Sermon Sunday 28th August 2022 at Stowe

Psalm 84

Matthew 6: 25-34 (do not worry)

We are in a series of Psalms chosen by this congregation, and today we’ve reached Psalm 84, which I should say would also be one of my choices. There are quite a few well-known verses here, including v1 ‘How lovely is your dwelling place’ and ‘Better one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord ...’ ‘Even the sparrow has found a nest…’ and so on. So there are some well-known bits of this psalm, some of which have found their way into our hymn books.

Let’s pray as we look at this psalm together.

This (84) is described as ‘of (ie written by) the sons of Korah’. It is closely associated with Psalm 42, which is also headed ‘a song of the sons of Korah’. They may have been written at the same time. But who was Korah? You may recall a notorious character of that name who led a rebellion, an insurrection against Moses. He was envious of Aaron who had been made High Priest when Korah thought he should have had the job. As a result he was swallowed up by the earth. He got his just desserts. But his sons dissociated themselves from their father and survived, and indeed went on in repentance to play major parts in worship, writing a good number of the psalms, including this one, Psalm 84. This is a joyful psalm, rejoicing in who God is. It is one of a number of psalms which seem to have been written to accompany pilgrims on their journey to the Jerusalem Temple.

You may note, when reading this, that twice during the psalm you find the added word ‘Selah’ – that is, after v4 and after v8, of the 12 verses. Do you detect a pattern there? ‘Selah’ neatly divides the psalm into three equal parts, which we might separately call ‘The joy of God’s house’, ‘the joy of the pilgrimage’ and ‘the joy of the Lord’.

So what, you may ask, does Selah mean? Well, you may well ask, because the answer is: no-one really knows. It seems to be a musical term, since the book of psalms is the hymn book of the Jewish nation, and later the early church.

Some scholars have interpreted the word as meaning ‘forever’, though I’m not sure quite how that works. If it were the word ‘Hallelujah’ I might think that could possibly work, but… Hey ho.

I’ve always thought that Selah means ‘pause, take a breath, let’s have a moment of silence to think about what we’ve just sung.’ Not a bad idea in a hymn or indeed in a reading.

Let’s see what it says and then come back to the structure.

You could think of this psalm in its three parts as ‘longing to be in God’s house’, ‘journeying to God’s house’ and ‘finally arriving in God’s house’. The context of the psalm can be expressed like this: imagine a group of Israelites, in exile, longing to be back in their own country. This psalm paints a picture of that long, hard journey, ending with their arrival back home. In fact, the psalm may have been be sung many years later en route to Jerusalem for an occasion such as the Feast of Tabernacles. That would make it one of the thirteen Song of Ascents among the psalms, as they were called. In fact Psalm 121, a version of which we will sing later, which I wrote, is also a Song of Ascent.

vv1-4: the joy of God’s house

The first cause for joy would be actually being in the Temple, the very house of God. v1 ‘How lovely is your dwelling place..’ implies not that it is beautiful (which it is) but that it is loved – or beloved. Couple that first verse of the psalm with the final verse ‘How blessed (or beloved) is the one who trusts in God’. Kind of brackets to the whole psalm. For those who are interested, that’s called a Chiasm.

Remember psalm 122 ‘I was glad when they said, let us go to the house of the Lord.’ (Another psalm that has been set to music many times, in our day.)

I wonder what your attitude is on a Sunday morning? Do you think – here we go again, it’s Sunday so it must go to church. Or do you really look forward to meeting with God and with fellow-Christians each week? I must say I look forward to coming here every month or so, because we always receive such a warm welcome. The psalmist says ‘my soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord.’ There’s devotion for you!

Do we see church as a place for reconciliation and communion with God? Would we really miss it if we weren’t able to come? I hope so! Ask yourself: what would I miss most? Your answer will reveal what’s on your heart.

vv5-8 the joy of pilgrimage

The next part has the pilgrims, newly arrived in the Temple, looking back at their long journey here. Mention is made of the Valley of Baca, which could be translated as the Valley of Balsam, and has been identified by name as the Valley of Rephaim from 2 Samuel 5. It is a particularly arid and dry – but the pilgrims through faith and determination to press on make it a place of springs.

The reason for being joyful here is the very idea of pilgrimage. In medieval times, Christians made pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Canterbury, a route even today called the Pilgrim’s Way; these days people talk about a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, or perhaps nearer home to Walsingham; but in those days of course travel was much harder. The psalmist sees the arduous journey entirely worth it, as at the end of the road is God himself. Perhaps this is even an allegory of our own life’s journey, as we travel alongside our Lord – to see it as a pilgrimage.

vv9-12 the joy of the Lord

The third part focuses not on the journey, nor even on the Temple, but on God himself. v9 has caused scholars some confusion; does it say ‘Look upon our shield’ or does it say ‘Look upon our sovereign’? Is this a prayer for the King? If it is, then this verse says that if the psalmist is to be preserved in his enjoyment of spiritual privileges, then he must pray for national stability. In this direct sense, his communion with God depends on the continuing favour of the Lord towards his anointed king, who is a shield to his people. That seems to be the sense of ‘shield’ here. For us, we should surely pray regularly for our monarch.

Prayer book:

‘We beseech thee also to save and defend all Christian Kings, Princes, and Governors; and specially thy servant ELIZABETH our Queen; that under her we may be godly and quietly governed: And grant unto her whole Council, and to all that are put in authority under her, that they may truly and indifferently minister justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion, and virtue.’

‘Indifferently?’ Impartially!

 Then there is the rather odd v10. ‘I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.’ Well, yes, obviously. So what is he getting at? One commentator suggests that the one referred to is only standing near the door, but that is better than having a seat among the wicked. Or, to put it another way, better standing room only in this theatre that a seat in the stalls in the other.

The psalm ends where it began, rejoicing in God’s provision for his own, ‘for those whose walk is blameless’.

Our NT reading is also fairly well-known, from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is showing where our focus should be. Too often, our focus is on ourselves: how do I look, what shall we have for dinner? These things do need thinking about – yes, we need to plan ahead - but what’s most important in life? For those pilgrims, their eyes were fixed on the end of the journey, not on their present problems, and so should ours.

So what are we to make of this psalm, using New Testament eyes? First, our focus should be on God himself. Throughout this psalm, though the writer looks at God’s house and the journey towards it, his true focus is in the God behind it all. He envies the sparrow with its nest so near the Temple because it is near God himself. His heart is thus set not only on the living God but the loving God, who has provided a new and living way through the cross of Jesus.

Second, as we have considered, we are on a pilgrimage. Remember the book Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan? Christian was heading for the Celestial City, and so are we. We’re not aiming to reach a building, or even a city, but the person of God himself, to be with him for all eternity. That’s a prize worth every drop of anguish along the way.

And thirdly, our prayers are important and effective, and should include prayers for those in authority, for God ‘looks with favour on His anointed one’. We have an amazing God whom we should never underestimate. The words in v11 gain new meaning in the light of the coming of Christ:

For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
    the Lord bestows favour and honour;
no good thing does he withhold
    from those whose walk is blameless.

No wonder that the conclusion is

‘O Lord Almighty, blessed in the one who trusts in you.’

Pray.