

Living Memories

Psalm 84; John 6:51-58

If you get the opportunity to go to the Holy Land (I believe there are still places available on next year's pilgrimage!), you will undoubtedly go to Jerusalem, and to the site of the ancient temple. There is not much left now. Certainly the golden topped mosque known as the Dome of the Rock is a well-known image, but that was built on the site of the old temple, which is several feet underneath that building. What is left of the old temple of Jerusalem, the one rebuilt on the site of Solomon's Temple some 100 – 200 years before Jesus, is a wall.

To some it is known as the western wall, but to most it is still remembered as the Wailing Wall. It is where devout Jews to this day go to lament the fall of Jerusalem and its Temple to the Romans in 66 AD. They stand and pray, and insert written prayers into the cracks between the great stones that were refashioned in the time of Herod the Great. Standing close up to those mighty stones, you can touch stones that Jesus would have passed, and maybe even touched Himself. If you look up, high up on the walls you can see bushes growing out of the masonry. Clearly their Property Committee isn't as efficient or active as ours.

Standing there a few years ago I looked up at these bushes, as I placed both hands on the great wall to pray. And as I looked I saw sparrows, nesting.

Even the sparrow finds a home,

And the swallow a nest for herself...

3000 years after the words of this Psalm was written, that we heard read earlier in our service, the sparrows are still making a home in the old walls of the Jerusalem Temple.

We all have them – those special places. Places where the space between us and where God is, is very thin. A childhood home; a hilltop; a seashore; a river. Dryburgh Abbey in the Borders is one such place for me, or the chapel at my old Oxford College, or that Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, or down by the lakeside in Galilee. You'll have them too. Places of infinite beauty, or peace, or grandeur, or poignancy. Redolent with happy or sad memories, they speak of life; they speak of what has made us and shaped us; they speak of faith, and doubt; of success and failure. They can be associated with colour, or music, or voices. They populate our memories in a magical way that is truly wonderful. Living memories.

Psalm 84 is also about living memories. It sings of the Jerusalem Temple, and no doubt sung by its great choirs. But it is not a piece that celebrates mere bricks and mortar. It's focus is on what makes the place special, wonderful, powerful – the presence of the living God. For people of faith, living memories have to do with the presence of God somehow in the moment of the thing we remember and cherish most. The hospital ward where you held your child or grandchild for the first time – not the bricks and mortar – but the birth and the new life being welcomed into the world. That's the living memory. The hospital ward where you held the hand of a dying loved one, with the tears and the thanksgiving, not the bricks and mortar, but that wonderful, awful, special moment of love and farewell. It is a living memory too, ironically, and one to be cherished.

This building, even with its beauty, is only so much stone and wood and glass and metal fashioned into shapes, but it is not until you build into its fabric the prayers and music and song; the baptisms and weddings and funerals; the voices of children and the smell of the coffee; the learning and sharing; the working together and the flowers. Then you have living memories. Then, for the person of faith, the presence of God has come, bidden or unbidden. God is here.

Psalm 84 praises the longing for the living presence of God, Who blesses memories, and creates them, and gives them meaning. Of course there will be those who can hold a child, or hear a symphony, or look at a sunset, or smell the salt sea air – and create a living memory. But for the person of faith, I believe, there is that extra, wonderful enhancement of knowing that in what we are experiencing, the presence of God, the intimacy of God, is also part and parcel of all that is going on around us and within us.

From its opening exclamation to its concluding blessing, Psalm 84 celebrates the joys offered to us by the closeness of God to us. God provides place, protection and pause in life. Even the birds, the sparrows and swallows, find their place in the place where God is. How much more so humanity, welcomed into the embrace of God. In good times and bad, and memories created.

Part of the tragedy of the modern world is the loss of the sense of the presence of God, the sacred, the mystery, the wonder. In our search for knowledge and understanding, which is really a search for control, we have reduced all that is mighty and glorious to little handfuls of short-term gratification. In our pursuit of the detail, we have lost the splendour of the big picture. In our focus on the mechanisms of clocks we have no sense of what the time is. In our splitting of atoms, we have lost sight of the complexity and interconnectedness of creation. These are not either/ors. But this reading of Psalm 84 reminds us of the longing that is at the heart of human existence. A longing for security, a longing for joy, a longing for happiness, and a longing for love. In a spiritual age you would call this the longing for God.

In a spiritual world we would long for the presence of God, not as the antidote to all that is wrong with the world, but as the strengthening presence Who will encourage us and enable us to face that world and do what we can to remedy it. Thus creating living memories. God is the lively One, the giver of life. God is sun, the source of life, and shield, the protector of life. God gives grace and glory. Christians believe that the good in life comes from God.¹

And it is in that life that our living memories are constructed, crafted, shaped, and coloured.

Psalm 84 draws our attention that it may be in Temples and Churches; or it may be in wide open spaces or surrounded by trees and hills; or it may be in the place to which music or drama or a good book will take us; but what helps give substance to the shaping of that moment and then that memory is the blessing of God being near.

Have we become so sophisticated and cynical that we no longer need this or value this? Are we so self-sufficient and confident in our own ability to shape our destinies that there is now, in 2015, no longer room or need for that sense of awe and wonder and mystery. It is not to banish knowledge or understanding or the quest for meaning, far from it. It is not to live in a world of uncritical naivety or superstition. But it is, surely, to say that when those golden moments come, that will be burnished into living memories, that we can say, "God is here; God was there."

I invite you before this day is done to reflect on your living memories. The times and places and people and events that have shaped and moulded you. They may be joyful or sorrowful; they may be healing or hurtful. But without those living memories you, in some way, would not be the wonderful person that you are. And as you look back, see where the touch or the glimmer of the presence of God has been. Laughter after a time of sadness; strength to face what you thought unendurable; a new beginning when you could see no way ahead; new life where all around you seemed dead; purpose and fulfilment when you thought all hope had fled. In all those living memories, look closely, and see where God was; there, and there, and there.

And in this place, this glorious cathedral of living memory and future vision, of past thankfulness and future expectation, sense once more the mystery and the majesty and the presence of the living God Who has shared with you every one of those living memories that you hold so dear.

If there is anything special about this place, it is because here God comes from time to time, to share with you your hopes and memories, your longings and desires, to prepare you for your next encounter with the world. For that, rejoice. For that, be glad. For that, sing His praises.

How lovely is Thy dwelling place,

O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs, yea, faints

For the courts of the Lord;

My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ James L Mays, Psalms, p274