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In(to) the presence of the Lord (Psalm 84)

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Tonight, I'm going to do something that hasn't happened much at Benedictus, and that is to preach on the psalm set for the day. The Psalms have had a special place in the Hebrew tradition of worship since the beginning, and in the early church and many congregations these ancient songs are recalled, recited and occasionally preached on.

If you're like me, the psalms have been important in your own faith journey and I think it's fair to say that certain psalms (or verses of psalms) are among the most familiar and loved pieces of scripture. Psalm 23 with its opening line: *'The Lord's my shepherd, I shall not want'*, is surely the best known of all, but there are others.

Actually, when preparing this sermon, I discovered that in the early centuries of church history, it was expected that any candidate for bishop would be able to recite the entire Psalter from memory. Imagine that, every psalm, all 150, by heart!! We might be tempted to ask how that is possible or how long it would take. I want to ask a different question. Why? Why would that have mattered? What is it about the Psalms that makes them so significant?

For Walter Brueggemann it matters because 'what goes on in the Psalms is [so] in touch with what goes on in our [lives].' We need our church leaders to engage with scripture and with God, and we need them to be in touch with us and with what goes on in our lives – to be compassionate and understanding. The psalms are significant in part because they convey with such honesty the range, messiness and complexity of human experience. If

leaders understand this, then hopefully they will better be able to be with us in whatever state we are found.

But it's not just bishops who do well to know the psalms. We do too. Why? Because more than any other part of scripture these ancient songs give vent to the emotions that go with life's experiences – to our joys and sorrows, to our fear and rage, our pain and love. More than that, the psalms 'shape' us, John Piper has written; they offer us ways to respond to the vicissitudes of life, ways that are wholehearted and honest, and that are also faithful. All of which makes preaching on them a worthwhile task. So, let's take a closer look at the psalm we've just heard – Psalm 84.

I must confess this psalm has always been a favourite of mine, and apparently, I'm not alone. Hassell-Bullock, a biblical commentator I read, referred to it as 'one of the most beautiful and beloved psalms in the entire Psalter'. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century Baptist preacher described it as the 'pearl' of the Psalter and 'the most sweet of the Psalms of Peace'. High praise indeed!

By way of background, Psalm 84 is considered to be one of the 'Songs of Zion', a group of psalms directly associated with Israelite pilgrimages to Jerusalem. These pilgrimages were related to the festivals that were celebrated annually in the life of Israel – Passover and Harvest and others. With affection and enthusiasm these 'songs' extol the beauty and majesty of the city, its temple, and its king (particularly its first king, David, who in scripture at least is credited with writing many of the psalms that appear in the Psalter). Frequently, they also express great desire for God's presence and this is certainly evident in the opening verses of Psalm 84: *'How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts (or armies)! My soul longs, indeed it faints (or languishes) for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.'*

The language is intense and passionate. The relationship being described here is (what we'd call spiritual) but there's nothing abstract about the language. It is expressed emotionally and located bodily (in the worshipper), and geographically (in the temple). As I reflected on these lines, I was reminded of those words of St Augustine (whose feast by coincidence is celebrated next Tuesday): *'Our heart is restless until it rests in you.'*

The psalmist expresses this same longing – to be with God – at rest and at home in God. The language of longing implies the unsettlement of distance from God, but this is balanced in the next lines with an image that communicates the peace that comes with closeness (3). *'Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.'* The picture of these tiny birds darting and nesting is one of playfulness, intimacy and security. It's an image that has become much more real for me after my recent pilgrimage in Spain. I remember one morning (after sleeping of all places in a bull fighting arena!) I was walking past the village church, and flying around the building – dipping, soaring and singing – were hundreds of black swallows. It suggested to me that all was well with the world, and it's exactly that sentiment that the psalmist is seeking to convey. A state of blessedness associated with proximity to God: *'Happy (blessed) are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise'.*

This verse is the first of three 'beatitudes' that appear in this psalm and they all have to do with a relationship with God. The second beatitude comes hard on its heels – the very next verse: *'Happy (blessed) are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion'* or as the NIV puts it, *'whose hearts are set on pilgrimage'* (5). Yes, it is good to be in close proximity to God, but it's not just the destination that brings blessing, so does being on the way. As I think about my pilgrimages in Spain I can relate to this – the blessing of the journey. We may not be there yet; we may feel far from

God, but to be travelling in that direction, the psalmist suggests, will itself begin to transform things – your perspective and way of being (6). Even difficult circumstances – as you *'go through the valley of Baca'* (times of dryness and desolation), you can experience transformation – *'make it a place of springs'*. *'They go from strength to strength'*, the psalmist says, and God comes ever more clearly into view: *'the God of gods will be seen in Zion'* (7).

