

34. Psalms 103-105

Praying Psalm 103 with Jesus



This has been called the Old Testament's 'Te Deum' (Latin hymn of praise and thanksgiving prayed in the liturgy on major feasts). As it stands it is post-exilic, but it builds on earlier material. It is a hymn of thanksgiving, beginning in a personal way and then inviting all of Israel (verse 10), all humankind (verse 14), and finally the whole of the cosmos to join in praising God.

It may arise out of a personal experience of healing (verses 3-4), or as a result of the return from exile (verse 6), or simply as a meditation on God's covenant love (verse 8). The focus is on God's mercy which is moved by human weakness (verse 14), and experienced by those who are faithful to the covenant (verses 17-18).

When GOD is the object of blessing, as in verses 1-3, and again in verses 20-23, we are praising and thanking God for a blessing already received or requested.

¹Bless GOD, O my soul. All that is within me, bless GOD's holy name.
²Bless GOD, O my soul. Never forget GOD's blessings.
³Bless GOD, who forgives our sins, and heals every one of our ills,
⁴who keeps us from the grave,
and surrounds us with covenant love and compassion,
⁵who fills us with good things as long as we live,
renewing our strength like the eagle's.
⁶O GOD, you see to justice and right judgments for all the oppressed,
⁷revealing your ways to Moses, and your deeds to the people of Israel.
⁸GOD is tenderly compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in covenant love.
⁹GOD will accuse us, but not always, and be angry, but not for ever.
¹⁰GOD will not deal with us as our sins deserve,
nor repay us according to our guilt.

¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is GOD's covenant love
toward those who revere [fear] God.

¹²As far as the east is from the west,
so far God removes from us our sins.

¹³As a father has compassion for his children,
so GOD has compassion for us who revere [fear] God.

¹⁴GOD does not fail to remember that we are but dust.

¹⁵As for us mortal human beings, our days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field.

¹⁶Come the wind, the flower is gone,
and its place does not remember it.

¹⁷But for those who revere [fear] God,
GOD's covenant love has always been, and will always be, present.

Your righteousness, O GOD,
passes from one generation to the next,

¹⁸to all who keep your covenant
and take care to carry out your commandments.

¹⁹GOD reigns from heaven, governing the universe.

²⁰Bless GOD, you mighty angels who do God's bidding,
always obedient to God's word.

²¹Bless GOD, you powers, eager to carry out GOD's will.

²²Bless GOD, you creatures, subject to GOD's rule. Bless GOD, O my soul!

In verses 3-6 the psalmist gives six reasons for praising GOD.

1. **God forgives all our sins.** Again and again throughout his ministry Jesus assured people that their sins were forgiven. He saw their faith and their love. Read, too, Jesus' parable about the need to forgive (Matthew 18:21-35).
2. **God heals all our diseases.** Having shown Jesus healing people, Matthew comments: 'This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases"' (Matthew 8:17, quoting Isaiah 53:4). 'Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness' (Matthew 9:35-36).

3. **God holds us back from death.** This refers in a special way to his saving us from the ultimate death: separation from God, the source of life. Jesus said: 'I came not to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for the multitude' (Mark 10:45).

4. **God crowns us with covenant love (ḥesed) and compassion (raḥamim).** These two words recur in the psalm (see verses 8, 11, 13 and 17). Along with 'graciousness (ḥanan) they occur together regularly when speaking of the key qualities of GOD.

5. God continues to satisfy us with all that is good.

‘We are filled with the goodness of your house, with the holy gifts of your temple’ (Psalm 65:4).

