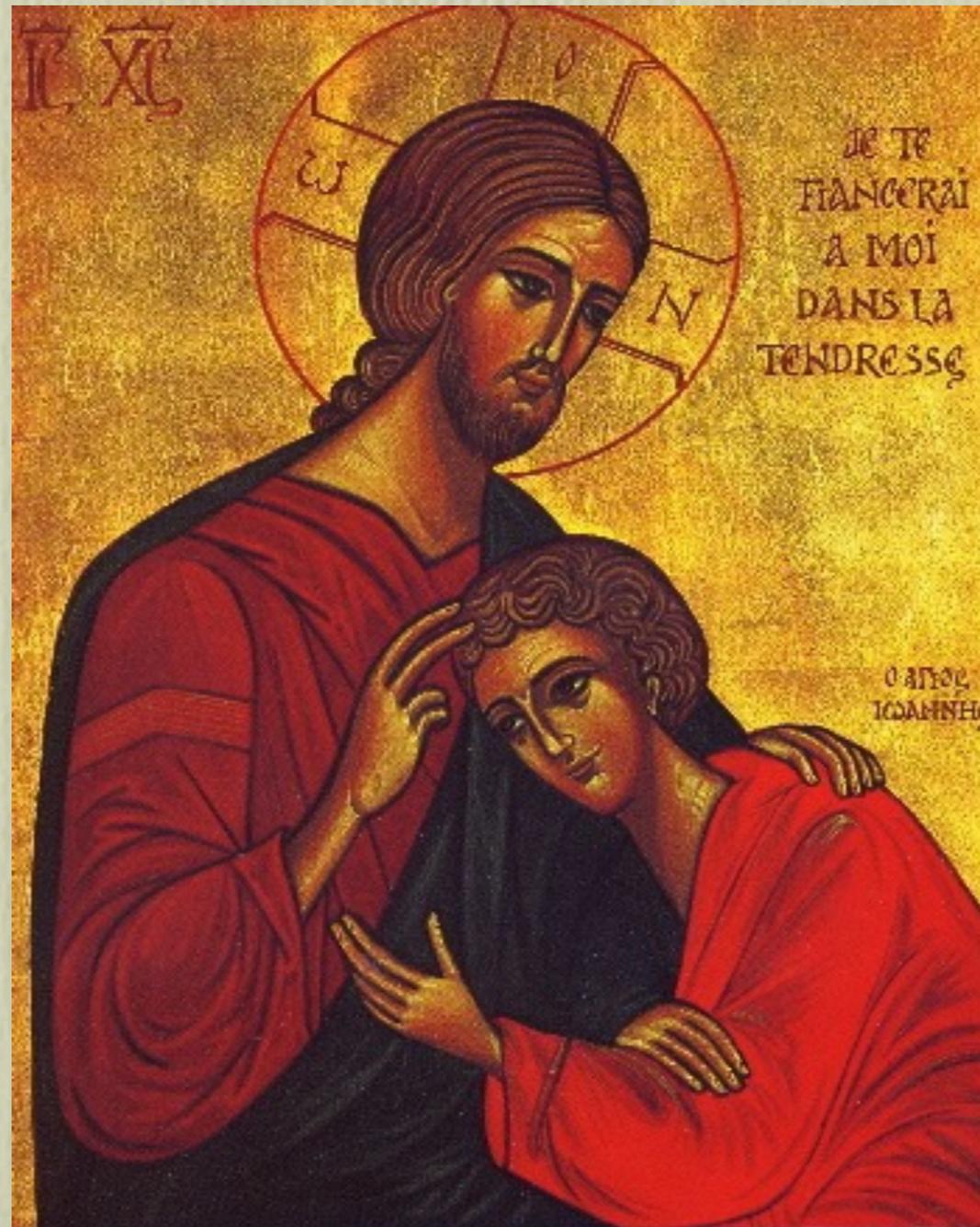


18. Psalms 51 and 52



Praying Psalm 51 in Jesus' Company

(Jesus was sinless. He is with us as we pray for forgiveness)



In Psalm 50 God accuses the people of sin.

Psalm 51 is the second part of the penitential cult: admitting sin and pleading for forgiveness.

The focus is on God's justice: the truth that God always acts in accordance with who God is.

In verses 1-9 the psalmist humbly admits his sin and so acknowledges **God's justice in judging** him as a sinner.

