

16. Psalms 44-47

Reflecting on Psalm 44 in Jesus' Company



This psalm, more than most, highlights the importance of recognising that the writings of the Bible, including the psalms, are human documents (see Presentation One). Those responsible for composing Psalm 44, and those who treasured it, however inspired, were praying from within the context of their understanding of God and of God's relationship with the world, and especially with them as God's chosen people.

Apart from a small number of lines which will be highlighted in presenting the psalm, very little of this psalm could be prayed by Jesus, and, in view of Jesus' teaching about God and about how we should relate to people we think of as enemies, very little of it can be prayed by Jesus' disciples. The psalm is not in the Lectionary and is prayed in the Prayer of the Church only in the Office of Readings for Thursday Weeks 2 and 4.

The opening verses present the belief found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that it was God who drove out the inhabitants of Canaan and gave the land to Israel.

¹We have heard, O God, our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old:

²with your own hand you drove out the nations,
and planted our ancestors there in their place;
you brought affliction on the peoples,
but brought prosperity to our ancestors.

³Not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory.

It was your right hand, and your arm,

and **the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them.**

Modern archaeology does not support this claim. The inhabitants of Canaan were not driven out by the Israelites invading from outside. An outside group introduced a new way of understanding God which was taken up by the indigenous inhabitants who formed Ancient Israel (see *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's new vision of Ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts*, by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman (The Free Press, Simon and Schuster, 2001).

³the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them.

Jesus longed for **'the light of God's countenance'** (see the reflection on Psalm 42). He also knew how much his Father **'delighted in him'** (Mark 1: 11 and 9:7). We are invited to share this with Jesus.

The psalmist shares the universally accepted view of his day that whatever happens in history is ultimately controlled by God (see the reflection on Psalm 2), and so goes on to thank God for the many military victories Israel has had in the past

⁴You are my King and my God; you decree victories for Jacob.

⁵Through you we beat down our foes;

through your name we trample on our assailants.

⁶For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me.

⁷It is you who have saved us from our foes,

and have put to confusion those who hate us.

⁸In God we have boasted continually,

and we will call upon you in thanksgiving forever.

That was the past. The present looks very different. Israel is suffering the consequences of military defeat. The psalmist is utterly bewildered. Why is God allowing foreign nations to plunder the land at will.

⁹Yet you have rejected us and shamed us. You have not gone out with our armies.

¹⁰You made us retreat before the foe, and our enemies plunder us at will.

¹¹You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations.

¹²You have sold your people for a trifle, letting them go cheaply.

¹³You have made us the taunt of our neighbours,
the derision and scorn of those around us.

¹⁴You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughing stock among the peoples.

¹⁵All day long my disgrace is before me, my face is covered in shame

¹⁶at the insults of the taunters and revilers, at the sight of the enemy attacking.

He would understand the calamity as divine punishment, if the people had been unfaithful to the covenant. However, as he sees it, this is not the case.

¹⁷All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant.

¹⁸Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way,

¹⁹yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness.

²⁰If we had forgotten the name of our God,
or spread out our hands to a strange god,

²¹would not God discover this,
God who knows the secrets of the heart?

²²**Because of you we are being killed all day long,
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.**

Verse twenty-two is quoted by Paul in Romans 8:36. Paul goes on to say that we who suffer because we follow Jesus are victorious because nothing can separate us from God's love.

It is unthinkable that God would be unfaithful, so what is going on? Why is God so slow to act?

²³Rouse yourself, O GOD! Why do you sleep?

Awake, do not reject us any longer!

²⁴Why do you hide your face?

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

²⁵We sink down to the dust,

our bodies unable to rise from the ground.

²⁶Rise up, come to our help.

Redeem us because of **your covenant love**.

They can do nothing. It is up to God to act as he acted in the past (verse 1). God is renowned for ‘covenant love’ (Hebrew hesed). The ultimate basis for the supplication is not their own innocence (though that has been stressed throughout the psalm). It is God’s kindness. The psalmist pleads with God to reveal this kindness now. The plea is urgent.

Jesus knew rejection and persecution (see reflection on Psalm 3). He even felt abandoned by God (Mark 15:34). As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote: 'Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7).

Reflecting on Psalm 45 in Jesus' Company



¹My heart overflows with a noble theme.

