

Sermon 23 August 2009

Text: Psalm 84

Henri Nouwen writes ('Jesus and the Gospel' p46): 'Once I saw a mime in which a man was straining to open one of the three doors in the room where he found himself. He pushed and pulled at the door knobs but none of the doors would open. Then he kicked with his feet against the wooden panels of the door, but they didn't break. Finally he threw his full weight against the doors but none of them yielded. It was a ridiculous, yet very hilarious sight because the man so concentrated on the three locked doors that he didn't even notice that the room had no back wall and that he could simply walk out if he would only turn around and look.'

From God's place, we often look like the man who tries to open the locked doors of his room. We worry about many things and even wound ourselves while worrying. God says "Turn around, set your heart on my Kingdom (my place). I will give you all the freedom you desire."

Today's Psalm conjures up for me an image of home, safety, rest, sanctuary in a particular setting; a space where the vulnerable are welcome and embraced.

Psalm 84 is a song for pilgrims; there are difficult, dark, dry times on the journey, and there are times for celebration and fruitfulness. The pilgrimage is toward home — physical and spiritual — home in God, home in ourselves.

'Even the sparrow finds a home
and the swallow a nest for herself
where she may lay her young
at your altar, O Lord of hosts.
Happy are those who live in your house.'

vi2 "...happy is everyone who trusts in you'

Home, rest, nest, dwelling place. How fortunate we are if we have a peaceful home; a place, space to rest, to nest, to offer hospitality. Yet, even if we do, we are so infrequently at home in God. Like the man in the mime, we often struggle, push, kick, to get out, to get away; distracted by so many things. Afraid, not noticing that we are free to leave any time and free to rest.

Whenever I am in Canberra, down the coast, in New Caledonia, I often sit on my bed, and pray. I imagine in my head and my heart, images of rest, of peace, one room, a tree, a sacred spot.

I think of words from songs or from scripture to inspire:

'You are my dwelling place'
'Abide in me'
'You are my refuge and strength'
'Rest in the midst of the storm'

On Wednesday, I woke unsettled, unable to concentrate and out of sorts, tired, no good to anyone. Thanks to Jill's willingness to take the Wednesday service, and postponing another appointment, I was able to take time to rest, to pray and to listen.

I walked up Black Mountain, feasting on the clean blue sky, the warmth of the air, the flowers, the blue-green eucalypts. I journaled. I stilled my racing, tense self. I came 'home'.

Then I went to see my spiritual director and spoke with her about the position of Archdeacon to which I've been appointed. I realised I had struggled with the 'yes' months ago as I mentioned last week in my sermon — then let it go. Now, with the announcement, I had to face the decision again.

After speaking with my spiritual director, I came to a place of peace. I realised I came to the archdeaconry position, bringing my self — my own unique blend of gifts and vulnerabilities. I am not an institutional person. I find life and energy round the edge, not at the centre. I am not a meetings person. I bring to the position my self - listening, and advocating on behalf of the voiceless — within and without. I bring my creative soul, to mission and strategic planning. I bring our wisdom, our life here at Holy Covenant into the centre. I have come home again, home to God, to my self, and in between - not a physical place - a space.

I can get on with it now. Grounded again.

Jan Richardson, p259, *Sacred Journey*. A woman's book of Daily Prayer reflects. At home, dwelling — the words evoke images of habitation, of space. More than a physical place, our dwelling is formed in the intersection of time and space, created as our daily living gives shape to our surroundings and to ourselves.

We do not dwell alone. God dwells among us; within us. The movement of God in our lives and the stories of generations of faithful people shape our dwelling, even when we live alone.

Learning to dwell calls us to times of resting, of being attentive to time as it unfolds in a particular place. For those of us who are intensely future-orientated, paying attention to the now presents a challenge.

Learning to dwell means learning to look at time not simply as something that happens on our way to somewhere else but rather as something that unfolds in space, space that we shape and craft by our daily routines, rituals, movements, interaction. It means lingering with God, with creation, with one another and with ourselves, in this time, in this space.

On the other hand, dwelling can be very real and physical.

Tim Scorer (?) tells of his experience in one of the refugee camps on the west bank— 'a city of apartments spawned haphazardly out of the will for shelter and community'. He writes:

"The conversation had turned from the reality of survival in such conditions and the amazing educational success of the family's children in spite of ongoing hardships, to a conviction that the day would come when all these Palestinians who had been exiled for decades in other lands of the Middle East would one day be free to return home. The wife got up from the rough chair where she was sitting and went to a cabinet from which she drew a house key. She handed the key and some folded papers to her husband who then spoke. "I was born here in a small tent in 1950. I have lived all my life here with my father who is now 94, and my eight children. We live with hardship every day and we live the dream of returning every day. This is the key to the house my father and mother were driven from in 1948. And this is the title deed for our family lands."

'Since that day', Scorer continues, 'we have heard of many Palestinians holding on to the keys and deeds of their lost family homes; we have heard of them being raised in defiance to those with authority who either by will or by neglect keep the Palestinians locked in with walls, border crossings and guard posts.'

Out of the land shared by Israelis and Palestinians for thousands of years comes a remarkable literature expressing praise to God and calling for justice for all, both Palestinian and Israeli. Now when I read verses from Psalm 84 I can't help but think of the desire of all God's people to be in the place they call home, without fear, and at peace with all their neighbours. (p.100, *Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life*, Pentecost 1)

A home and shelter are a basic human right of every human being surely, yet for so many in the world it still seems to be something needing to be earned or deserved. Within our recent Australian history, young Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their parents, forever labelling them as the stolen or homeless generation.

So, what is our response to those who need a safe swelling place?

- Given the reality for many Aboriginal people, for Palestinians, what meaning does having a home in God have for you?
- When are you most at home with God? and
- How does this further shape and inform your practice of faith?

How lovely is your dwelling place

O Lord of hosts.

Even the sparrow finds a home
and the swallow a nest for herself
where she may lay her young
at your altar, O Lord of hosts.

Happy are those who live in your house
ever singing your praise.

Verses from Psalm 84

There is rest and peace,
but there is always an edge
while others are homeless
physically or spiritually.

We choose

place of fear

place of love