

21. Psalms 61-63

Praying Psalm 61 with Jesus



¹Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.

²From the end of the earth I call with a despondent heart.

Carry me high on a rock where they cannot reach me.

³You are my refuge, my bastion against the enemy.

⁴I want to abide in your tent forever,
find refuge under the shelter of your wings.

The psalmist is living in exile (verse 2). He is pleading with God to protect him against his enemies (verse 3). He would love to live in the temple with God, who dwells there in the sanctuary, under the outstretched wings of the cherubim (verse 4).

⁴I want to abide in your tent forever,
find refuge under the shelter of your wings.

‘Guard me as the pupil of your eye;
hide me in the shade of your wings’ (Psalm 17:8).

‘How precious is your covenant love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shade of your wings’ (Psalm 36:7).

‘Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me.
In the shade of your wings I will take refuge,
till the destructive storms pass by’ (Psalm 57:1).

‘In the shade of your wings I sing for joy’ (Psalm 63:7).

‘GOD will cover you with pinions,
and under God’s wings you will find refuge’ (Psalm 91:4).

⁵You, O God, have heard my vows.

You have given me the heritage
that belongs to those who revere ['fear'] you.

When, like the psalmist, we are despondent and fearful, we are invited to pray this psalm with Jesus. Having remained faithful to God in everything, Jesus now enjoys 'the heritage that belongs to those who revere God.' In God's presence, he is experiencing God's glory (John 17:5).

⁶Prolong the life of the king;
may his reign endure for generations!
⁷May your eyes always be upon him.
May your covenant love and faithfulness watch over him.

We can hear Jesus praying because: ‘Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them’ (Hebrews 7:25). Listen to him as he prays that his Father’s gaze will always be upon us; that God’s covenant love and faithfulness will watch over us. He encourages us: ‘Make your home in me as I make my home in you’ (John 15:4). Let us renew our faith that he ‘longs to gather us as a hen gathers her brood under her wings’ (Matthew 23:37).

⁸And I will continue to sing praises in your honour,
as I fulfil my vows each day.

Let us renew our commitment to the covenant, and to the promises we have made, and let us join the risen Jesus in singing praise to God.