I dedicate my verses to the king.

My tongue is as skilled as the pen of a scribe.

²You are the most handsome of men.

How gracious is your speech.

How your God continues to bless you.

³O mighty one, gird your sword upon your thigh.

⁴In splendour and majesty ride on victorious,
for the cause of truth and goodness and right.

In defence of justice let your right hand show your dread deeds.

⁵Your arrows are keen. To you armies surrender.
The king's enemies lose heart.

⁶Your throne is the throne of God.
Your reign endures for ever.

Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity.

⁷You love justice and hate what is evil.

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with oil of gladness beyond your companions.

⁸Your robes are fragrant with aloes and myrrh.

From the ivory palace you are greeted with music.

⁹Daughters of kings are among your loved ones.

On your right stands the queen mother in gold of Ophir.

¹⁰Listen, O daughter, mark these words:

Leave your family behind,
forget your father's house.

¹¹The king is infatuated with your beauty.

Since he is your lord, You must bow to him.

¹²The city of Tyre comes with gifts,
seeking your favour.

¹³The richest of the peoples honour you.

¹⁴The king's daughter is clothed with splendour;
her robes embroidered with pearls set in gold.
They are leading her to the king.

¹⁵She and her maiden companions
are escorted amid gladness and joy
into the palace of the king.

¹⁶In the place of your ancestors you will have sons.
They will be princes over all the land.
Your name will be celebrated for ever.

¹⁷The peoples will never cease thanking you
from one generation to the next,
giving praise to you through this song.

This is not a prayer, but a song to celebrate the wedding of the king. As we listen to it in Jesus' company, there are some verses that we can think of as applying to him.

Jesus' ministry was about 'truth and goodness, right and justice' (verse 4).

His power to bring about the reign of God was far superior to the power of military prowess (verses 3-4). His was the power of Love, the power that creates and sustains the universe.

In his circular letter to the Gentile Christian communities in the East, Paul compares the virtues needed to live a Christian life to the armour of a soldier in the field (verse 3):

‘Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places ... Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’ (Ephesians 6:10-16).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: ‘The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes. The word faces us towards God’ (Hebrews 4:12-13).

In the Prologue to his Gospel, John states: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God’ (John 1:1). Jesus is the incarnation of this Word (John 1:14).

His word penetrates to the heart of our day to day living (our ‘joints’), and to the centre of our vital energy (our ‘marrow’), exposing the ‘thoughts and intentions of the heart’.

⁶Your throne is the throne of God.

The throne of the king is God's throne, for the king is to execute God's will and God's justice, thus bringing about the reign of God in the land.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews quotes verses six and seven in relation to Jesus: 'Of the Son God says, "Your throne is God's throne; it endures forever and ever. Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity; you love justice and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" (Hebrews 1:8-9).

Jesus is the bridegroom (verses 11-15; see reflection on Psalm 23). He embraces sinners. So must his bride, the Church. Jesus was criticised for doing so, and so is the Church. The psalm reminds us that ‘**the king is infatuated with your beauty**’ (verse 11). We must not allow our own sin or the sin of others in the Church to distract us from her beauty as the Body of Christ in the world, continuing Jesus’ liberating and healing ministry.

Praying Psalm 46 in Jesus' Company



¹God is our refuge and strength,
a helper close at hand in time of trouble.

²So we will not fear, though the earth should tremble;
though mountains collapse into the sea,
³though waters roar and foam,
though the mountains shudder before the crashing waves.

The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁴There is a river whose streams
gladden the city of God,
home of the Holy One,
our God, the Most High.

⁵God is in the midst of the city.
It cannot be shaken.
God will be its help
when the morning dawns.

⁶Peoples revolt.
Kings mobilise their armies.
The earth shudders
whenever God thunders.

⁷The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁸Come, behold the formidable things
GOD has brought about on the earth:
⁹everywhere God puts an end to war,
breaking the bow.

God shatters the spear,
burns the chariot in a pyre.

An end to your fighting!

¹⁰Be still and know that I am God.

I am exalted above the nations,
supreme on the earth.

¹¹The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The beautifully refined poetry of this psalm establishes it as one of the masterpieces of the psalter. It is a psalm of trust in God whose presence in the city has saved it from foreign aggression.

