

44. Psalms 136-139

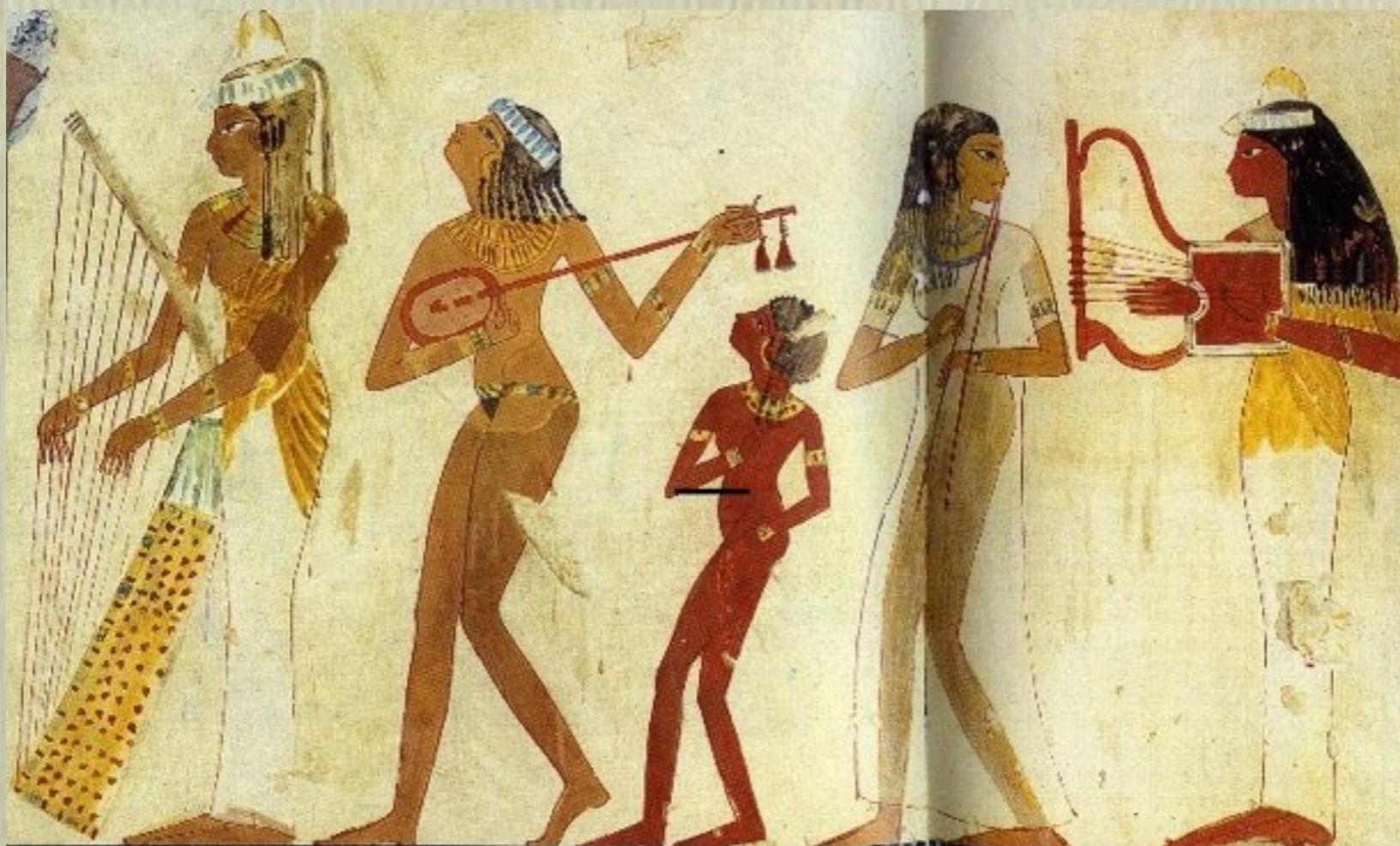
Praying Psalm 136 with Jesus

Harp

Lute

Oboe

Lyre



Psalm 136 is a hymn of joyous admiration which finds expression in wave after wave of jubilant thanksgiving.