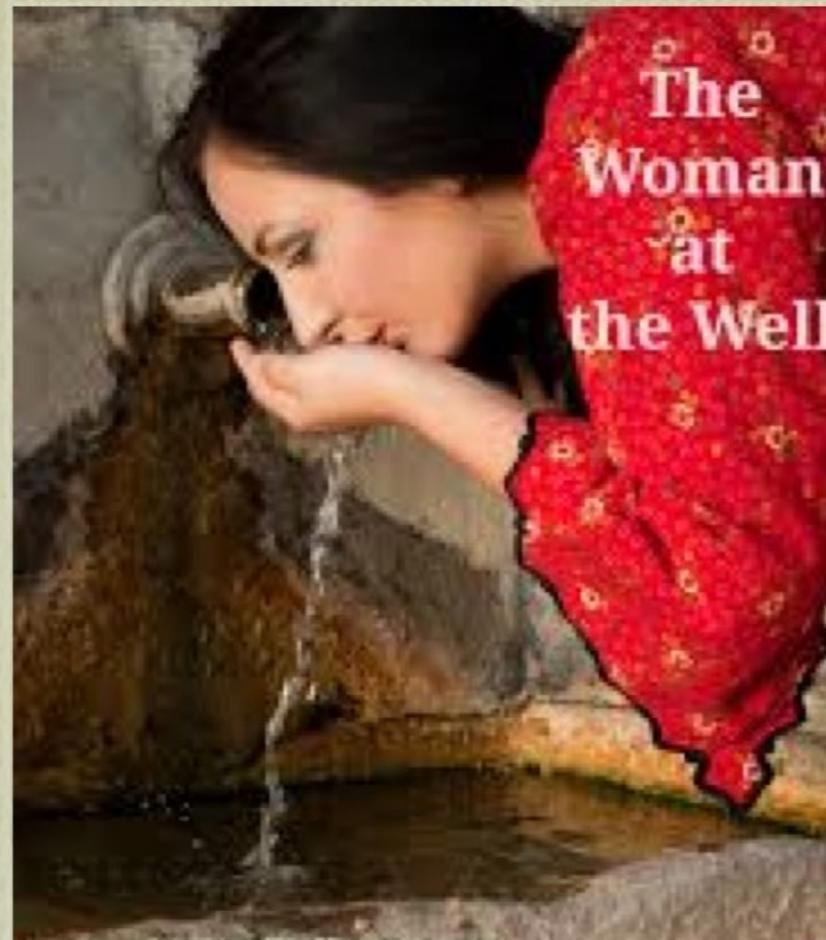
‘With honey from the rock I would satisfy you’ (Psalm 81:16).

‘With long life I will satisfy them’ (Psalm 91:16).

‘He satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things’
(Psalm 107:9).

‘I will satisfy the poor of Zion with bread’ (Psalm 132:15).

‘You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing’ (Psalm 145:16).



As we pray this psalm with Jesus we would do well to contemplate the scene of his multiplying the loaves and the fish to feed the crowd (see Mark 6:30-44 and 8:1-10). Let us reflect, too, on the Last Supper (see Mark 14:17-26), and on these words addressed by the Risen Jesus to the Christian community in Laodicea: 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (Revelation 3:20).

6. **God sees that the oppressed receive justice.** Jesus' concern for justice is expressed, perhaps most clearly, in the first of his beatitudes: 'Blessed and happy are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Luke 6:20).

⁷You reveal your ways to Moses, and your deeds to the people of Israel.

The psalmist is recalling the Exodus from Egypt

⁸GOD is tenderly compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in covenant love.

This repeats the creedal formula found throughout the Bible.

⁹GOD will accuse us, but not always, and be angry, but not for ever.

¹⁰GOD will not deal with us as our sins deserve,
nor repay us according to our guilt.

These verses assume that some terrible catastrophe (the exile in Babylon perhaps), happened because God was angry at the failure of the people to repent. The focus in this psalm, however, is on the assurance that God's 'anger' is always trumped by covenant love. God has made a commitment to love Israel, and the people can be confident that God will remain faithful to this commitment.

¹³As a father has compassion for his children,
so GOD has compassion for us who revere [fear] God.

¹⁴GOD does not fail to remember that we are but dust.

Like a father GOD exercises authority:

‘Let my son go that he may worship me’ (Exodus 4:23).

Like a father GOD educates:

‘Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so
GOD your God disciplines you’ (Deuteronomy 8:5).

‘Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for GOD has spoken: I
reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled
against me’ (Isaiah 1:2).

Like a father GOD accepts the anointed king as his adopted son:

‘I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me’ (2 Samuel 7:14).

‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’ (Psalm 2:7)

Like a father GOD cares for orphans as his own:

‘Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation’ (Psalm 68:5).

GOD’s ‘feelings’ are those of a father:

‘How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender’ (Hosea 11:8).

‘I thought you would call me, “My Father”, and would not turn from following me. Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness’ (Jeremiah 3:19, 22).

