

17. Psalms 48-50

Praying Psalm 48 with Jesus



¹Great is GOD and most worthy of praise
in the city of our God.

²God's holy mountain rises in beauty,
the crowning joy of all the earth.

Mount Zion, true pole of the earth [see 'Mount Zaphon],
city of the great King.

³God, in the midst of its citadels, is its sure defence.

⁴Look, the kings are assembling, they advance together.

⁵As soon as they see it, they are astounded;
they panic, and take to flight.

⁶Trembling takes hold of them,
like the pangs of a woman in labour,

⁷as when the east wind causes shipwreck to a merchant fleet.

⁸As we have heard, so we have seen:

this is the city of the Mighty GOD, the city of our God,
who has established it for ever.

⁹In your temple, O God, we ponder your covenant love.

¹⁰Your praise, O God, like your reputation,
reaches to the ends of the earth.

Your right hand is filled with justice.

¹¹May Mount Zion be glad.

At the sight of your judgments may the towns of Judah rejoice.

¹²Walk through Zion, walk all around it,
count its towers, admire its ramparts,

¹³take note of its citadels,

that you may tell the next generation:

¹⁴‘This is God, our eternal God, who is for ever our guide.’

²Mount Zion, true pole of the earth, city of the great King.

The psalmist is inviting us to admire and celebrate Mount Zion (Jerusalem) and its temple. 'Mount Zaphon' (true pole of the earth), near the mouth of the Orontes River in Northern Syria, was the sacred mountain of the storm god Baal-Hadad in ancient Canaanite mythology, the Canaanite equivalent of Mount Olympus for the Greeks.

But, as even foreign kings can see (verses 4-8), no mountain city can compare to the city which is the abode of Israel's God, the 'great King'.

1. Jesus in the Temple that is Heaven.

We reflected on Jesus' love for Jerusalem when praying Psalm 2. As we begin to pray this psalm with Jesus our thoughts go to the 'heavenly Jerusalem' where the risen Jesus dwells with his Father.

At the Last Supper Jesus said to his friends: 'If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father' (John 14:28). On the day of his resurrection he asked Mary of Magdala to go and tell Peter and the other apostles: 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17).

We express our joy to Jesus that God raised him to life and took him to himself. Jesus spent his whole life longing for this eternal embrace of love.

As we love Jesus, so our hearts are happy for him. His time of waiting, his time of suffering is over. Nothing can ever come between the longing of his heart and the joy of experiencing his heart's desire.

Perhaps the most powerful picture of the Risen Jesus to be found in the New Testament is in The Book of Revelation. Describing his vision, John writes:

‘I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lamp-stands, and in the midst of the lamp-stands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force’ (Revelation 1:12-16).

We are destined to enjoy Heaven with Jesus. The goal of our life is the same as his. We are called, like Jesus, to enjoy undistracted communion with God forever: ‘what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Corinthians 2:9).

‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also’ (John 14:2-3).

‘Father, you have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am’ (John 17:22-24).

2. Jesus in the Temple that is the World

Having reflected with Jesus on our eternal home, where Jesus now lives with God, and where we hope to join him, our thoughts go to our present situation. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we think of the presence of God, and so the presence of the risen Jesus, in the universe. Wherever we are, we confidently pray: 'your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast' (Psalm 139:7-10).

Jesus is THE Sacrament, THE Mystery, THE Symbol of God. 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:19). 'In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Colossians 2:9). Being in communion with his Father, his heart is able now to reach out, beyond all the limits of space and time, to be wherever God's love is. And so he is able to be with us. We recall his promise: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32).

We speak of Jesus being at God's right hand – which is our way of saying that he is at the heart of God's powerful action, bringing about the reign of God's loving will in this our broken world. We can still resist God's loving advances – hence the continual corruption of sin in our personal and communal lives. But nothing can stop God's love, and millions are welcoming this love and responding to it heroically in their lives.

We know the way Jesus relates to us now, because we have seen the way he related to us before death took him from our sight and our touch. He whom God lifted up to himself is he whom we lifted up on a cross. If we want to see what it means for Jesus to ascend into heaven, the best image is the glorified Christ reigning from the cross. The words that he spoke from the cross teach us the way in which he will always relate to us.

Jesus longs to forgive our sins ('Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing', Luke 23:34).

He longs to take us with him to be with him forever in God's embrace ('This day you will be with me in paradise', Luke 23:43).

He is thirsty for our hearts ('I thirst', John 19:28), and from his pierced side he pours out upon us the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist to cleanse and nourish us (John 19:34).