In verses 10-17 the focus is on **God's justice in bringing him salvation**. God, being God, will always show mercy and re-create a sinner's life, so that, freed from sin, we will be able to live beautifully from the heart.

I ¹Be gracious to me, O God (אֱלֹהִים), according to your covenant love.

According to your tender compassion, *blot out* my transgressions.

2 ²*Wash* me more and more from my guilt

3 ²*purify* me from my sin.

4 ³I *know* my transgressions; my sin is always before me.

5 ⁴against you, against you, I have *sinned*.

What is evil in your sight I have done.

6 ⁴You are just in your sentence,
blameless when you pass judgment.

5⁻ ⁵For it was into *sin*, into guilt that I was born

4⁻ ⁶Indeed you desire truth in the heart
then in the secret of my heart make me *know* wisdom

3⁻ ⁷If you purge me, I will be *purified*.

2⁻ ⁷If you *wash* me, I will be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear rejoicing and gladness

Let the bones you have crushed exult.

I⁻ ⁹Turn your face away from my sins, and *blot out* all my guilt

I ¹⁰Create in me, O God (אֱלֹהִים), a purified *heart*
2 put a new and steadfast *spirit* within me.
3 ¹¹Do *not* cast me away from your presence.
4 Do *not* take from me your holy spirit.
5 ¹²Give me again the joy of your *salvation*
and sustain in me a generous spirit
6 ¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
5⁻ ¹⁴Rescue me, O God (אֱלֹהִים), my *salvation*,
and I will sing aloud of your justice.
¹⁵O God* (אֲדֹנָי), open my lips,
and I will declare your praise.
4⁻ ¹⁶For you have *no* desire for sacrifice;
3⁻ ¹⁶if I were to give a burnt offering, you would *not* be pleased.
2⁻ ¹⁷My sacrifice is a contrite *spirit*;
I⁻ ^{17a}a broken, a crushed, *heart*, O God (אֱלֹהִים), you will not spurn.

An addition to the psalm

¹⁸In your goodness show favour to Zion.

Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

¹⁹Then you will delight in proper sacrifices,
holocausts offered on your altar.

Central point of Part One

⁴You are just in your sentence,
blameless when you pass judgment.

Only God's gift of the Spirit can effect the reconciliation for which the penitent is praying.

God promised through the prophet Ezekiel: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you' (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Psalm 51:1

¹Be gracious [ḥanan] to me, O God (אֱלֹהִים),
according to your covenant love [ḥesed].
According to your tender compassion [raḥamim]
blot out my transgressions.

‘GOD (יְהוָה), tenderly compassionate [raḥamim] and gracious [ḥanan],
long suffering (slow to anger),
and abounding in covenant love [ḥesed]
and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6).

‘Be tenderly compassionate
as your Father is tenderly compassionate’ (Luke 6:36).

Psalm 51:2

²Wash me more and more from my guilt

‘Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us’ (Hebrews 12:1).

Psalm 51:5

⁵It was into sin, into guilt, that I was born.

We are, of course, conceived and born innocent, but we are born into a sinful world and sin is contagious. We speak of this as Original Sin, that is, the sin of our origins, and of the environment into which we are born.

Psalm 51:6

**⁶You desire truth in the heart;
then in the secret of my heart make me know wisdom.**

Knowing that only ‘the truth will set us free’ (John 8:32), the psalmist prays for wisdom. Wisdom speaks of order, harmony and beauty. Human wisdom is an acquired skill in judging the best way of acting in the changing and often complex circumstances of life, and in putting decisions into operation.

What the psalmist is praying for is that special wisdom which concerns the purpose of life itself and the way in which we relate to God, the source of life. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit that gives us a special sensitivity and openness to receive God’s self-revelation to us. It enables us to savour and relish the divine.

It is by keeping our eyes on Jesus and by opening our souls to receive his Spirit that we learn this wisdom. In contemplating Jesus we see who we really are and we learn how to respond to the action of God's Spirit in our lives. By this Spirit we are transformed, so that the life of Jesus becomes our life, his thoughts become our thoughts, his responses become our responses, his prayer becomes our prayer.



Deesis, Hagia Sophia

To speak of divine Wisdom is to speak of God's design for the world. Each of us is created and held in existence by God to be part of the beauty of this design. We will fulfil our purpose only by being open to the inspiration of grace. If we choose to resist grace, God can use even our resistance to further God's mysterious designs. What a personal tragedy it would be, however, for us not to enjoy being part of the beauty of divine communion.