‘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).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we are conscious of the fact that picturing God as a father is central to Jesus' image of God. We saw this when reflecting on Jesus' intimate communion with God in the second presentation. Jesus knows that everything he is and everything he does has its source in God. When Jesus calls God 'Abba' (as in Mark 14:36), he did not understand this as separating him from us. On the contrary, a central dimension of his ministry was to reveal God as everyone's Father.

Jesus wanted his disciples to love their enemies, and so 'to be children of **your Father** in heaven' (Matthew 5:45). Jesus wanted them to 'be compassionate as **your Father** is compassionate' (Luke 6:36). When he taught his disciples to pray he taught them to open their prayer with an acknowledgement that God is 'Father' (Luke 11:2). Jesus' image of God is expressed beautifully in the parable of the two sons (see Luke 15:11-32).

Jesus wanted all of us to be able to say, with him: ‘The Father and I are one’ (John 10:30); ‘The Father is in me and I am in the Father’ (John 10:38; see 14:10-11, 20). The Risen Jesus commissioned Mary of Magdala to ‘go to my brothers and say to them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ (John 20:17).

Paul witnesses to the practice in the early Christian communities of addressing God as Jesus addressed God: 'Abba! Father!' (Romans 8:15). 'Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"' (Galatians 4:6). 'For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist' (1 Corinthians 8:6). 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father' (Philippians 1:2).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'The one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters' (Hebrews 2:11).

Jesus wants each of us to know that God is the source of all we are and all we do. In his culture this is beautifully expressed in acknowledging God as 'Father.' In the ancient world, and in the medieval world, indeed right through to the beginning of the modern era, the role of the woman in conception was unknown. The father was thought to be the sole source of human life. It was the mother's role to nurture this life. It was not realised that she contributes to it.

Knowing this it is insufficient for us today to acknowledge God as 'Father'. We now know that the father is not the sole source of life. The mother has a complementary and essential role in procreation. In fidelity to what Jesus revealed about God we acknowledge God as 'Father-Mother.'

¹⁵As for us mortal human beings, our days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field.

¹⁶Come the wind, the flower is gone, and its place does not remember it.

We human beings are fragile

¹⁹GOD reigns from heaven, governing the universe.

²⁰Bless GOD, you mighty angels who do God's bidding,
always obedient to God's word.

²¹Bless GOD, you powers, eager to carry out GOD's will.

²²Bless GOD, you creatures, subject to GOD's rule.

Bless GOD, O my soul!

The angels, the stars of the heavens, the whole of the created universe, are invited to 'bless GOD', that is, to praise and thank God for the blessings GOD continues to pour out on creation. Finally, the psalmist invites his own soul to join in the praise.

Psalm 103

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All that is within me, bless GOD's holy name.

²Bless GOD, O my soul.

Never forget GOD's blessings.

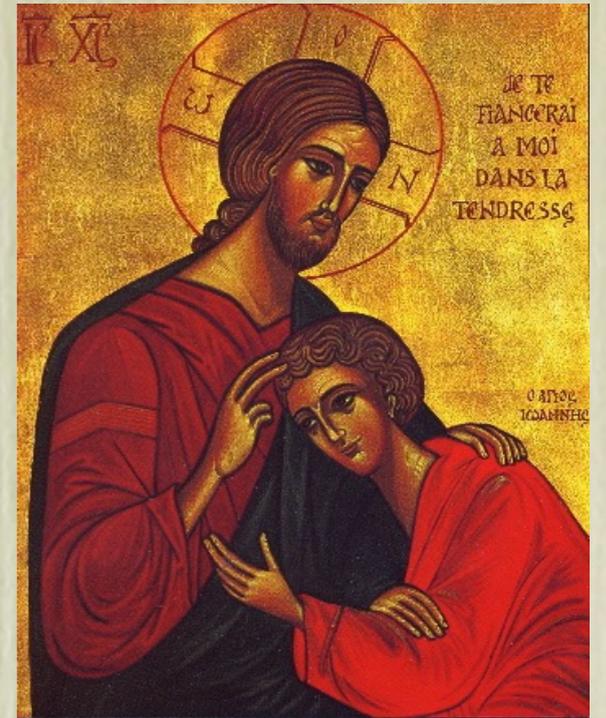
³Bless GOD, who forgives our sins,
and heals every one of our ills,

⁴who keeps us from the grave,
and surrounds us with covenant love and compassion,

⁵who fills us with good things as long as we live,
renewing our strength like the eagle's.