He is constantly giving us the very Spirit of love that binds him to the Father, so that we can love with his love ('He gave up his spirit', John 19:30),

and he assures us of his own mother's special care ('Here is your mother', John 19:27).

Paul writes: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us' (Romans 8:18). 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12).

'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

3. Jesus in the Temple of the Church.

In a special way, we reflect on the presence of the risen Jesus in the Church, the 'new Jerusalem', which Paul speaks of as 'the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation' (Ephesians 1:23). 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish' (Ephesians 5:25-27).

We thank God for the community of Jesus' disciples to whom it is our privilege to belong. When Philip asked to see the Father, Jesus told him that to see him is to see the Father (John 14:9). Similarly, if we want to see the face of Jesus we have only to look upon the face of the Church. Of course we need to be discerning. The Church is composed of sinners like you and me who have been partly enlightened by Jesus but who are still partly living in the dark. The Church is composed of people like you and me who long for God but who can easily be distracted and fail, sometimes seriously. There are sinners in the Church because the Church continues the mission of Jesus, clasping sinners to her bosom.

We look at the face of the saints, and we look at each other and marvel at the goodness that we see there. It is Jesus who is loving in and through us; it is Jesus who is praying in and through us. So we thank God for the holiness that is evident in the Church. The Spirit that comes from his heart comes to us through the community, especially through the sacraments.

We think of the three sacraments of initiation into the community. In Baptism we were united to Jesus and in Confirmation his Spirit was poured into our hearts. In Communion we are taken into heaven for a few moments and are given a taste of the communion with God and with all whom we love which will be our eternal home.

Then there is the beautiful sacrament of Reconciliation. Jesus is always ready to forgive, heal and encourage us. In Marriage and in Sacred Orders our way of loving and our way of ministering to others is consecrated so that whenever we love, it is he who is loving in us, and whenever we serve it is Jesus who is serving in us. Finally, when we are losing our hold on life, our final journeying to God is surrounded by grace through the sacrament of Anointing.

Jesus promised that if we listen to the community we will hear him. We thank God in a special way for the Church, for it is there that Jesus continues to dwell in a special way, drawing us to himself. Jesus promised: 'I will build my church, and the gates of the Underworld will not prevail against it' (Matthew 16:18).

The Book of Revelation speaks beautifully of the Church, describing it as 'the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven' (Revelation 3:12). 'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Revelation 21:2). 'I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb' (Revelation 21:22).

The Church is THE Sacrament, THE Mystery, THE Symbol of Jesus. The portrait of the Risen Jesus in The Book of Revelation concludes with the words: 'In his right hand he held seven stars.' These are the churches of Asia, representing the local Christian assemblies all over the world that draw Christians together to celebrate their faith. The risen Christ is holding the local churches in his hand.

In the Catholic Catechism (n. 776) we read: 'As sacrament, the Church is Christ's instrument. The church is taken up by him also as his instrument for the salvation of all, the universal sacrament of salvation, by which Christ is manifesting and bringing about the mystery of God's love for all people. The Church is the visible plan of God's love for humanity, because God desires that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built into one Temple of the Holy Spirit.'

Speaking of the local church assembled for the Eucharist, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews picks up the imagery of Psalm 48 when he writes: ‘You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first born who are enrolled in heaven’ (Hebrews 12:22-23).

In Christ we find the fullness of God. Furthermore, while everything shares in the grace of Christ and reflects something of his fullness, it is to the church that we must look if we wish to see his fullness, for he fills the church with his Spirit (it can be called, therefore, his 'body') and pours out the fullness of grace into her. The church is the body which he fills with his life, which radiates his glory throughout the cosmos, and which draws the whole of humankind and all creation into his fullness as it is built up and grows into him.

The Second Vatican Council declares: 'The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only arousing in them a desire for the world to come, but also animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end' (Church in the Modern World, §38).

The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus' body, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God's love.

It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now, raised to the fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus - the Spirit of love which binds him to the Father - that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcomed. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the Church. 'In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him' (Colossians 2:9-10).

The Beauty of God's Temple.

As we pray the psalm with Jesus, we are in awe at the beauty of the universe, being created and held in existence by God's Word (see John 1:1-13).

We are in awe at the beauty of Jesus, in whom 'the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of the gift of truth' (John 1:14).

The Beauty of God's Temple.

We are in awe at the beauty of the Church. Speaking of the Church Paul writes: 'In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord' (Ephesians 2:21). 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (1 Corinthians 3:16). 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?' (1 Corinthians 6:19).