With the gift of prayer comes an invitation to surrender to God's loving action in our souls. If we respond in faith and allow the initiative to come wholly from God, then, and only then, all that we are and all that we do becomes suffused with divine Wisdom. Then we can begin to say with Saint Paul: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2:20).

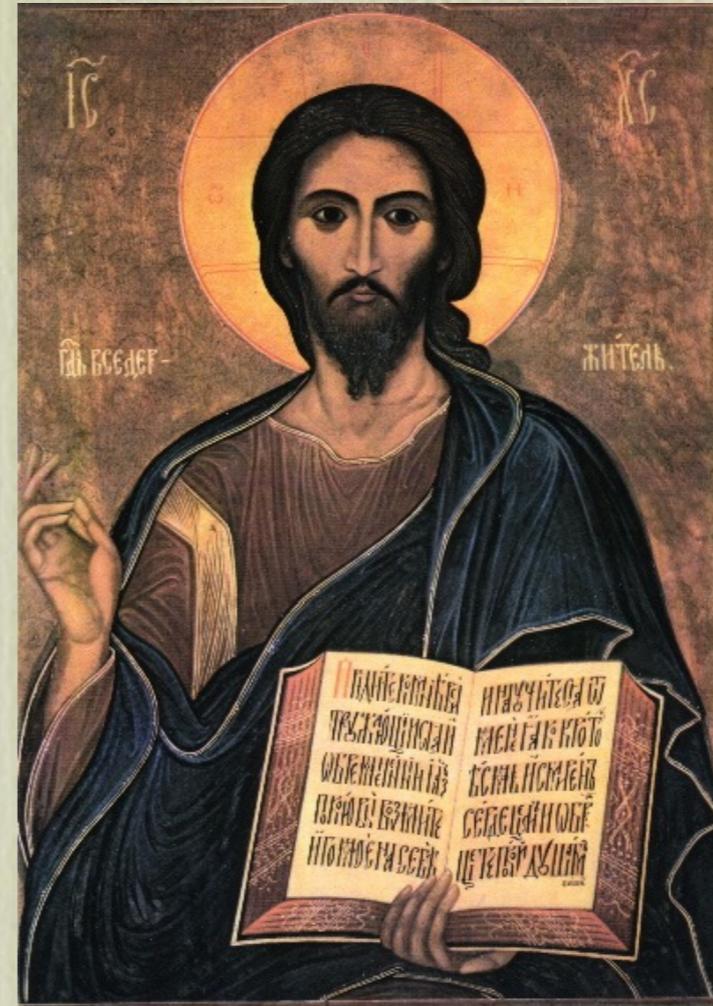
It is a journey of faith, for we journey in darkness: our eyes are unable to take the brightness of God's light. It is a journey of hope: for now we have only touches of the embrace for which we are made and for which our hearts long. It is a journey of love. It is in being in trusting communion with God that our souls find peace.

From the beginning to the end of his Gospel, John wants us to hold in our minds and hearts the picture of this intimate communion of God and the Word, God and Wisdom, for the Gospel is about how this Word, made flesh in Jesus, reveals the true nature of God as love, and invites us to share in the communion which we are here contemplating.

In reminding us that everything that has come into being has its existence through the Word (see John 1:3), John is saying that creation is essentially an act of revelation. In creating, God is revealing the communion of love that he enjoys with the eternal Word, with Wisdom. Creation is an expression of God's Wisdom. Its glory is a sacrament of the glory of God.

James, the brother of the Lord, writes: ‘The Wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy’ (James 3:17).

As we pray for wisdom let us hear Jesus invite us: ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls’ (Matthew 11:28-29).



‘Let me hear rejoicing and gladness’ (verse 8) recalls the ‘music and dancing’ (Luke 15:25) that celebrated the return of the prodigal son.

¹Be gracious to me, O God, according to your covenant love.

According to your tender compassion, *blot out* my transgressions.

²*Wash* me more and more from my guilt
purify me from my sin.

³I *know* my transgressions, my sin is always before me.

⁴against you, against you, I have *sinned*.

What is evil in your sight I have done.

You are just in your sentence
blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵It was into *sin*, into guilt, that I was born.