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⁷revealing your ways to Moses, and your deeds to the people of Israel.



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¹⁷But for those who revere God,
GOD's covenant love has always been, and will always be, present.

Your righteousness, O GOD,
passes from one generation to the next,

¹⁸to all who keep your covenant
and take care to carry out your commandments.

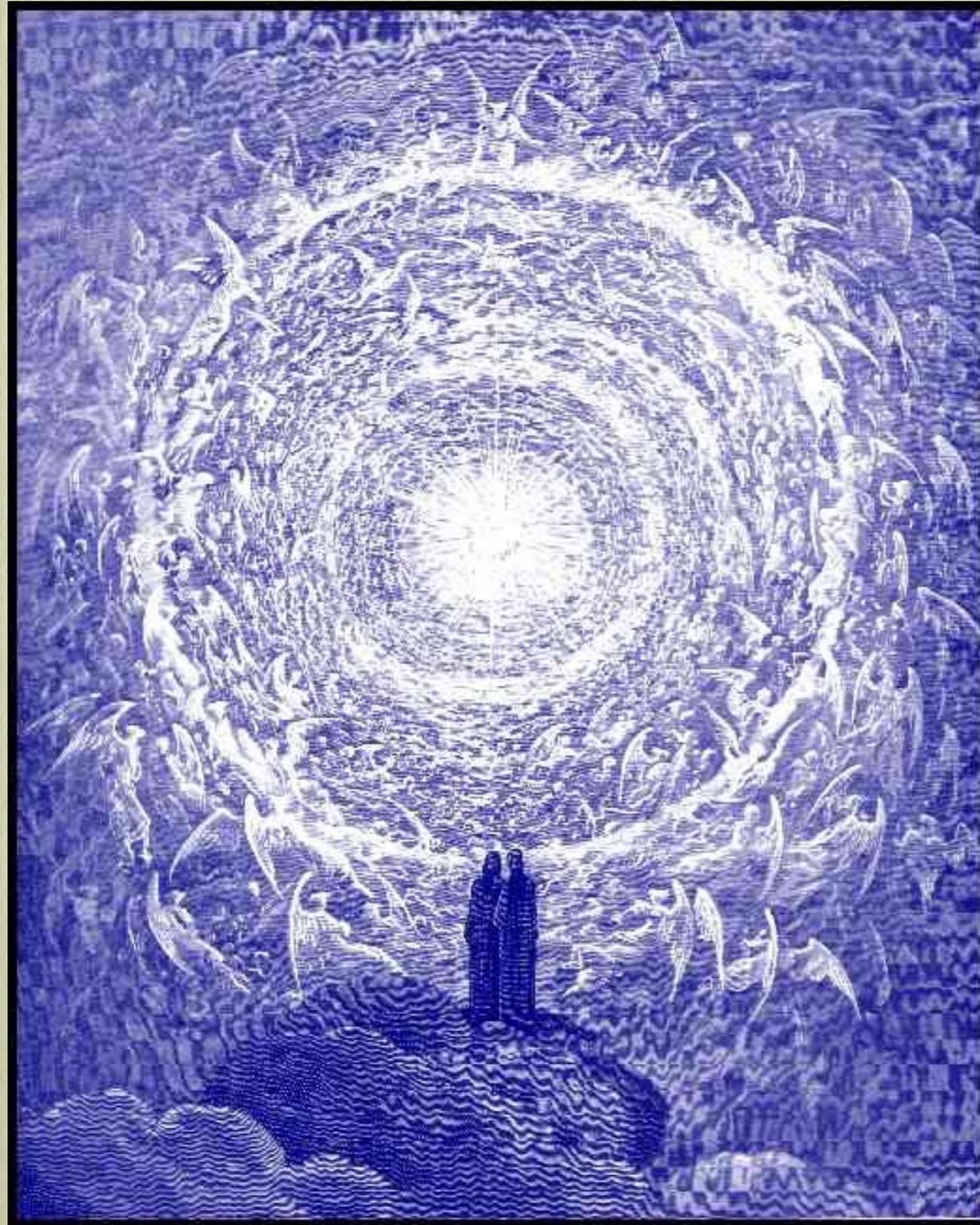
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²²Bless GOD, you creatures, subject to GOD's rule. Bless GOD, O my soul!

Praying Psalm 104 with Jesus



¹Bless GOD, O my soul.