4. Jesus in the temple of the human person.

Each of us personally is called and graced to be the temple in which God wants to dwell: 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom you know him, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you ... If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home in you' (John 14:15-18, 23).

As we admire the beauty of the risen Jesus, and the beauty of his Body, the Church, our prayer is that ‘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). The text continues: ‘this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’. This is the Spirit of love that flows between God and the risen Jesus, the Spirit that is ‘poured into our hearts’ (Romans 5:5).

We pray with Paul: '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' (2 Corinthians 4:6). We pray that the beauty the psalmist sees in Jerusalem, the beauty we see in the face of Jesus, will increasingly be the beauty that God wants for each of us, till we can pray with Paul: 'It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Psalm 48

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the crowning joy of all the earth.

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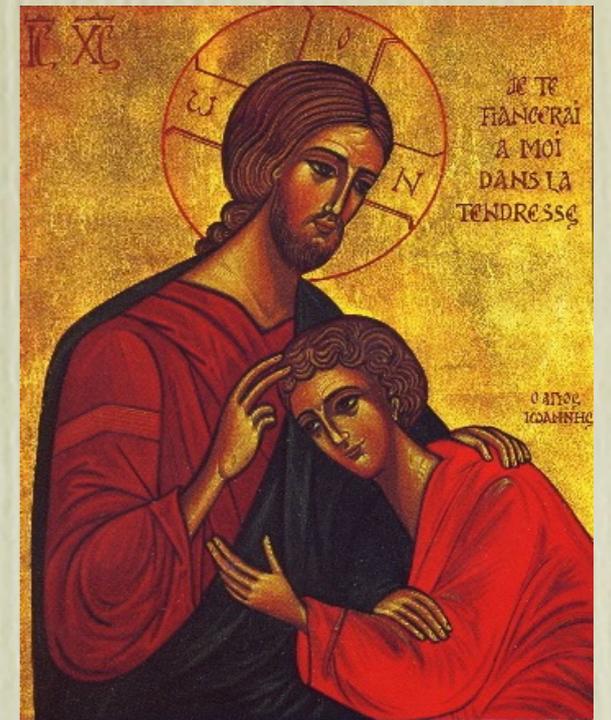
³God, in the midst of its citadels, is its sure defence.

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this is the city of the Mighty GOD, the city of our God,
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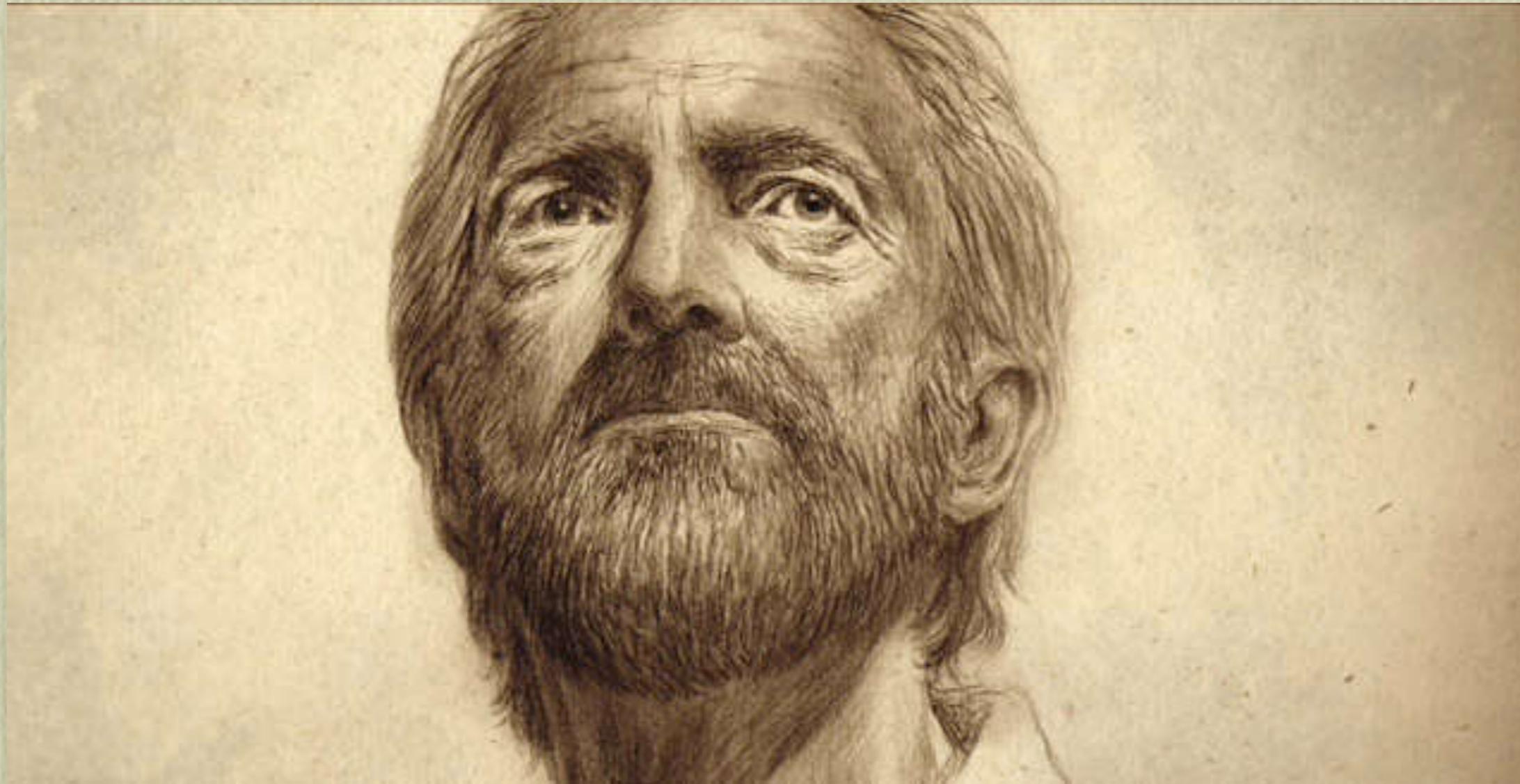
¹²Walk through Zion, walk all around it,
count its towers, admire its ramparts,