¹Give thanks to GOD who is good! [Leader]

Your covenant love endures forever! [Response]

²Give thanks to the God of gods!

Your covenant love endures forever!

³Give thanks to the God* (יְהוָה) of lords.

The response appears in other psalms: ‘Give thanks to GOD who is good. Your covenant love endures for ever’ (Psalm 106:1).

‘Give thanks to GOD who is good. Your covenant love endures for ever’ (Psalm 107:1).

‘Give thanks to GOD who is good. Your covenant love endures for ever’ (Psalm 118:1).

‘Your covenant love, O GOD, endures for ever’ (Psalm 138:8)

It is possible that the litany form with the assembly proclaiming after each statement ‘Your covenant love endures forever’ was used with a variety of repeated responses in other psalms, without appearing in the text.

The history of Israel is part of Jesus’ history and so the history of his disciples. We can sing this hymn thinking also of the Passover effected by Jesus, and the many wonderful ways in which God has proved victorious in the obstacles that have faced us on our journey to the enjoyment of communion with God.

⁴You alone create all that is!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁵Your wisdom it was made the skies!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁶You established the earth on the seas!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁷It was you who made the great lights!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁸The sun to rule in the day!

Your covenant love endures forever!

⁹The moon and stars in the night!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹⁰ Egypt's first-born you struck!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹¹ You brought Israel out from their midst!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹² All with your mighty power!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹³ You divided the Red Sea in two!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹⁴ You made Israel pass through the midst!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹⁵ You drowned Pharaoh and his army in the sea!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹⁶ Through the desert your people you led!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹⁷Nations in their greatness you struck!

Your covenant love endures forever!

¹⁸Kings in their splendour you slew!

Your great love endures forever!

¹⁹Sihon, the king of the Amorites!

Your covenant love endures forever!

²⁰Og, the king of Bashan!

Your covenant love endures forever!

²¹You let Israel inherit your land!

Your covenant love endures forever!

²²To keep it as their own!

Your covenant love endures forever!

For a reflection on the traditional legend of the beginnings of Ancient Israel see the commentary on verses 8-12 of Psalm 135.

Part Three: Concluding Verses

²³ You remembered us in our distress!

Your covenant love endures forever!

²⁴ You rescued us from our foes!

Your covenant love endures forever!

²⁵ You give food to all living things!

Your covenant love endures forever!

²⁶ We give thanks to our God in heaven,

Your covenant love endures forever!

Praying these concluding verses with Jesus, we think of his agony and passion, and how God ‘remembered him in his distress’ (verse 23). and ‘rescued him from his foes’ (verse 24) in raising him from the dead.