⁶Indeed you desire truth in the heart
then in the secret of my heart make me *know* wisdom

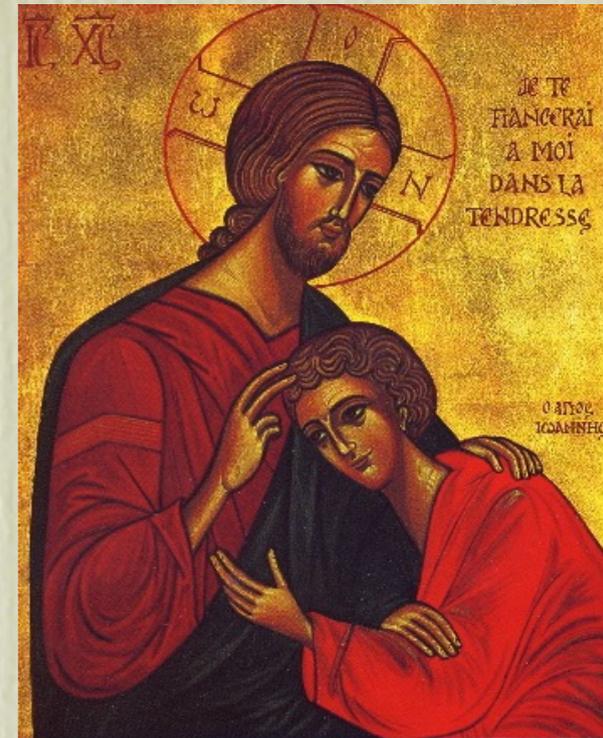
⁷If you purge me, I will be *purified*.

If you *wash* me, I will be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear rejoicing and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed exult.

Turn your face away from my sins.

Psalm 51



Part Two

9 blot out all my guilt

*10 Create in me, O God, a purified heart
put a new and steadfast spirit within me.*

As Christians, the ‘**new and steadfast spirit**’ that we long for is the Spirit of Jesus himself, given to us from the cross and constantly offered by the risen Jesus.

As Paul says: ‘The spirit gives life’ (2Corinthians 3:6). ‘You were taught ... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness’ (Ephesians 4:23-24).

The new spirit has created a new way of being human, a new 'Adam' (Genesis 2:7).

As Paul says: "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit ... The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven ... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven' (1 Corinthians 15:45-49).

We sinners long for restoration of our baptismal consecration and the holiness of being incorporated again into God's people.

¹¹Do *not* cast me away from your presence.

Do *not* take from me your holy spirit.

Central point of Part Two

¹²Give me again the joy of your *salvation*

¹²Give me again the joy of your *salvation*

and sustain in me a generous spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

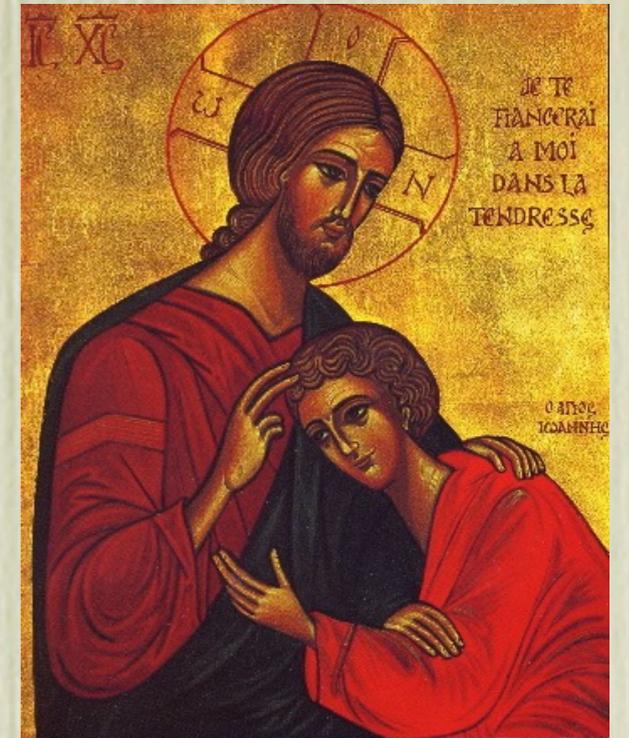
¹⁴Rescue me, O God, my *salvation*,
and I will sing aloud of your justice.