Psalm 61

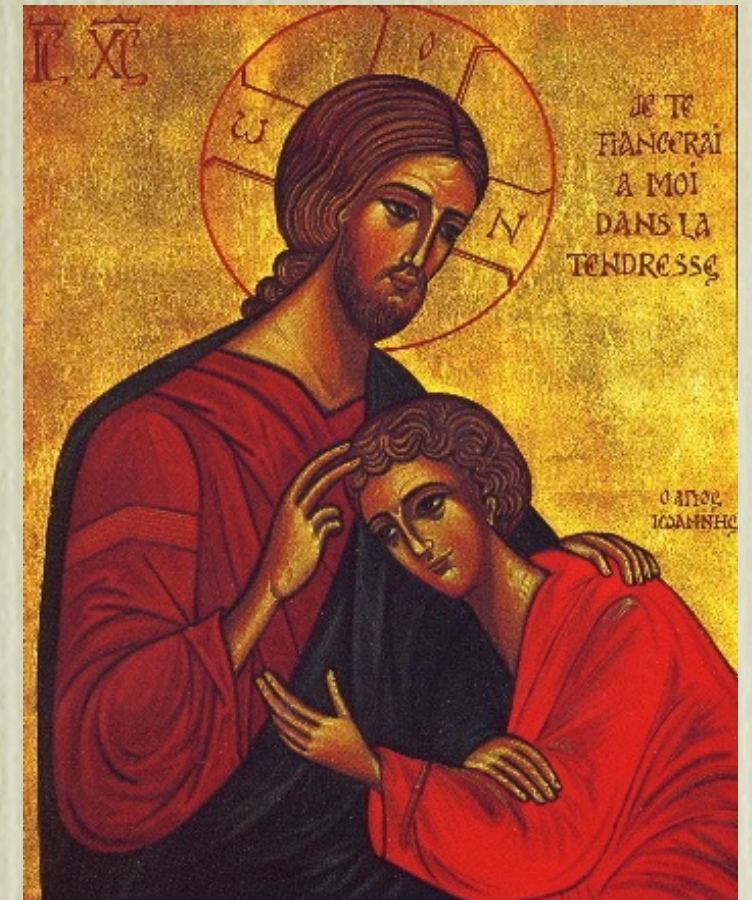
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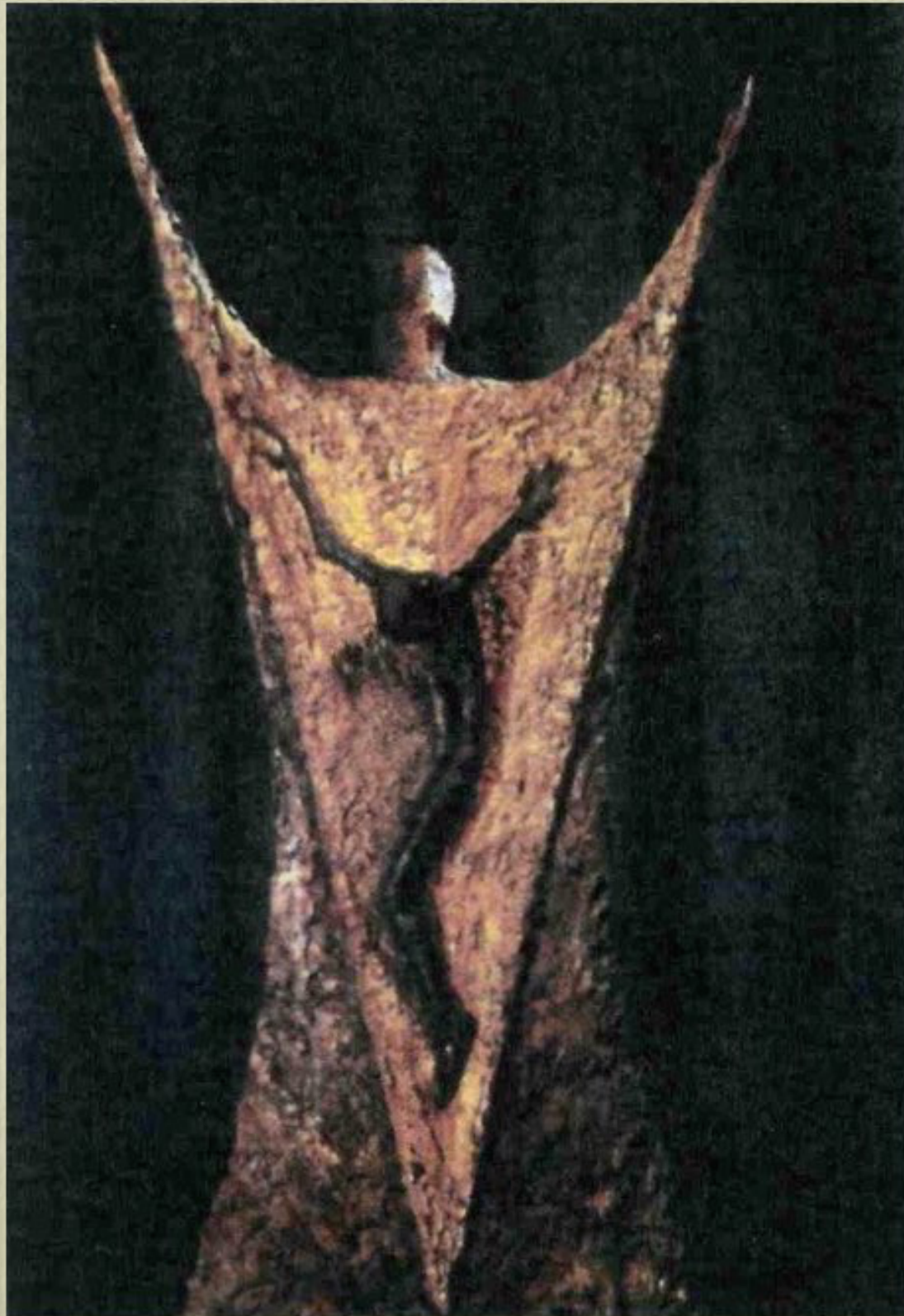
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Praying Psalm 62 with Jesus



¹*Only in God can I find rest. In God alone is my salvation.* (Refrain. see verses 5-6)

²*God is my rock, my safety, my fortress. I shall not be shaken.*

³How long will you keep up your attack?