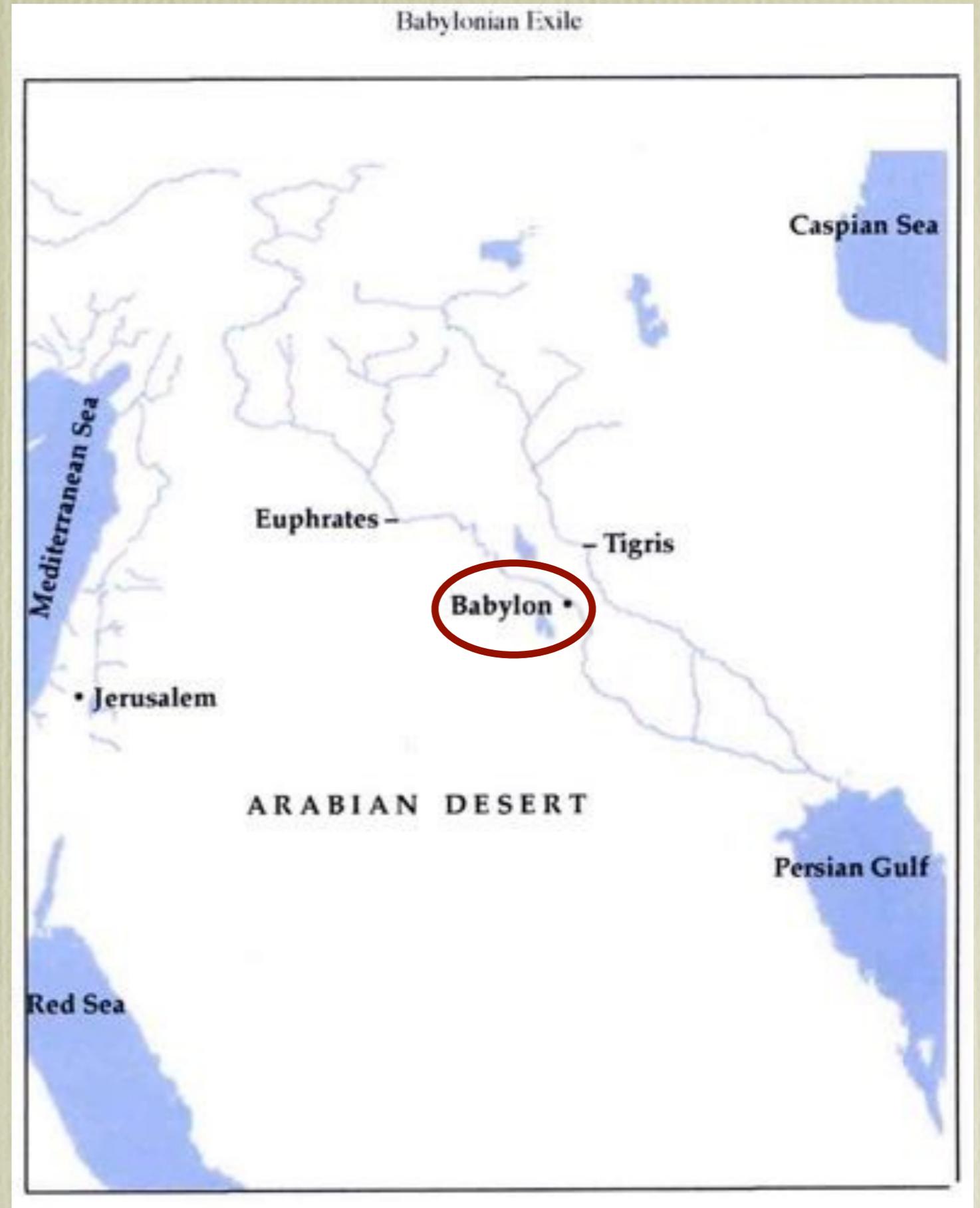
God’s ‘giving food to all living things’ (verse 25) is dramatically expressed in the scenes of the feeding in the wilderness. The first (Mark 6:30-44) is in Jewish territory; the second (Mark 8:1-10) is in Gentile territory. In both scenes Jesus is moved with God’s compassion (see Mark 6:34 and 8:2). We also recall Jesus’ words after the account of the multiplication of bread given us by John: ‘My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven ... The one who eats this bread will live forever’ (John 6:55-58).

Indeed, God’s ‘covenant love endures forever.’

Praying Psalm 137 with Jesus



¹By the rivers of Babylon
we sat and wept
remembering Zion.
²On the willows
we hung up our harps.



¹By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept remembering Zion.

²On the willows we hung up our harps.

³Our captors called for songs of joy: ‘Sing us a song of Zion!’

⁴How could we sing a song of our GOD on alien soil?

⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

⁶If I fail to remember you, let my tongue cleave to my mouth –
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

This is one of the finest lyric poems of the Psalter. It is a lament or elegy, a resistance song for those in exile who refused to give up hope of returning to Jerusalem.

(Verses 7-9 are not in the liturgy.)

*7Remember, O GOD, the Edomites
on the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!'
Down to its foundations!*

*8Babylon, you devastator!
Blessed and happy are those who repay you
for what you have done to us!*

*9Blessed and happy will they be who take your children
and dash them against the rock!*

In 1578 John of the Cross composed a ballad on Psalm 137.

¹By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept remembering Zion.

²On the willows we hung up our harps.

The first seven verses are inspired by verses 1-2.

