

Finding home

Psalm 107:1-9; Colossians 3:1-11

What does 'home' mean for you? Is it a place, a dream, a comfort, a security, a shelter? What have been the different homes in which you have lived at different points in your life? Were they places of happiness or sadness? Are you in transition from one home to another, and what are the questions that you are facing as you move? In a world where homelessness continues to be a blight on our society, and refugees cross the globe to find sanctuary, 'home' is one of the pressing concerns of our generation. The question about where we find home, and how we make a home, remains urgent. To be really at home is to be really at peace, and there is no real peace for any of us until there is peace for all of us.

It is such an evocative word, 'home'. It conjures up conflicting images.

For those who have had happy homes it will speak of welcome, acceptance, being cared for and finding a place; it might mean family and loved ones; it might be the place that gives you that sense of belonging, and even when you have gone far away, it is always the place to which you return. I took a funeral for a Hebridean lady last week, who had lived in different parts of the country, and indeed the world. She had lived in Edinburgh for over fifty years, and yet, whenever she went back to the Island of Lewis, that was 'home' for her.

For others home is an altogether darker place. It can be a place of abuse, loneliness, coldness and emptiness. It can become a prison, a burden, and a repository of sad memories. It can be the place a young person longs to escape; it can be the place an old person fears to leave.

When we think of home, any and all of these images are real, and we need to be sensitive to the fact that when we use that word, 'home', it will evoke different things from different people.

'Home' is a word that has many different meanings in the Bible. From the image of the Garden of Eden, to the image of the place where Jesus grew up in Nazareth. From the house of Job, devastated by tragedy after tragedy, to the high courts of heaven where God was said to reside. I remember in my first parish in Cupar looking at the stained glass windows and noting that one,

with a picture of an angel, and the text from Psalm 91, “He shall give his angels charge of you”, was in memory of someone who had died. Except after the name of the dead person the short phrase, ‘gone home’ was inscribed. A lovely old lady, Margaret Hamilton, used to sit in front of that window for years. I remember when she reached the age of 80 I went over before morning worship to congratulate her. She thanked me, and then turned to the window and pointed and said, “It’s about time I went home!”

Psalm 107 is a song of praise about the loyal and steadfast love of God, the Hebrew word is *hesed*. It is a song of thankfulness. It is a song to sing in the glad times and in the sad times. It is a song to sing when the world is perfect and the world is broken. Because it is a song to sing for all peoples at all times. Gathered from east and west and north and south. In desert wastes, with no city to dwell in, hungry and thirsty, soul-sick, troubled and distressed, God comes towards them, comes towards us, and begins to lead towards a city to live in.

God’s steadfast love to God’s people is not the result of their repentance, nor a reward for their obedience. It is the permanent gift and nature of God that makes the tough times of life bearable, repentance likely, and obedience possible. God’s unqualified love never lets us go. God’s unqualified love calls us home.

It’s the story of the prodigal son and the older brother, both finding a home with their gracious father. It’s the story of Zacchaeus called down from his sycamore tree by a Saviour who has decided to eat in his house that night. It’s the story of the penitent thief who, dying beside a dying Jesus can ask, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom”, and is reassured by Jesus words, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Life is difficult, but for the faithful believer, the struggling believer, the honest believer, the nervous believer, God’s steadfast love for you, just as you are, is calling you to be at home, with God.

At home with God – now there’s a thought. What does it mean to find a home with God? We’re not talking about a physical description of a heavenly abode in some glossy celestial magazine. The dimensions and décor of heaven are not to be found in the pages of scripture in any detail.

The closest Jesus gets to it in John's gospel is to talk of a house, or a mansion, with many rooms. The point is not the geography, or the architecture, or the white goods, or the soft furnishings. The point is it is a home, where God is. A place, any place, where God is.

Amongst the many purposes of faith is to challenge to help us attempt the long road to find home, where God is. To be 'at home with God' has to do with being comfortable with God without become complacent; content with God without become presumptuous; relaxed with God without becoming indifferent. When we find home with God we do not come as guests, we come as family. From east and west and north and south. All find a welcome where God is. God offers a place to us in God's home, and we are welcome.

If we know little more about God's home than it is a place of welcome, and has many rooms, I wonder what that means to us and the places that we call home? Are our homes places of welcome and inclusion, where people can be at their ease and be made comfortable. Or does our home have an edge to it, an atmosphere that is tangible and not particularly pleasant?

The Church is often described as the house, or home of God, not that God is to be confined within the walls of cathedral or chapel, Victorian sanctuary or church hall, but that it may be a place where God's presence is sensed, and enjoyed.

It has been interesting listening to you as you have adapted to worshipping in this temporary house of God. Familiar, yet unfamiliar. Where shall I sit? Can God be worshipped with a piano and not a pipe organ? Isn't the Minister getting a bit too close? Isn't the congregation getting a bit too close? Hasn't the bringing of people together, on chairs, in a confined space, actually improved the singing? Hasn't the bringing of people together out of pews and on to chairs, led to you speaking to people you haven't spoken to before? Isn't that part of what being the Church is about, a gathering of people, worshipping, listening, singing, praying, together?

For that I believe we should give thanks. We have learned to congregate again, and become aware of the presence of God in a different way. We have discovered that God's home is to be found in many different places, and one of them is right here. Has it taken exile from the

sanctuary into this hall for us to realise that great truth that God's love is at home here, with us, now?

"A sense of exile from home, of being lost and alone, is a near universal part of human experience. People find themselves wandering in wastes of postmodern capitalist societies, in small towns from which they could not escape, in unhealthy relationships, in confusing situations, in addictions or dark nights of the soul. The list is, unfortunately, endless. On the other hand, God's love is also endless, and the news that God's intent, God's promise, is to guide us from the waste to the pleasant places in the future, even as God did in the past, is good news in deed."ⁱ God is calling you home. God is calling me home. And one of those places of 'home' is right here.

Finding home, with God, with the people of God. God's welcome mat is out, God's door is open, God's hands are outstretched; now listen, 'Come home, my daughter, my son, and be with Me.' This is the word of God, thanks be to God. For His steadfast love for everyone.

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

Amen

ⁱ Quinn G Caldwell, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 3, p303