How long will you batter your victim

as you batter a leaning wall, or a tottering fence?

⁴Their only plan is to bring a person down.

They take pleasure in falsehood.

With their mouths they utter blessings,

but in their hearts they curse.

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my stronghold, my haven.

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Before God, our refuge, pour out your hearts.

⁹Common folk are but a breath, those of high estate a delusion.
Placed in the scales, up they go; they weigh less than a breath.

¹⁰Put no trust in extortion. Set no vain hopes on fraud.
If your wealth increases, do not set your hearts on it.

¹¹Time and again God has said: 'Strength and love are mine to give.'

¹²Covenant love belongs to you, O God*.

¹³You repay each of us according to what we have done.

*Only in God can my soul find rest. In God alone is my salvation.
God is my rock, my safety, my fortress. I shall not be shaken.*

The refrain beautifully expresses the psalmist's faith. It takes us to the heart of Jesus' prayer.

Common folk are but a breath

Ultimately our soul can find rest only in God, for human beings are no more than a breath, a puff of wind (Hebrew הֶבֶל hebel, the name given to Cain's brother (Abel) in the story in Genesis 2:4-8).

We must put trust in God (verse 2), not in fragile human beings like ourselves.

In the first refrain the psalmist says: ‘**In God alone is my salvation.**’

The Hebrew yeshu‘a (יְשׁוּעָה, ‘salvation’) and the related verb occur 136 times in the psalms. Salvation speaks of the presence and action of God who answers our cry for help and comes to our aid.

The classical text is Exodus 14, which describes the action of God at the Red Sea: ‘As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to GOD ... Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the salvation that GOD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. GOD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still ... Thus GOD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians’ (Exodus 14:10, 13-14, 30).

Reflecting on the victory of Cyrus of Persia over the Babylonian armies and the imminent return of the exiles to Jerusalem, the prophet writes: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns' ... All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation wrought by our God' (Isaiah 52:7,10; quoted in Luke 3:6).

God's salvation is offered to the whole human race: 'Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other' (Isaiah 45:22).

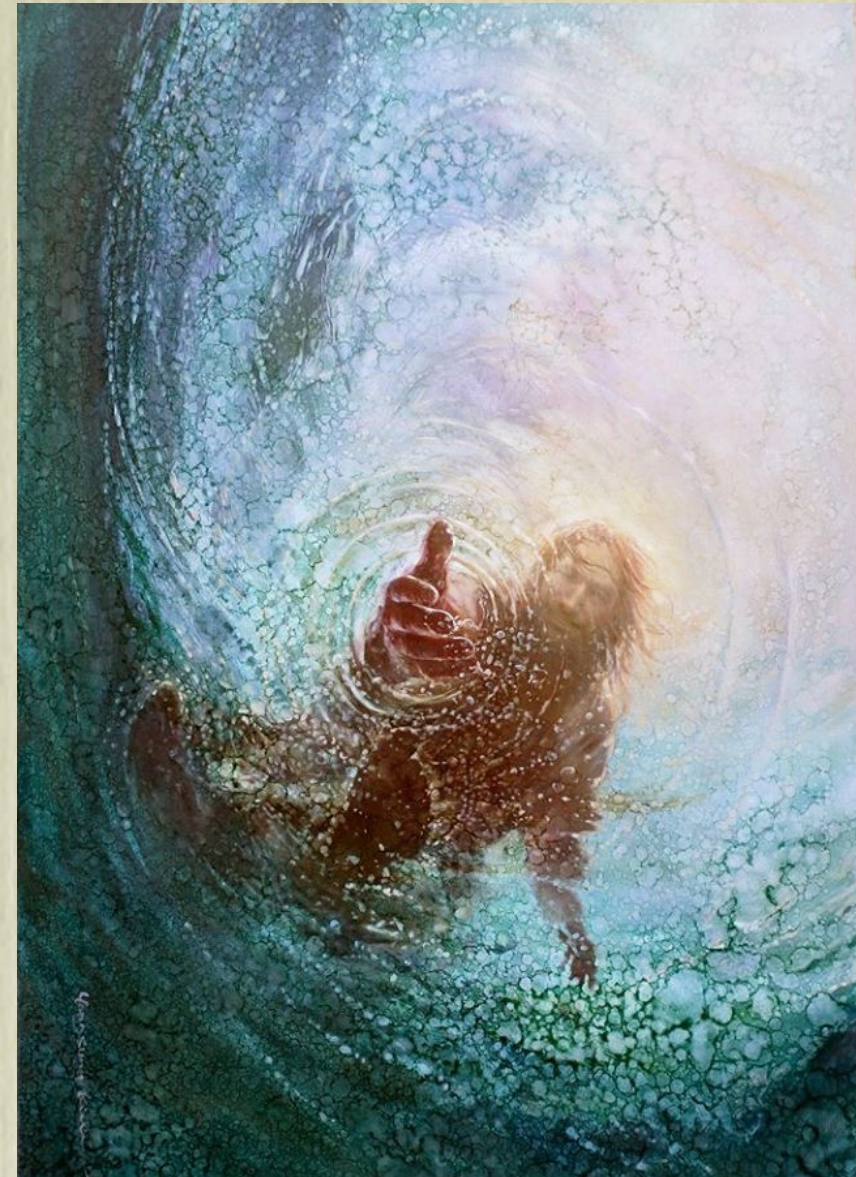
Praying this psalm with Jesus we remember that the name 'Jesus' derives from the word 'salvation.' Joseph is told: 'Your wife, Mary, will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will **save** his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21).

