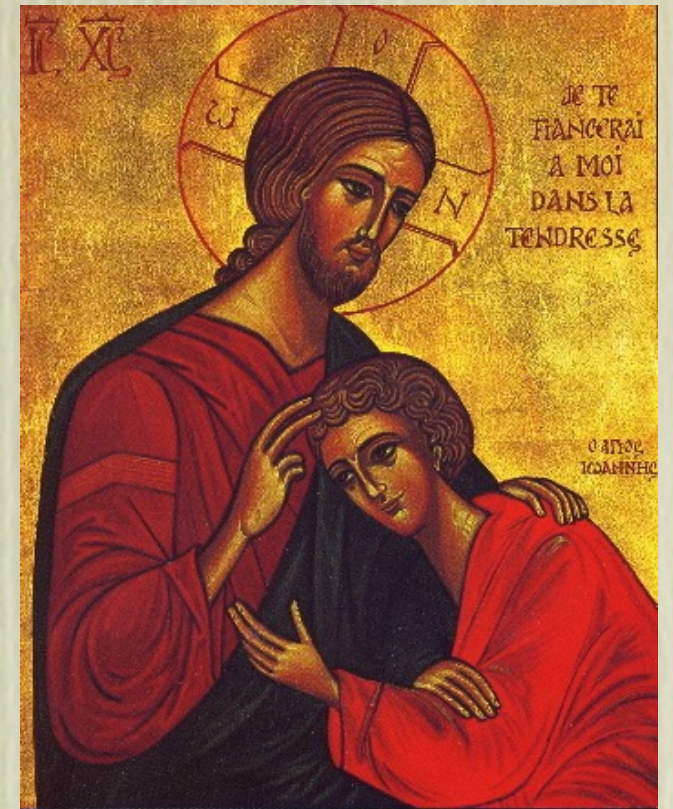
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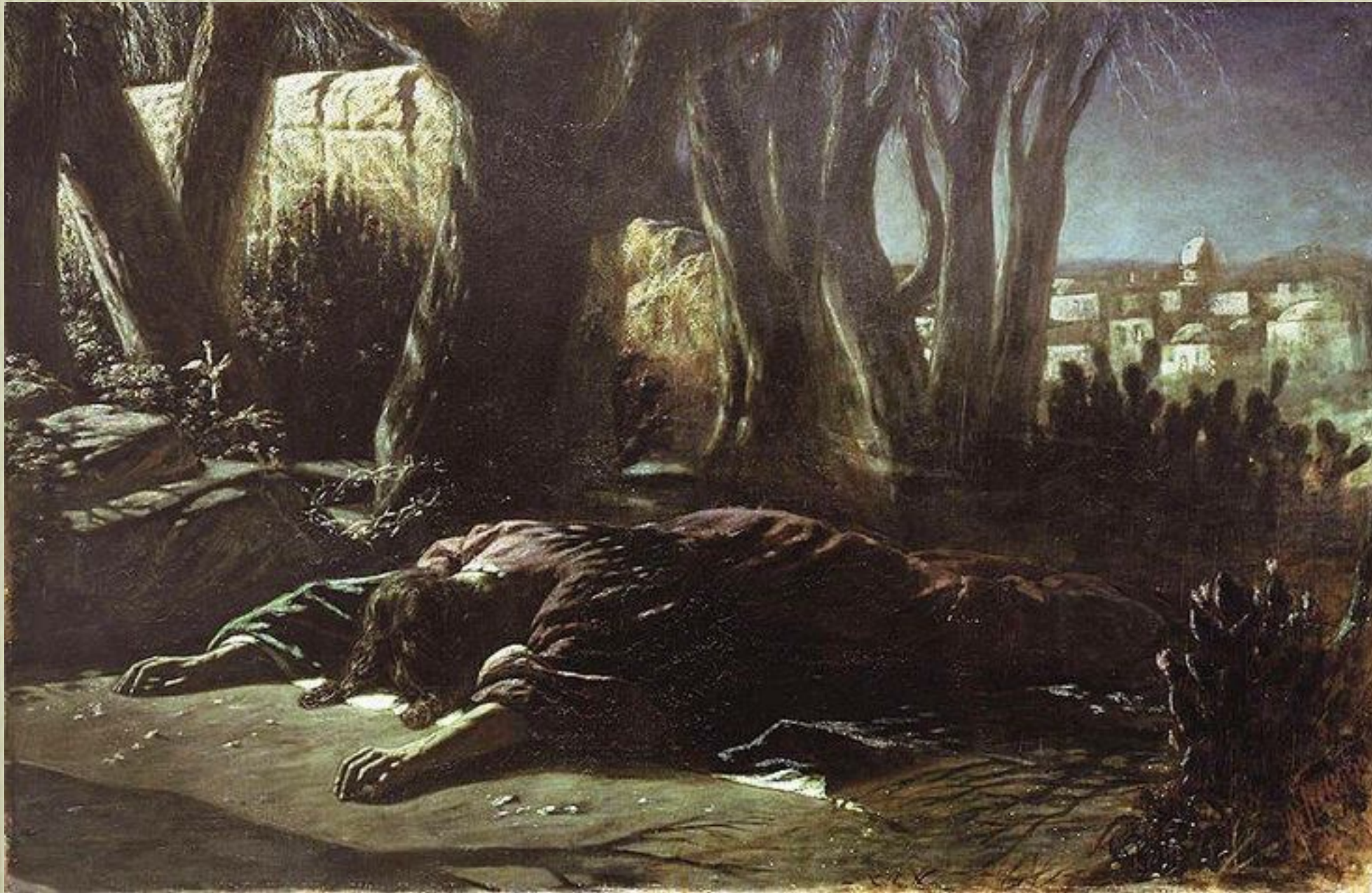
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Then I will thank you.
The righteous will gather round me
to thank you for your kindness to me.