O GOD, my God (אֱלֹהֵי), how wonderful you are.

You are clothed with beauty and majesty,

²wrapped in a mantle of light.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent.

³You establish your dwelling above the rains.

You make the clouds your chariot,
and ride on the wings of the wind.

⁴You make the storm your herald.

The lightning carries out your will.

⁵You set the earth on its foundations.

It will never be shaken.

⁶You cover it with the ocean as with a garment.

The waters rise up to assault the mountains.

⁷When you rebuke the waters they flee;

at the rumble of your thunder they take to flight.

⁸They rose up to the mountains and ran down to the valleys,
to the place you appointed for them.

⁹You set a boundary that the waters may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

¹⁰You make rivers gush forth from their springs,
to flow between the hills,

¹¹giving drink to the wild animals.
The wild asses quench their thirst.

¹²The birds of the air nest near the streams,
and sing among the branches.

¹³From your lofty abode you water the hills.
The ground drinks its fill of your gift.

¹⁴You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants through human labour.

We are to produce food from the fields,
¹⁵wine to gladden the heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread for strength.

¹⁶The trees of GOD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon planted by GOD.

¹⁷Birds nest in their branches.

On the tree-top the stork has its home.

¹⁸High mountains are for the wild goats;
rocks are a refuge for the hyrax.

¹⁹You make the moon to mark the seasons.

The sun knows its time for setting.

²⁰You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come out.

²¹The young lions roar to you
as they search for their prey.

²²At the rising of the sun they withdraw,
and go to rest in their dens.

²³We go out to our work
and labour until evening.

²⁴O GOD, how manifold are your works!
Everything you have done is masterly;
the earth is full of your wonderful creatures.

²⁵Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
filled with fish past counting.

²⁶There ships ply their trade,
and there is Leviathan that you made for play.

²⁷All these creatures look to you
to give them their food in due season.

²⁸When you provide it, they feed.
When you open wide your hand, they have their fill.

²⁹When you hide your face, they are dismayed.
When you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.

³⁰You send forth your breath, and they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.

³¹May your glory, O GOD, endure for ever.
May YOU rejoice in creation.

³²One look from YOU and the earth trembles.
One touch, and the mountains erupt.

³³I will sing to GOD as long as I live.

I will sing praise to my God,
while I have breath to do so.

³⁴May my meditation be pleasing to YOU,
for I delight in YOU.

³⁵May sinners disappear from the earth.

May the wicked be no more.

Bless GOD, O my soul. Praise GOD [Alleluia].

Psalm 104 extols the greatness of the Creator as revealed by God's presence and action in creation.

As we reflect back on this psalm seven themes stand out.

i. How creation reveals God's work G.M. Hopkins: 'God's grandeur'.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

2. The Transcendent God is continually present and acting in creation.

‘When you hide your face, they are dismayed.

When you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.

You send forth your breath, and they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth’ (verses 29-30).

3. Human beings work in harmony with the rhythms of creation.

²³We go out to our work and labour until evening.

4. Sharing in God’s delight in creation. The author is a contemplative: he is attentive to the sacred in the interconnectedness of things. He is a poet, working with language to share what he recognises to be beyond comprehensive expression.

5. Everything is connected to everything else. This is expressed well in the following words from the Preacher: 'All have the same breath' (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

²⁹When you hide your face, they are dismayed.

When you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.

³⁰You send forth your breath, and they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.

6. How creation reveals the beauty of the Creator. Praying it as Christians we contemplate Jesus, God's focal word, the perfect expression of divine beauty.

We might read 'The Windhover' by Gerard M. Hopkins, composed in 1877, just before his ordination, and dedicated 'To Christ our Lord'.

I caught this morning, morning's minion,
kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in its riding
of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
high there, how he rung upon the rein of the wimpling wing
in his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
as a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and gliding
rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah, my dear,
fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

We might reflect also upon the following stanzas from
'The Spiritual Canticle' of John of the Cross.

Stanza 4

O woods and thickets
planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
coated, bright, with flowers,
Tell me, has he passed by you?

Stanza 5

Pouring out a thousand graces,
He passed these groves in haste;
And having looked at them,
with his image alone,
He clothed them in beauty.