Zechariah was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' and made this prophecy about his son, John: 'You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of **salvation** to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1:76-79).

Since God is a 'saving God' we should cry to God when we are in distress, trusting that God hears our cry and will come to aid us.

In a powerfully symbolic scene Matthew portrays Jesus walking on the sea. Jesus was not dragged down into the chaos that threatened to engulf him. Peter wanted to be like Jesus in this. While he kept his eyes on Jesus he, too, could 'walk on water', but as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus he 'began to sink'. He cried out: 'Lord, **save** me!' (Matthew 14:30).

We are invited to join Peter in this cry, remembering that Jesus came 'to seek out and **save** the lost' (Luke 19:10).



Paul's message at the beginning of his first missionary journey was about salvation: 'You descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this **salvation** has been sent' (Acts 13:26).

Luke concludes Paul's preaching in Rome with the same message: 'Let it be known to you then that this **salvation** of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen' (Acts 28:28).

Remembering the ways in which God has responded in the past brings peace and joy in the knowledge that whatever our sufferings, God is the one who saves. The accent is on God bringing divine help to aid us in our difficulties, not protecting us from having to face them. Jesus went through a terrible death. God did not intervene to protect him from it, but God did respond to Jesus' pleading, and raised him to eternal life.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'In the days of his flesh, 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. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (Hebrews 5:7-8). If we welcome God's grace, we, too, will be raised to life with Jesus.

*Only in God can my soul find rest. In God alone is my hope.
God is my rock, my safety, my fortress. I shall not be shaken.*

When the refrain is repeated in verses 5-6, ‘salvation’ is replaced by ‘hope’ (תִּקְוָה). In English ‘hope’ is closely associated with ‘expectation’ and ‘desire’. In the psalms it is related to trust.

A perfect expression of hope is found in Psalm 131: ‘My heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother. My soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, **hope** in GOD from this time on and forevermore.’ A little child is not looking for a future gift. Rather, undistracted by thoughts of the future, it is resting peacefully, trusting in its mother’s love. This is what it means to hope.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of ‘our **hope** of sharing the glory of God’ (Romans 5:2). It is through Jesus that we exult in the hope of final salvation when we will enjoy God’s glory, when our whole being will be caught up in the eternal radiance of God’s light and love. Paul is thinking here of the future, but he also retains the meaning which hope (ἐλπίς) has in the psalms and in the prophetic writings. Paul’s focus is not on longing, but on a present attitude of peaceful trust that, as we now share Jesus’ life of communion with God, so, in the future, we will enjoy a full and eternal communion with him in the glory of God. Our ‘hope of glory’ is ‘Christ living in us’ (Colossians 1:27).

As Paul says: ‘**Hope** does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5). Paul prays: ‘May the God of **hope** fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in **hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 15:13).