Praying Psalm 143 with Jesus



¹Hear my prayer, O GOD,
In your faithfulness be attentive to my prayer.
In your righteousness respond to my plea.

[²Do not judge me harshly, for no one is just in your sight.]

³The enemy pursues me, crushing my life to the ground,
making me sit in darkness like the dead, long forgotten.

⁴My spirit faints within me; my heart is numb.

⁵I remember the days of old. I ponder all your deeds.
I reflect on what you have done.

⁶To you I stretch out my hands.
For you I am thirsting like a parched and weary land.

⁷Answer me quickly, O GOD. My spirit is failing.
Do not hide your face,
or I shall be like those who go down to the grave.

⁸Let me hear of your covenant love in the morning,
for in you I trust.
Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.

⁹Rescue me, O GOD, from my enemies.
I have fled to you for refuge.

¹⁰Teach me to do your will, for you are my God.
Let your good spirit lead me in ways that are level and smooth.

¹¹For your name's sake, O GOD, preserve my life.
In your righteousness rescue me from my troubles.

(Verse 12 is omitted. It is not in the liturgy.)

¹²*In your covenant love cut off my enemies,
destroy all who are against me, for I am your servant.*

This is a supplication of one who is in a grave situation, persecuted by enemies (verses 3 and 9). It is possible that he is to face judgment 'in the morning' (verse 8), and is pleading with God to be there on his side. He relies on the faithfulness and justice of GOD.

Aware that he is not innocent, the psalmist pleads with God not to judge him harshly, for 'No one is just in your sight' (verse 2). This is quoted by Paul in Romans 3:20.

'To you I stretch out my hands. For you I am thirsting like a parched and weary land' (verse 6). The psalmist's plea is very real. It consumes his whole body.

In his acute distress the psalmist prays to God: ‘Do not hide your face’ (verse 7).

Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall the many times during his public ministry that he had to face criticism, rejection and persecution. We think especially of his trial before the Jewish Council and Pilate and his crucifixion. Though he felt abandoned even by God, he never lost faith in God’s faithfulness and love. We ask Jesus to share his faith with us.

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In your righteousness respond to my plea.

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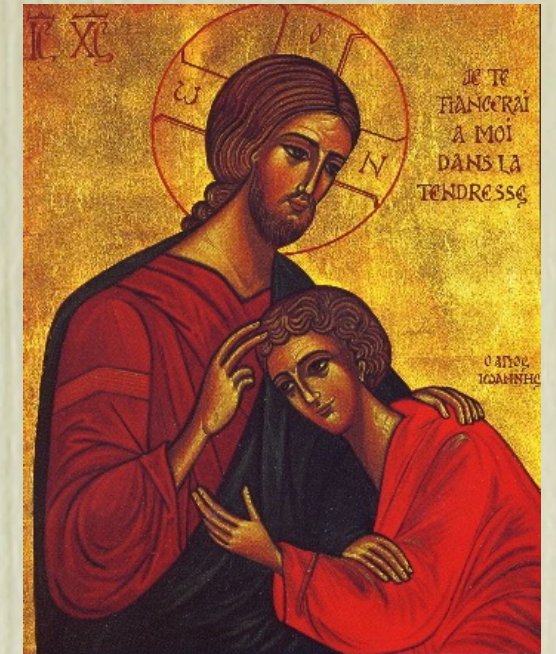
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