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 5,4

‘St. Paul says: The Son of God is the splendour of his glory and the image of his substance (Hebrews 1:3). It should be known that only with this figure, his Son, did God look at all things, that is, he communicated to them their natural being and many natural graces and gifts, and made them complete and perfect, as it is said in Genesis: “God looked at all things that he made, and they were very good” (Genesis 1:31). To look and behold that they were very good was to make them very good in the Word, his Son.

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 5,4

‘Not only by looking at them did God communicate natural being and graces, as we said, but also with this image of his Son alone, he clothed them in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This he did when he became man and elevated human nature in the beauty of God, and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all. Accordingly the Son of God proclaimed: “If I be lifted up from the earth, I will elevate all things to myself” (John 12:32). And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of his Son and through the glory of his resurrection according to the flesh not only did the Father beautify creatures partially, but, we can say, he clothed them entirely in beauty and dignity.’

Spiritual Canticle 14-15

Stanza 14

My Beloved is the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands, and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes

Stanza 15

The tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music, sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes,
and deepens love.

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle

‘This spiritual flight denotes a high state and union of love, in which, after much spiritual exercise, the soul is placed by God. This state is called spiritual espousal with the Word, the Son of God.’

7. The seventh theme concerns sin. In the final verse: **'May sinners disappear from the earth. May the wicked be no more'** (verse 35) the psalmist longs to see the end of sin, for it is sin that obscures the glory of God and spoils creation.

Psalm 104

¹Bless GOD, O my soul.

O GOD, my God, how wonderful you are.

You are clothed with beauty and majesty,

²wrapped in a mantle of light.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent.

³You establish your dwelling above the rains.

You make the clouds your chariot,
and ride on the wings of the wind.

⁴You make the storm your herald.

The lightning carries out your will.

⁵You set the earth on its foundations.

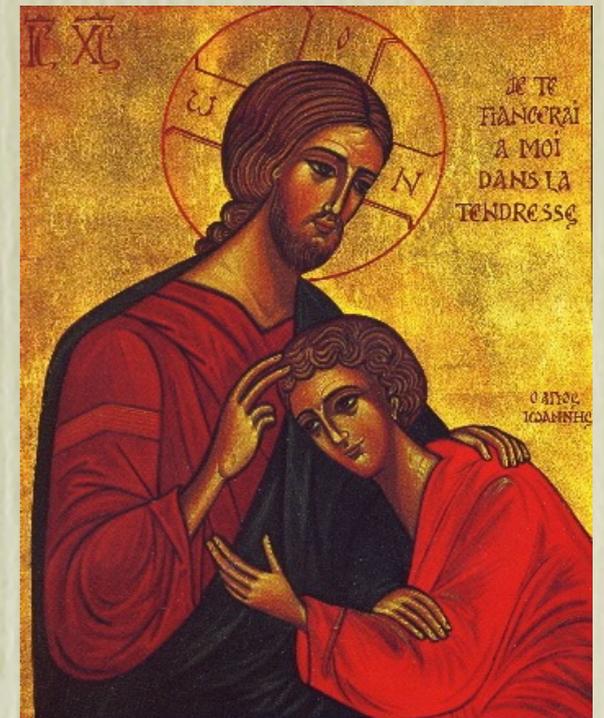
It will never be shaken.

⁶You cover it with the ocean as with a garment.

The waters rise up to assault the mountains.

⁷When you rebuke the waters they flee;

at the rumble of your thunder they take to flight.



⁸They rose up to the mountains and ran down to the valleys,
to the place you appointed for them.

⁹You set a boundary that the waters may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

¹⁰You make rivers gush forth from their springs,
to flow between the hills,

¹¹giving drink to the wild animals.
The wild asses quench their thirst.

¹²The birds of the air nest near the streams,
and sing among the branches.

¹³From your lofty abode you water the hills.
The ground drinks its fill of your gift.

¹⁴You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants through human labour.

We are to produce food from the fields,
¹⁵wine to gladden the heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread for strength.

¹⁶The trees of GOD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon planted by God.

¹⁷Birds nest in their branches.

On the tree-top the stork has its home.

¹⁸High mountains are for the wild goats;
rocks are a refuge for the hyrax.

¹⁹You make the moon to mark the seasons.

The sun knows its time for setting.

²⁰You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come out.

²¹The young lions roar to you
as they search for their prey.

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and go to rest in their dens.

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Everything you have done is masterly;
the earth is full of your wonderful creatures.