God is compared to a citadel that is inaccessible to an invading army, and so provides certain protection to the people of the city. This is picked up in the refrain (verse 3, 7 and 11).

The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the disciples on the lake, threatened by a storm. During the 'storms' of our lives we hear Jesus say to us as he said to them: 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' (Matthew 8:26). 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom' (Luke 12:32).

We contemplate Jesus at the Last Supper as he says to us: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid' (John 14:27).

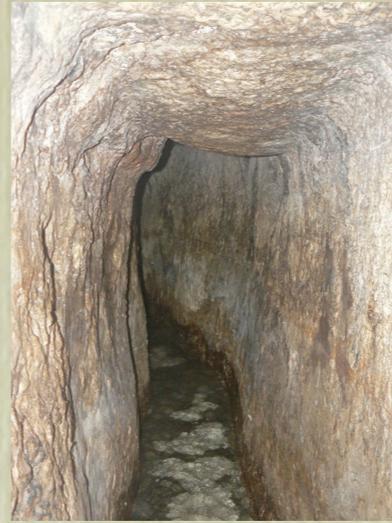
The women who were present at Jesus' burial and later found the tomb empty were told: 'Do not be afraid ... He has been raised' (Matthew 28:5).

In his ministry Paul faced many problems: ‘One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent” (Acts 18:9).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: ‘We can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” (Hebrews 13:6, quoting Psalm 118:6).

In the words of Psalm 46: **‘Be still, and know that I am God’** (verse 10).

⁴There is a river whose streams
gladden the city of God,
home of the Holy One,
our God, the Most High.



Fundamental to the confidence of the inhabitants of Jerusalem was the fact that the city's water supply was secure.

Jesus says to us as he said to the Samaritan woman: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you "Give me a drink", you would have asked him and he would have given you living (life-giving) water' (John 4:10). He went on to say: 'The water that I give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). We think of Jesus: 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38). 'One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out' (John 19:34).

⁹Everywhere God puts an end to war, breaking the bow.
God shatters the spear, burns the chariot in a pyre.
An end to your fighting!
¹⁰Be still and know that I am God.

Let us pray that we will all heed God who is inspiring everyone to forgo violence, and experience the blessing promised to those who make peace (Matthew 5:9).

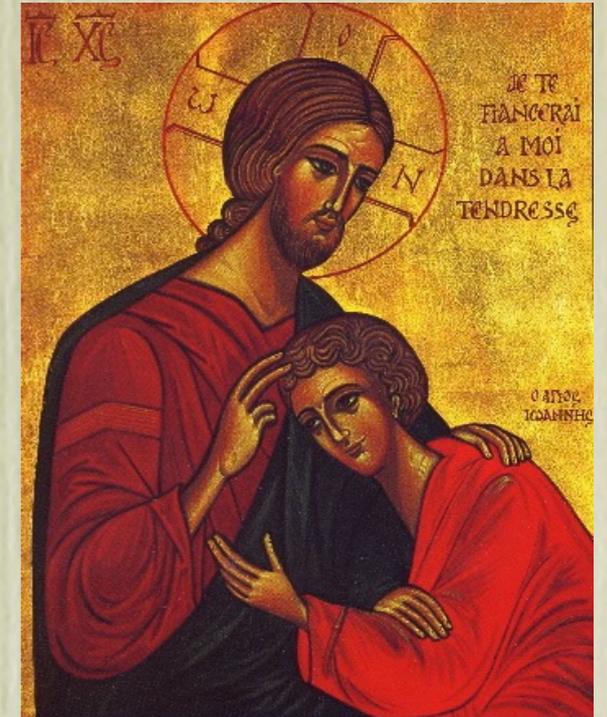
Psalm 46

¹God is our refuge and strength,
a helper close at hand in time of trouble.

²So we will not fear, though the earth should tremble;
though mountains collapse into the sea,

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though the mountains shudder before the crashing waves.

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¹⁰Be still and know that I am God.
I am exalted above the nations,
supreme on the earth.

¹¹The Mighty GOD is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Praying Psalm 47 with Jesus



¹Clap your hands, all you peoples!

Acclaim your God, singing for joy.

²For GOD, the Most High, we must revere {fear},
great king over all the earth.