¹⁵O God*, open my lips,
and I will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you have *no* desire for sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would *not* be pleased.

¹⁷My sacrifice is a contrite *spirit*;
a broken, a crushed, *heart*, O God, you will not spurn.

Psalm 51



Reflecting on Psalm 52 in Jesus' Company



- ¹O you who wield power, why do you boast
of the evil you do against those who are faithful to the covenant?
- ²All day long you are plotting their destruction,
slashing them with your razor tongue.
- ³You prefer evil to good.
You choose to lie rather than speak the truth.
- ⁴With your deceitful tongue you love the destructive word.
- ⁵Very well, God (יְהוָה) will break you down and remove you forever,
snatch you from your tent,
and uproot you from the land of the living.

⁶The just will watch in awe [fear], and laugh at those who do evil:
⁷‘So this is the one who would not take refuge in God (אֶל־הַיְהוָה),
but trusted in the power of wealth,
and grew powerful through crime!’

Luke’s Gospel has a lot to say about those this psalm is criticising.
He calls them the ‘rich’.

They are ‘proud in the thoughts of their hearts’ (Luke 1:51). Their pride causes them to be self-reliant and therefore closed to what can be received only in dependence upon God.

They ‘go away empty’ (Luke 1:51). They are unrepentant (Luke 3:7-9). When Jesus comes among them, they seek to get rid of him (Luke 4:9), and they accuse Jesus of blasphemy (Luke 5:21).

The 'rich' are 'choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life' (Luke 8:14).

They are not open to the blessedness of the poor or to eternal life (Luke 10:25).

Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan, the rich can see someone in need and not be moved by compassion (Luke 10:31).

Jesus' indictment of the lawyers and Pharisees (Luke 11:37-54) makes a good commentary on the woes of the rich.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)



The parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14).



To seek to rely on oneself without reference to God is to miss out on life. In exalting myself, I fails to receive God's gracious gift.

The best way to understand Jesus use of the word 'rich' is to examine his use of the contrasting word 'poor': those whom the psalmist says have put their hope in God.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus announced in the synagogue at Nazareth that his mission was 'to bring good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18).

We hear him declare: 'Blessed and happy are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed and happy are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed and happy are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed and happy are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven' (Luke 6:20-23).

The word 'poor' applies literally to those who do not have the resources to meet their own needs. We are 'poor', therefore, to the extent that we recognise that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God on whom we are totally dependent. Jesus is telling his disciples that they will be 'blessed and happy'. That is to say, they will have that special happiness that flows from God's blessing.

The poor will share Jesus' communion with God to the extent that they recognise their own powerlessness and complete dependence on God. This will mean giving up attempts to rely on ourselves without reference to God. It will mean looking to God as the only source of our hope and salvation, trusting that God wants only to love us. The poor are those whom the psalmist describes as 'faithful to the covenant' (verse 1). They are blessed now because God takes them to heart and, in Jesus, is answering their cry.

Jesus does not favour material, economic poverty. As we watch Jesus, we see that he cannot resist the cry of the poor, and he calls his disciples to share in his mission of liberation (Luke 9:1-2). When he meets a person who wants to be his disciple and who has resources to help the poor, he asks him to rid himself of his possessions — of the riches that burden and ‘possess’ him — and to give them to those who need them.

Only then will he be free to follow Jesus (Luke 18:22). Whatever resources we have, we will be judged on how we shared them with those in need (Luke 3:10-11).

The 'poor' are those who believe that God who delights in Jesus delights also in them. They believe that it is God's purpose to save them from all that hinders their full communion with him and thus limits their freedom to live full human lives.

Luke is a realist. The poor will experience hunger; they will weep; and they will be rejected, as Jesus and the prophets were rejected (Luke 6:21-23). It is one thing for a child to trust. It is another for an adult, in a world of sin and oppression and suffering, to maintain this same loving trust in God while being committed to do God's will.

The challenge presented by Jesus to his disciples is to remain 'poor' under persecution. We will see Jesus in his public ministry and especially in his suffering and death living with this childlike trust. In the face of a cruel death Jesus can still say to God: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46; Psalm 31:5).

(The reflection concludes with a prayer)

⁸Here am I, like a green olive tree in the house of God (אֱלֹהִים).

I have always trusted in your covenant love.

⁹I will thank you forever, because of what you have done.

In the presence of the faithful I hope in you, for you are good.