²⁵Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
filled with fish past counting.

²⁶There ships ply their trade,
and there is Leviathan that you made for play.

²⁷All these creatures look to you
to give them their food in due season.

²⁸When you provide it, they feed.
When you open wide your hand, they have their fill.

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When you take away their breath, they die and return to dust.

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and you renew the face of the earth.

³¹May your glory, O GOD, endure for ever.
May YOU rejoice in creation.

³²One look from YOU and the earth trembles.
One touch, and the mountains erupt.

³³I will sing to GOD as long as I live.

I will sing praise to my God,
while I have breath to do so.

³⁴May my meditation be pleasing to YOU,
for I delight in YOU.

³⁵May sinners disappear from the earth.

May the wicked be no more.

Bless GOD, O my soul. Praise GOD [Alleluia].

Reflecting on Psalm 105 with Jesus

Psalm 105 is not a prayer. The psalmist is calling the people to remember the covenant GOD made with their ancestors (verses 8-10) and that it is GOD who released them from slavery in Egypt (verse 37), led them through the wilderness (verses 39-43), and gave them 'the lands of the nations' (verse 34). They must 'observe GOD's law' (verse 45).

¹Give thanks to GOD, call on GOD's name,
Tell all the peoples what GOD has done.

²Sing to the sound of instruments;
tell of all the wonderful things GOD has done.

³Sing Alleluia to GOD's holy name.

May the hearts of those who seek GOD rejoice.

⁴Seek continually for the presence and the power of GOD.

⁵Remember GOD's wonderful deeds,
GOD's miracles, and judgments,

⁶you offspring of GOD's servant Abraham,
you children of Jacob, the chosen of GOD.

⁷GOD is our God (אֱלֹהֵינוּ), judge of all the earth,
⁸ever mindful of the covenant,
⁹the promise made to Abraham,
¹⁰the oath to Isaac, confirmed to Jacob,
the everlasting commitment made to Israel
fixed for a thousand generations.

¹¹God said ‘To you I will give a land,
Canaan, as your inheritance.’

¹²When they were few in number, of little account,
and strangers in the land,

¹³wandering from nation to nation,
from one kingdom to another,

¹⁴GOD allowed no one to oppress them,
rebuking kings on their account:

¹⁵‘Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.’

¹⁶GOD caused famine to ravish the land,
and took away their sustenance.

¹⁷Joseph was sent on ahead, sold as a slave.

¹⁸His feet were bound with fetters,
his neck with a collar of iron,

¹⁹until what he had said came to pass,
and he was vindicated by the word of GOD.

²⁰Pharaoh released him;
the ruler of nations set him free.

²¹He made him master of the palace,
steward of all his possessions,

²²to instruct his officials at his pleasure,
and to teach his elders wisdom.

²³Then Israel came to Egypt;

Jacob lived there as an alien.

²⁴GOD made Jacob's people fruitful,
stronger than their foes,

²⁵whose hearts GOD then turned to hate Israel.
They were eager to enslave them.

²⁶GOD sent Moses, the servant of the Lord,
and Aaron, the chosen one.

²⁷They performed signs among them,
and miracles in Egypt.

²⁸GOD covered the land in darkness,
but still they resisted.

²⁹GOD turned their waters into blood,
causing their fish to die.

³⁰Their land swarmed with frogs,
even in the chambers of their king.

³²GOD sent hail to pound them,
and lightning to strike the land.

³³GOD struck their vines and fig trees,
and shattered the trees throughout the land.

³⁴GOD spoke, and the locusts came,
young locusts without number.

³⁵They devoured all the vegetation, the fruit of the land.

³⁶GOD struck Egypt's first born,
the first issue of their strength.

³⁷Then GOD led Israel out with silver and gold.
Not one among them faltered.

³⁸Egypt was glad when they departed,
for dread had fallen upon them.

³⁹GOD spread a cloud for a covering,
and fire glowing by night.

4^o Israel prayed, and GOD sent quails,
and gave them food from heaven in abundance.

4¹ GOD opened a rock, and water gushed out,
flowing through the desert like a river.

4² GOD remembered the holy promise,
given to Abraham, the servant of God.

4³ God brought the people out with joy,
the chosen ones with shouts of rejoicing.

4⁴ GOD gave them the lands of the nations,
and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,

4⁵ that they might keep the commandments
and observe GOD's law. Alleluia!