The Letter to the Hebrews 6:19 likens hope to a grappling iron that anchors our soul in heaven where the risen Christ has entered into glory. He holds us fast. If we cling to him we will join him there, enjoying with him God’s eternal embrace.

Paul regularly associates hope with faith and ‘love.’ Perhaps the most well-known text is in his hymn to love which concludes: ‘Now, faith, **hope**, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Pursue love’ (1 Corinthians 13:13).

There is a place for eager longing. There is also, and more importantly, a place for hope, where the focus is not on longing for something for which one is expectantly waiting, but on present assurance because of the God in whom one now places one's confidence, on whom one now relies, to whom one now looks. We are sure that what God has promised will happen, and we can leave the future peacefully to God, and focus now on love.

Let us join the psalmist and Jesus in praying: 'Only in God can my soul find rest. In God alone is my hope.'

Psalm 62

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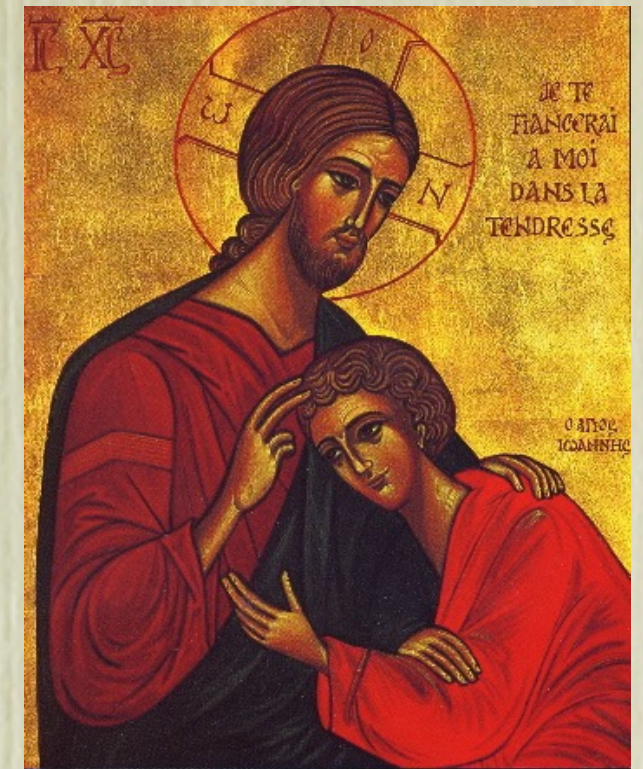
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Praying Psalm 63 with Jesus



¹O God, you are my God, for you I rise at dawn.
I thirst for you. My body ['flesh'] pines for you,
like a dry, weary, waterless land.

²I gaze on you in the sanctuary,
to behold your power and your glory.

³Your love is worth more than life.
My lips will sing your praise.

⁴I will praise you as long as I live.
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

⁵I am filled as with a banquet.
I praise you with joy.

⁶I think of you as I lie awake,
meditating on you throughout the night.

⁷You have been my help.

In the shade of your wings I sing for joy.

⁸I cling to you with all my heart.

Your right hand holds me fast.

Verses 9-11 are omitted in the Church's liturgy

⁹*Those who want me dead
will go down into the depths of the earth.*

¹⁰*They will die by the sword,
their bodies food for jackals.*

¹¹*When their lying mouths are stopped,
the king will rejoice in God.*

*All who put their trust in God
will sing in exultation.*

The psalmist thinks of God as he lies on his bed at night (verse 6), and he rises in the morning to praise God in the temple (verse 2). Psalm 63 is a prayer of longing and trust. Longing for communion with God is a recurring theme in the psalms:

‘O God*, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you’ (Psalm 38:9).

‘As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, O God.
I thirst for God, for the living God.
When will I come and behold the face of God?’ (Psalm 42:1)

‘I am longing, indeed I am fainting, for the courts of GOD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God’ (Psalm 84:2).

‘Let the hearts of those who seek GOD rejoice.
Seek GOD and his strength;
seek his presence continually’ (Psalm 105:3-4).

‘I stretch out my hands to you;
I am thirsting for you like a parched land’ (Psalm 143:6).

‘They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you slake their thirst from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fount of life’ (Psalm 36:8-9).