⁴Our inheritance, our glory, is from God,
given to Jacob out of love.

⁵God goes up with shouts of joy,
ascends to the blast of the trumpet.

⁶Sing praise to God, sing praise;
sing praise to our King, sing praise.

⁷For God is king of all the earth;
sing praise with all your skill.

⁸God is king over the nations;
God reigns on the holy throne.

⁹The princes of the peoples are assembled
with the people of Abraham's God.
All the rulers on the earth belong to God,
to God who reigns over all.

Omitted

³*who subdues peoples under us, and nations under our feet.*

²GOD, the Most High, we must revere [fear],
great king over all the earth.

How can we recognise the majesty of God who reigns over the whole world without experiencing a profound sense of reverence, awe and wonder, and without realising our own smallness? As explained in the reflection on Psalm 2 ‘fear of GOD’ is primarily a matter of reverential awe at the majesty and mystery of God. However, there is frequently present also an element of fear of divine punishment.

It is this latter element that is removed by Jesus who taught us to be afraid of our own capacity to reject God, but not to be afraid of God, whom he liked to address as 'Father'. Having stated that we should not be afraid of anyone other than God, Jesus went on to speak of God's care even for the sparrows, and he concluded: 'So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows' (Matthew 10:31).

As John says: 'There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love' (1 John 4:18).

Psalm 47 is prayed in the Church's liturgy to celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven 'when God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 1:20).

At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples: 'If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father' (John 14:28).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus let us rejoice that he is experiencing the intimate communion with God that he always yearned for (see the reflection on Psalm 42).

²great king over all the earth.

⁹All the rulers on the earth belong to God,
to God who reigns over all.

No one is outside the ambit of Jesus' loving influence and attraction: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32). From his pierced heart he fills the universe with his love: 'He ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things' (Ephesians 4:10).

Paul writes: 'that you may know what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things' (Ephesians 1:19-23).

At the resurrection Jesus became 'king of kings' (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16). His reign is universal, for God is to be 'all in all' (1 Corinthians 15:28).

In The Book of Revelation we read: ‘I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13).

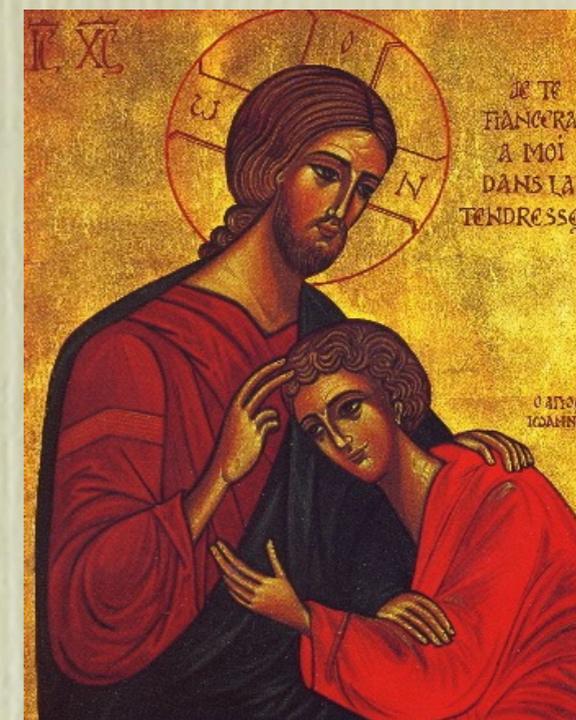
⁴Our inheritance, our glory, is from God,
given to Jacob out of love.

The land is the pride and joy of a people who see themselves as the recipients of God's preferential love.

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the many blessings we receive as members of the Church, 'which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:23).

Psalm 47

- ¹Clap your hands, all you peoples!
Acclaim your God, singing for joy.
- ²For GOD, the Most High, we must revere,
great king over all the earth.
- ⁴Our inheritance, our glory, is from God,
given to Jacob out of love.
- ⁵God goes up with shouts of joy,
ascends to the blast of the trumpet.
- ⁶Sing praise to God, sing praise;
sing praise to our King, sing praise.



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⁸God is king over the nations;
God reigns on the holy throne.

⁹The princes of the peoples are assembled
with the people of Abraham's God.
All the rulers on the earth belong to God,
to God who reigns over all.