1. By the rivers of Babylon I sat down weeping,
there on the ground.

2. I remembered you, O Zion whom I love, and in that sweet
memory, I wept the more.

3. I removed my festive garments, and put on the clothes of a
slave. I hung on the green willows the music which gave me joy.

4. I put it aside in hope for that which I hoped for in you.

There love wounded me and took away my heart.

5. I begged love to kill me, since it had wounded me so.

I cast myself into its fire, knowing that it burned,

6. removing the guilt of the young bird that would die in its flame.

I was dying in myself, and breathing in you alone.

7. I died within myself for you, and for you I came back to life,

because the memory of you gave life and took it away.

⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

⁶If I fail to remember you, let my tongue cleave to my mouth –
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From John's ballad, some further verses inspired by verses 5-6:

11. May my right hand be forgotten

– the hand I used with such love when home in you –

12. if I do not remember you, my greatest joy,

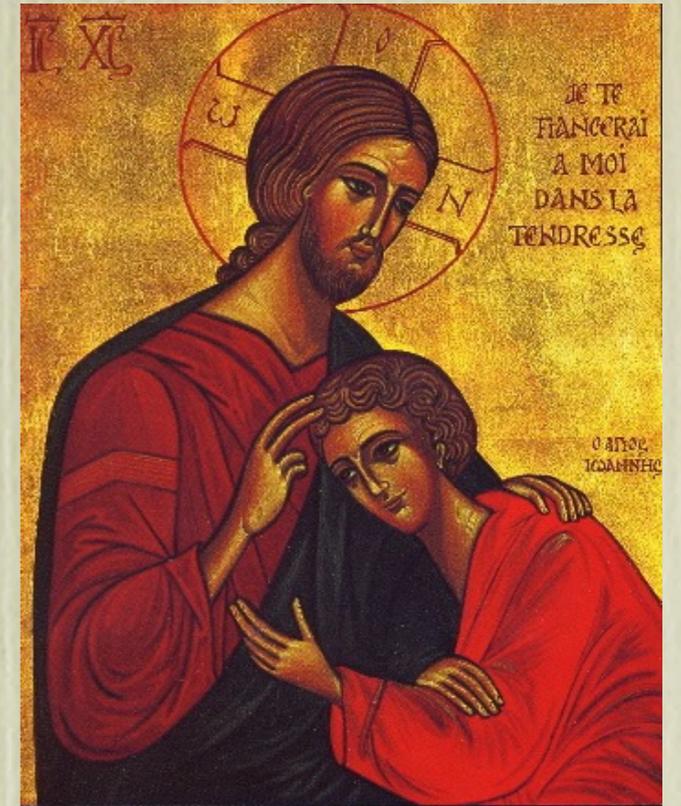
or if I celebrate one day of festival, or feast at all without you.

13. Blessed is He in whom I have placed my trust.

14. He will gather his little ones, and me, who wept because of you,
to the rock who is Christ, for whom I abandoned you, O Babylon.

Psalm 137

- ¹By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
remembering Zion.
- ²On the willows we hung up our harps.
- ³Our captors called for songs of joy:
‘Sing us a song of Zion!’
- ⁴How could we sing a song of our GOD
on alien soil?
- ⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
- ⁶If I fail to remember you,
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Praying Psalm 138 with Jesus



¹I thank you, O GOD, with all my heart,
for you have heard me.
In the presence of the gods I sing of you.

²I bow toward your holy temple,
giving thanks for your covenant love and faithfulness.
You display to all the glory of your name and your word.

³On the day I called, you answered,
you increased the strength of my soul.

⁴All earth's kings will praise you, O GOD,
when they hear your word of command.

⁵They sing of your ways: 'How great is the glory of GOD.'

⁶Though high up, you watch over the lowly.

Though far away, you keep an eye on the haughty.

⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you reach out and save me.

⁸You, O GOD, will fulfil your purpose for me.

Your covenant love, O GOD, endures for ever.

Do not forsake the work of your hands.