¹³take note of its citadels,

that you may tell the next generation:

¹⁴‘This is God, our eternal God, who is for ever our guide.’

Reflecting on Psalm 49 in Jesus' Company



¹Hear this, all you peoples! Listen, inhabitants of the world,
²people both high and low, rich and poor alike.

³I have wisdom you need to hear. My heart is full of insight.

⁴I turn my mind to an enigma.

To the sound of the harp I will present my challenge.

⁵Why should I fear times of trouble,
when criminals track me down to destroy me,

⁶people who trust in their wealth
and boast of the abundance of their riches?

⁷Yes, none of us can buy our own freedom,
or pay a ransom to God for our lives.

⁸For the ransom is too high, well beyond our means.

⁹There is no escaping death, no avoiding the grave.

¹⁰Look, even the wisest die.

They perish just like the foolish and the stupid.

They have to leave their wealth to others.

¹¹The grave is their home for ever, their final dwelling,
even if their names spread wide through the land.

¹²*Human beings in their opulence cannot endure;
like the animals they must succumb to silence.*

¹³Such is the lot of those
who find their security in themselves:
just like sheep they are being driven to the grave.

¹⁴Death shepherds them. Straight to the grave they descend,
and their form wastes away.

The realm of the dead is their home.

¹⁵But I know God will rescue me,
snatching me from the grip of death.

¹⁶Do not be concerned when people become rich,
when the wealth of their house increases.

¹⁷When we die we will take nothing with us.
There is no place for wealth in the grave.

¹⁸Though in their life they consider themselves blessed –
for you are praised when you do well for yourself –

¹⁹they will go down to join their ancestors,
and will never again see the light.

²⁰*Human beings in their opulence cannot comprehend;
like the animals they must succumb to silence.*

Psalm 49 is not a prayer. It is a reflection on death as an unavoidable dimension of the human condition. The rich and powerful cannot buy their way out of it. They are foolish, therefore, to be too impressed by the power they wield. We should not be too impressed either, but rather place our hope in God, who alone gives and sustains life (verse 15).

The psalmist knows what it is like to experience ‘**times of trouble**’ (verse 5). But he makes the point that we should not be afraid – persecutors die like everyone else (verses 9-11).

¹⁵I know God will rescue me,
snatching me from the grip of death.

The idea of being ransomed from death takes on a new meaning in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus' mission was to reveal God as love by giving himself in love for us. The way he lived and the way he died showed us how to live. His gift to us of the Spirit of his love-communion with God enables us to welcome him to live in us, trusting in God and offering our lives for others. As Jesus himself said: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28).

Paul writes: 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God ... and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:21, 23). 'He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity' (Titus 2:14).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read: 'He entered once for all into the Holy Place ... with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption' (Hebrews 9:12).

Peter writes: 'You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors ... with the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Praying Psalm 50 in Jesus' Company



¹The Mighty God, the High GOD, speaks,
summoning the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.

²Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.

³Our God is coming and will not be silent.