We are encouraged by the words of Jeremiah, which tell us of
God’s response to our longing: ‘When you search for me, you
will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you
find me’ (Jeremiah 29:13).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus we might reflect on two contrasting scenes in the gospels. In the first scene (Mark 10:17-22) a rich man comes up to Jesus full of a beautiful desire. He wants what he calls 'eternal life' - that is a life that knows no bounds, but that keeps on filling the heart from the fount of all life who is God. We all know this desire. It is no surprise that when he experiences this desire he is attracted to Jesus. We are told that Jesus gazed upon him and loved him. So why did the man go away grieving? What was his problem? In the scene just before this one, people are bringing little children to Jesus. When the disciples object Jesus says: 'If you do not receive the kingdom of God as a little child you will never enter it' (Mark 10:15). The rich man is very earnest, and has been exemplary in obeying God's commandments, but he doesn't want to change and become like a child. He doesn't want to let go control. He doesn't want to make space for God's gift.

Life is a gift. How can we accept a gift if our hands are full and we don't want to let anything go. For the rich man the problem was not wealth. Rather it was the fact that his riches possessed him. He was into control and he thought he could stay in control and possess eternal life as well. But we can't. As Jesus says, salvation – finding the life we seek and need – is impossible for us (Mark 10:27). We can't get it on our own. It comes from God. There is no need for us to go away grieving, for God loves us and longs to give God's Self to us. Can we free ourselves to receive what we so long for?

Things are very different for Mary Magdalene when she goes to the tomb after the Sabbath to be with Jesus (John 20:1, 11-18). Pope Gregory the Great expresses beautifully what happened.

‘Because of the ardent love of her heart, Mary Magdalene continued seeking Jesus when she could not find him, even after the other disciples had gone away. In tears she kept searching, and, afire with love, she yearned for him. Thus it happened that she alone saw him. She had already sought and found nothing, but she continued seeking and so found the object of her love. While she was seeking, her longing grew stronger and stronger, until it was allayed in the embrace of Him whom she was seeking ... At first she did not recognise him, but then Jesus said to her: Mary! ... as if to say: “Now recognise the one who recognises you” ... Outwardly it was He who was the object of her search, but inwardly it was He who was teaching her to search for Him’ (Homily 25).

²I gaze on you in the sanctuary,
to behold your power and your glory.

It is to satisfy this same desire that we come together on the day of the Resurrection (Sunday) to ‘the sanctuary’ for the eucharist.

We remember the advice of Saint John of the Cross: ‘God does not give grace and love except according to the soul’s desire and love. The more the soul desires and loves, the more God gives’ (Spiritual Canticle 13,12).

We find this sentiment of longing expressed again and again throughout the history of the Church. In the first years of the second century Ignatius of Antioch writes ahead to the community in Rome as he was being taken there under armed escort to be thrown to the lions for the sport of the populace.

‘He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire ... Here is one who longs only to be God’s; do not delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the passion of my God. If any of you has God within himself, understand my longings, and feel for me, because you will know the forces by which I am constrained ...

Here am I, yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for the things of this world, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, “Come to the Father”. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love’ (Letter to the Romans 6,1-2).

Gregory of Nyssa (d.395) writes:

‘God wants the delay in pleasure to set afire the desire of the soul so that, together with this ardour, joy may also increase ... To find God means to seek Him continually ... This is truly seeing God, when one is not sated in desiring Him ... God is eternally sought ... The teaching which Scripture gives us is, I think, the following: the person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following Him. The contemplation of His face is an endless walking towards Him ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped’ (Homily 2 on the Canticle of Canticles, 801).

The theme of longing recurs often in the writings of Augustine (d.431):

‘I call upon you, God my Mercy, who made me and did not forget me when I forgot you. I call you to come into my soul, for by inspiring it to long for you you prepare it to receive you’ (Confessions 13.1).

In a conversation between his soul and God, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (d.1109) writes:

‘Come now, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in Him. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for Him and, having locked the door, seek Him out. Speak now my whole heart, speak now to God: ‘I seek your face, O Lord, your face I seek.’ ... What shall I do, most high God, what shall this exile do, tormented by love of you and yet cast off far from your face? I yearn to see you, I desire to come close to you, I long to find you, I am eager to seek you out and I do not see your face ...