The psalmist is praising and thanking God for God's covenant love, trusting that God will not forsake him and 'will fulfil God's purpose for me' (verse 8).' We recall the words of Jeremiah: 'Surely I know the plans I have for you, says GOD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope' (Jeremiah 29:11).

The psalmist is placing GOD before other gods (verse 1) in obedience to the Decalogue (Exodus 20:3). Compare Psalm 96:4-5.

'Bowing toward the temple' (verse 2) was a traditional custom (see 1Kings 8:31, 33, 38,44, 48; Daniel 6:10).

⁸You, O GOD, will fulfil your purpose for me.
Your covenant love, O GOD, endures for ever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Verse 8 lifts the psalm above the stereotyped earlier phrases, and is one of the finest expressions of hope in God to be found in the Bible.

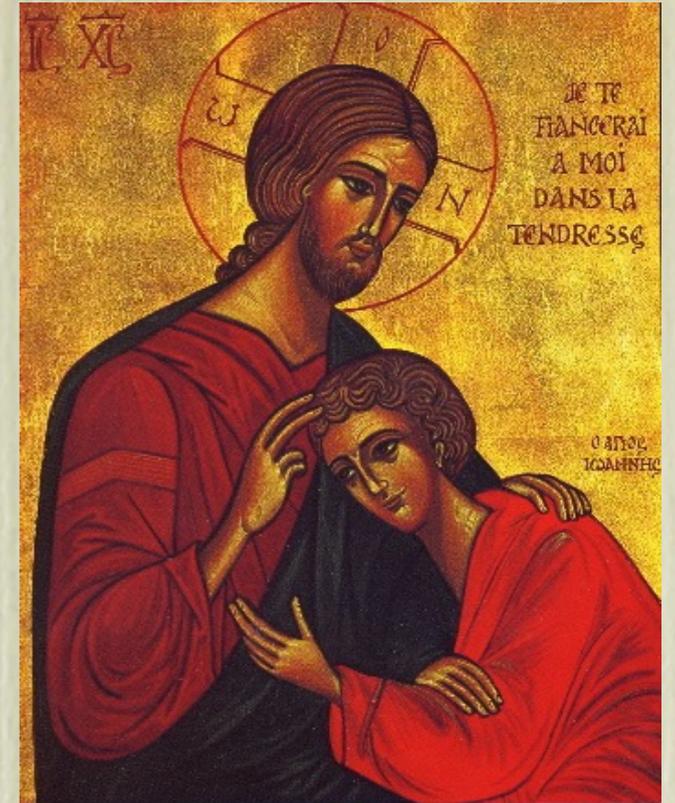
What God has done for us gives us the courage to keep trusting that the purpose of God, the 'Father of mercies' (2 Corinthians 1:3) will, finally, be realised in our lives. In the meantime, we are strengthened to trust that 'nothing will separate us from God's love' (Romans 8:35). 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:6).

Psalm 138

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Praying Psalm 139 with Jesus



¹O GOD, you search me and you know me.

²It is you who know when I sit and when I stand.

You discern my inmost thoughts.

³You know if I am journeying or resting.

You know everything I do.

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
you know, O GOD, what I am about to say.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶I find this overwhelming, beyond my understanding.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I scale the heavens, you are there;
if I lie in the grave, you are there.

⁹If I were to take the wings of the dawn
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰even there you would lead me,
your right hand would hold me fast.

¹¹If I think night will hide me,
and darkness give me cover,
¹²to you darkness is not dark;
the night is as bright as the day.

¹³It was you who formed every part of me,
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I thank you for the wonder of my being,
for the wonders of all your creation.

¹⁴You watched my body taking shape,
when I was being formed in secret,

¹⁵You saw my body grow according to your design,
intricately woven, hidden from sight.

¹⁶All of my life was written in your book;
all the days that were prepared for me, before any of them existed.

¹⁷How precious are your thoughts.

They are like countless grains of sand.

¹⁸To finish counting them I would have to be, like you, eternal.

* * * * *

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴See if I follow crooked paths. Lead me along your ancient way.