First comes a devouring fire; then a mighty tempest.

⁴From on high God summons the heavens and the earth
to witness the judgment of the people:

⁵'Gather to me my people, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.'

⁶The heavens declare God's justice,
for God is coming in person as judge.

⁷'Listen, my people, for I will speak; Israel, I testify against you.
I am God, your God. I accuse you. I lay the charge before you.

⁸I find no fault with your sacrifices;
your offerings are always before me.

⁹I do not ask for more bullocks from your stalls,
or goats from your herds.

¹⁰Every wild animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle in their thousands on my mountains.

¹¹I know all the birds of the air;
all that moves in the field is at my disposal.

¹²If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.

¹³Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?

¹⁴Offer to me a sacrifice of confession
and pay your vows to the Most High.

¹⁵Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honour me.'

¹⁶To the wicked God says: 'How dare you quote to me my law.

How dare you invoke the covenant,

¹⁷you who hate discipline, and turn away when I speak?

¹⁸You make friends with a thief when you see one.

You keep company with adulterers.

¹⁹You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue plots deceit.

²⁰You sit and speak against your kin; you slander your own mother's child.

²¹This is how you behave and should I be silent?

Do you think that I am like you? I will accuse you to your face.

²²Mark you this, you who never think of God!

I will not punish you without offering you an escape.

²³They honour me who bring to me as their sacrifice
admission of their guilt.

I will see that those who correct their conduct

will enjoy my salvation.'

This is a psalm composed for the penitential liturgy. God is accusing his people of their failure to keep the covenant. There are many allusions to the Sinai Covenant. Psalm 51 follows as the second part of the liturgy, in which the people acknowledge their sin and ask for pardon. There are many verbal connections between the two psalms.

‘**Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth**’ (verse 2). See the commentary on Psalm 48:2.

‘**Those bound to me**’ (verse 5) are those who owe fidelity to God, the hasidim, who have entered into a covenant relationship with God, a commitment of love (hesed). God is faithful to God’s commitment, God’s covenant love . Are we?

In verse 7 God opens the case against the people, accusing them of sin. They are fulfilling all their cultic obligations. God has nothing of which to accuse them on that score (verses 8-13). But cult and sacrifices cannot substitute for a genuine relationship with God. They are guilty of breaking the covenant. We cannot carry out our religious duties, and use that to bribe God into silence.

Our relationship with God is tested by our relationship with others (verses 16ff). In the decalogue we are commanded not to kill, not to destroy through adultery the marriage relationship which is at the basis of family life, not to deprive others of the material things which they need to live properly, and not to accuse others falsely (Exodus 20:13-16). God is accusing the people of breaking the commandments: not fulfilling their side of the covenant.

It matters how we live. As we listen to this psalm we would do well to listen to Jesus' parable about what ultimately matters in human behaviour. We are judged on how we have loved (Matthew 25:31-46).

What Psalm 50 asks of us is that we be honest. To the extent that we have broken the covenant, we should own up to our failure. Only honest confession ('a sacrifice of confession', verses 14 and 23) provides the basis for repentance, and a renewal of communion with God.

Psalm 50

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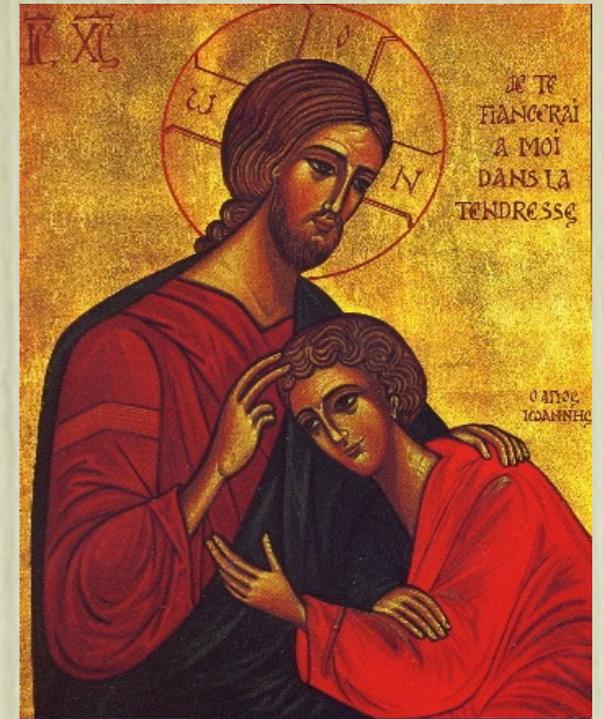
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