‘Look upon us, Lord; hear us, enlighten us, show yourself to us. Give yourself to us that it may be well with us, for without you it goes so ill for us. Have pity on our efforts and our strivings towards you, for we can avail nothing without you. Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you’ (Proslogion chapter 1).

Mechthild of Magdeburg (13th century) writes:

‘I delight in loving him who loves me, and I long to love him to death, boundlessly, and without ceasing. Be happy, my soul, for your Life has died for love of you. Love him so fiercely that you could die for him. Thus you burn ever more without ever being extinguished as a living flame in the vast fire of high majesty. Thus you become full of the fire of love. This makes you here utterly happy.

You can no longer teach me anything. I cannot turn away from love. I must be its captive. Otherwise, I cannot go on living. Where it dwells, there I must remain, both in death and in life. This is the folly of fools who live free of anguish’ (Book 1, 28, The Flowering Light of the Godhead).

We must trust this longing. Like the deer longing for flowing streams we may not know what direction to take, or we may not have the energy to run. Let us be gentle with ourselves. It is God who has placed the longing in our heart, and, provided we attend to it, we will continue to find ourselves drawn.

We do not have to go anywhere to be with God. God is within us. We are simply to say Yes to God as God draws us inwards into our own heart where God longs to be in communion with us. Give in to the longing. Create times of stillness. Learn to 'waste time' in prayer, listening to the murmuring of the longing as it washes over the rocks of uncertainty and doubt. The experience of the psalmist can help persuade us that in experiencing this longing we are not alone.

²I gaze on you in the sanctuary,
to behold your power and your glory.

‘The upright shall behold his face’ (Psalm 11:7).

‘I shall behold your face; when I awake I shall be satisfied,
knowing that you have appeared’ (Psalm 17:15).

‘One thing I asked of GOD, this is what I seek:
to live in the house of GOD all the days of my life,
to behold GOD’s beauty’ (Psalm 27:4).

⁶I think of you as I lie awake,
meditating on you throughout the night.

‘Their delight is in the law of GOD,
and on GOD’s law they meditate day and night’ (Psalm 1:2).

‘Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, GOD,
my rock and my redeemer’ (Psalm 19:14).

‘I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my spirit’ (Psalm 77:6).

‘I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds’ (Psalm 77:12).

‘May my meditation be pleasing to God,
for in GOD I rejoice’ (Psalm 104:34).

‘Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long’ (Psalm 119:97).

‘I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds,
I meditate on the works of your hands’ (Psalm 143:5).

‘On the glorious splendour of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate’ (Psalm 145:5).

Psalm 63

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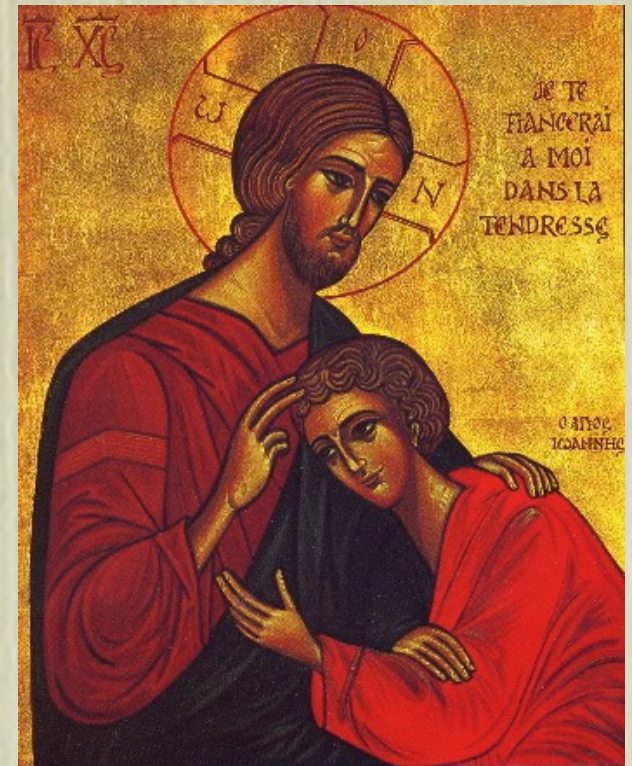
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