At this point in the psalm there's a brief intercessory interlude – a prayer for the King: *'O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Behold our shield... look on the face of your anointed.'* It's a prayer for the king but indirectly it is a prayer for general wellbeing, for that was the King's divinely given responsibility – to administer justice and ensure the wellbeing of the nation (and couldn't we do with a bit of that in Australia at the moment!!)

From here, it's back to waxing lyrical about the goodness of God and the joy of being in God's presence: *'For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the (solid) house of my God than live in the (flimsy) tents of wickedness. For the Lord God is a sun and shield (light and protection); God bestows favour and honour. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, happy (blessed) is everyone who trusts in you'* – the final beatitude.

Well, it is a very positive psalm. So, how does it land? Does it speak to you? Does it speak for you? I first read it at a time when life was good and faith was easy. I read it devotionally and uncritically, like someone in the first flush of romance (perhaps because I was). I resonated with its affirmations, its positiveness and sense of relational intimacy. But it hasn't always been like that since then. In the dark seasons of my life, particularly in more recent years, times of disillusionment with the church or the world (or myself), I found it hard to connect with the overt sentiment of the psalm. It was all a bit too positive, I guess, too confident and neat and nice. I'm conscious that some

of you may be in that kind of place. What then? Beneath the affirmations and declarations, how might this psalm speak to those who are struggling?

For one thing, the psalm suggests that acknowledging and attending to the spiritual dimension of life is important for wellbeing. When this psalm was written and first recited, God's presence was associated very specifically with the temple in Jerusalem. To be there or a pilgrim journeying purposefully towards the temple was considered to bring peace, security, light, satisfaction, transformation and joy – in short, blessing. Today it's different. That temple is gone, and in the Christian understanding our sense of God has changed too. The presence of God is no longer so focused on the temple or Jerusalem, though there remains an awareness of the sacredness of particular sites – 'thin places' the Celts called them. What has not changed is the importance of spiritual connection, of drawing close to and resting in the divine presence. Worship, prayer, and meditation are practices (like pilgrimage) that bring us into this presence, and underneath all the fine words, that's what I hear in this psalm – an invitation to draw closer, to put ourselves in the way of God, and a reminder of how life-giving it can be.

And importantly, this isn't just about us, about our private little experience and individual wellbeing. To me, the psalm also suggests that our commitment to this spiritual journey, our attempts to dwell in the presence of God (to 'abide', as John describes it in chapter 15 of his gospel) can have a broader impact. This is hinted, for example, in the image of passing through the Valley of Baca and it (not just us) becoming a 'place of springs'. Whether 'Baca' was an actual place (a dry and parched valley in Israel) or a metaphorical place (of broken-heartedness and grief, of desolation) or both, there's this picture suggests that our being on a spiritual pilgrimage, our journeying into the presence of God can be transformative not only for ourselves, but for others and the environment. In other words, being 'in God'

– ‘in Christ’ is how Paul expressed it in the New Testament – has ecological implications.

When describing the Hasidim, a devout and prayerful group of Jews, E. Wiesel once said: ‘Equipped with mysterious strengths, [they] wander the earth, warm it and change it,’ mightily empowered to ‘transform doubt and care into enthusiasm into the praise of life.’¹ (Those words seem to me to echo something of what the psalmist was suggesting in the second beatitude we read in this psalm: *‘Happy (blessed) are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs.’*

Well, like I said, overtly it is a very positive piece of scripture. You may or may not be in a place where the actual words resonate, but whatever your state, I hope you might hear in them a deeper invitation, which also comes with a promise. And I pray that we all might know it.

¹ E. Wiesel, *Chassidische Feier*, Freiburg: Herder, 1988).