

PSALM 84: 1-4, 10-12

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!
² My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

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.

⁴ Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

¹⁰ For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favour and honour.
No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

¹² O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Has there ever been a time when you have felt particularly close to God or a time when God felt particularly close to you? Has there ever been a place you have been to or a place you sometimes go where you feel such closeness? For the people of Israel, like many ancient peoples, there were places and spaces where God could be felt especially close. It may have been a mountain, a hill or a valley. It may have been a burial site. But certainly for the Israelites, the holy city Jerusalem was such a place, and especially the temple. The “Holy of holies” was a space where only the appointed priest would enter and only at certain times in the year. That’s where the ark of the covenant (containing the 10 commandments) was kept and God was believed to be especially present there.

This psalm, like other psalms too, is inspired by this sense of getting close to God through the place and the space that is the temple, a place and a space where God dwells. As Protestants, we tend to downplay or dismiss thinking about the sacred inhabiting special places and spaces, or accessed through special objects like crosses or statues, or scents, sounds and touch. And yet, it is very much part of the way we’re made as humans, accessing the divine and the sacred through all our senses: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell.

Accessing the sacred is not just an inward, spiritual thing but a sensate thing too, and in fact, the two often interact. What revelations of God may come to us when we are out in nature, on a mountain, in a forest or sitting by a tree? And what about creatures dear to

us (the psalm mentions sparrows and swallows finding shelter in the temple) or the people close to us. And how about those pictures or mementos or objects that somehow remind us of loved one or some special occasion like a wedding, birth, death or some special ceremony? And how much of God's closeness do we feel as the energy of love and care between us persons as it is exchanged and cherished?

But there is also something more that the psalmist associates with the sacredness of the temple. It is the sacredness of righteousness or justice (same word in Hebrew and Greek). Worship and justice joined by love must all go together. The psalmist experiences the closeness of God when they are walking in the way of righteousness just like they experience it in the midst of worship. They experience God's presence and strengthening when they are walking uprightly and trusting in God no matter what challenges they must face and what situations they must figure out how to engage rightly and compassionately.

And this is something we Protestants can fully get behind. We typically distrust any ritual for ritual's sake. Unless ethics are joined with prayer, unless a commitment to justice and right are inspired by our bible reading, and unless genuine compassion and care for the extra vulnerable are evoked by our worship, it is not the true God we are worshipping, praying to or meditating upon. The psalmist is very much aligned to such thinking, praying and meditating.

So what about you and me? How do we connect our worship and our service, our praying and our commitment to justice, our personal meditation and our concrete love of our neighbour? May we take this time and this week to find a fresh closeness to God as we open our heart to where God may be leading us in our relationships in the world and our personal journeys through a challenging darkness into new light. And may we give thanks for those special places, spaces and objects that open us up to God's presence.

PRAYER: Come close to us, O God as we seek to get closer to you. We need your sheltering arms, not to protect us from life, but to carry us through the darkness into the light. Sometimes the darkness is very personal to us, O God. Sometimes it is our exposure and sensitivity to the struggle, hurt and suffering around us. We carry the pain of Ukraine and all those impacted directly. We carry the pain of those within our family and sphere of friendship struggling with their physical or mental health. We carry our personal struggles in a relationship or the grief of loss that continues to weigh upon us even as others seem to have moved on... Come close to us, O God, and help us feel your closeness... In Jesus' name; Amen.