(Verses 19-22 are omitted. They are not used in the liturgy)

*¹⁹O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would go away.*

*²⁰They speak of you maliciously,
and rise up against you to do evil!*

*²¹How I hate those who hate you, O GOD!
How I loathe those who defy you!*

*²²I hate them with a deadly hate.
I count them my enemies.*

This is one of the most beautiful of the psalms. From beginning to end it is a reflection on God's knowing us. In the Scriptures to 'know' is not the same as to 'know about'. True, as the psalm says, God does know all about us. But the focus is not so much on information as on intimacy (see especially verses 13-15). We cannot escape God's gaze. We cannot hide from God.

Not that the psalmist wants to escape or hide. He prays in the concluding stanza: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts' (verse 23). He is confident that he is not 'following crooked paths.' He wants God to 'lead me along your ancient way' (verse 24). The language is reminiscent of Jeremiah: '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' (Jeremiah 6:16).

The psalmist senses GOD's hand upon him, and finds this 'overwhelming, beyond my understanding' (verses 5-6). He knows that GOD is leading him: 'your right hand holds me fast' (verse 10). How is it possible that the Transcendent God could have such a personal and intimate communion with us?

We recall Paul's words: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!' (Romans 11:33).

‘To you darkness is not dark; the night is as bright as the day’ (verse 12).

In his First Letter John writes: ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all’ (1 John 1:5). Nicodemus ‘came to Jesus by night’ (John 3:1). Jesus speaks to him about being ‘born of the Spirit’ (John 3:6), and goes on to say: ‘This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God’ (John 3:19-21).

The psalmist wants God to scrutinise him. He is confident that God will see that he has not followed ‘crooked paths’ (verse 24). In the Book of Revelation the Risen Jesus declares: ‘I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve’ (Revelation 2:23).

Jesus wants his disciples to be ‘the light of the world’ (Matthew 5:14), and Paul pleads with the Christians of Philippi to be ‘blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world’ (Philippians 2:15).

Let us pray this psalm with Jesus, asking him to gaze into our hearts. Pray that he will pour his Spirit into our hearts to purify them of whatever it is that is blocking our welcoming of grace and our revealing this grace to others. Pray that he will find delight in seeing how transparent our souls are in knowing God, in knowing ourselves, and in knowing others.

Psalm 139

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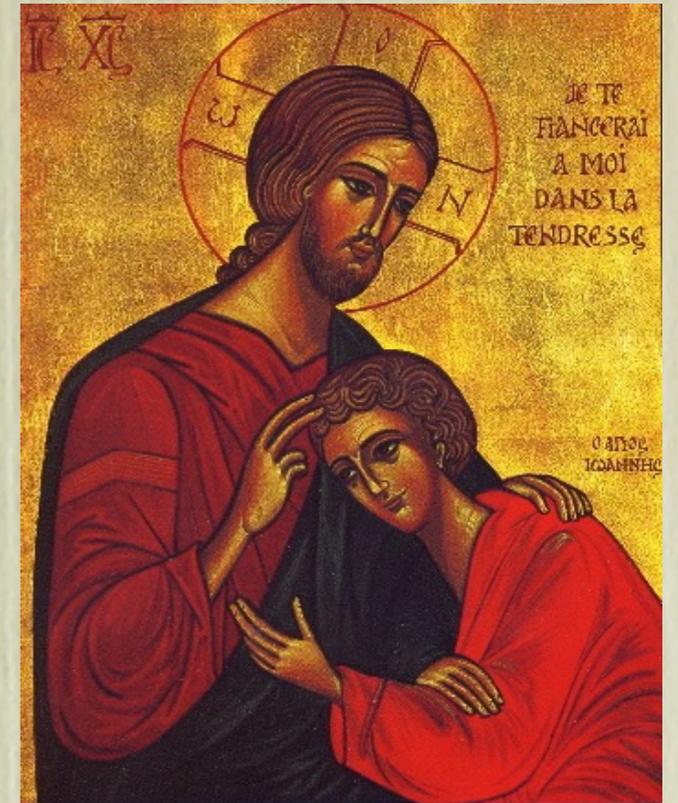
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