

Psalm 84

Date: 16 April 2023

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 84. John 2:18-22, Ephesians 2:4-7

One of my favourite places to spend my time is visiting fine art galleries. I don't do it often, but I can get lost for hours looking at paintings and sculptures, trying to wrap my head around the artist's intentions, their techniques and their skills, the colours and textures and the emotion and tension all caught in a point in time. As I get absorbed in a piece, and as my creative interpretation collides with their creative expression, it's like I am for a moment entering the mind of the artist, and we meet ever so briefly.

As a Uni student, I studied classical music composition. One winter some friends and I went to Sydney, and we spent an afternoon wandering through the botanical gardens and the national art gallery. In that art gallery was a painting, a 19th century romantic piece by Eugene von Guerard, called Milford Sound, inspired by a beautiful location on the South Island of New Zealand. I saw this painting and I just couldn't take my eyes away from it. It was brooding and dramatic, yet so calm and serene, so cold and icy, yet so warm with rich browns and greens. Just like we experience in Tasmania, the weather at Milford Sound can change so quickly, and a calm bay suddenly becomes a choppy and angry, destructive force. Well, I took that painting with me, not literally of course, but it was so branded on my mind, I couldn't stop thinking about it. In my final year, in my final semester, I wrote an orchestral piece which tried to dialogue with this painting, with serenity and drama, vastness and intimacy.

I longed to visit Milford Sound for myself, to see what Eugene had seen, to feel what Eugene had felt. There was an affinity I had with the place that was more than just enthusiasm, there was something in my soul that connected with this place, even though I had never been there.

It's this feeling that the psalmist is recalling in Psalm 84, with remarkably emotive language. I'm not an overly flowery person these days, but I'll do my best to take us on a journey with the psalmist, to see what he has seen, to feel what he has felt, and reflect for ourselves whether there's something in our souls that connects.

1. A godly longing

"How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord almighty"

For the psalmist, the place that is firmly in his heart is the Lord's house. He speaks of the loveliness of the Lord's dwelling place, not just a loveliness of "aww isn't that lovely" but a sincere expression of beauty. The temple is a

beloved place for the psalmist, just like the NSW art gallery is for me. He dreams about being there, about walking its perimeter, entering its gate, seeing the wonderful craftsmanship reflecting the marvellous glory and power of the Lord Almighty, the Lord of hosts.

But this isn't just a matter of the aesthetics, the psalmist has **in his being** a longing to be in the temple courts, to rest inside its walls. "My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord" This yearning is so intense, to be in God's place, it's as if his soul loses consciousness. Seeking its end, fading away in the perfect completion of being in the Lord's house.

This over-the-top language is the kind of thing you might say when you've experienced the pinnacle of the human senses - reaching a mountain peak, or eating the most delicious chocolate you've ever encountered, you might say "This is it, I could die happy now". Overwhelming all the senses at once.

So often in the psalms you'll get one idea, and it's taken to an altogether higher extreme to help us lean in and connect with the feelings the psalmist is sharing with their hearers. And the psalmist says that the temple of the Lord is just this sensory pinnacle. Not only their soul, but he says "My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God" - this is it, it's for this reason that they live and breathe. Not to be in the temple for the temple's sake, but to be in the presence of the Lord. The language is like that of a lover, his desire and affection for God - and to be in his presence - is so intense that it overwhelms his whole being.

Do you know what it feels like, to have the intense desire this psalm's author does? What a wonderful example, if only we would live out our faith like this psalmist. Seeking the Lord not only in a momentary thought or a Sunday service, but that delighting in God and seeking his face is our creaturely pursuit. We have been made for this, created in God's image, to be in relationship with him, to glorify him, to worship him. It's the image we see of the Christian life in 1 Thessalonians 5: "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." The Christian who lives this way knows the blessing that the Psalmist recalls in verse 4: "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you."

2. A broken reality

And yet... This isn't the reality for the psalmist. He is not there in God's place. He cannot be there. For whatever reason, and we don't know who wrote this psalm, but despite their longing and desire they are kept from the Lord's presence in the temple. Maybe it's sickness, or maybe it's duty, or... Maybe verse 10 provides a hint of their circumstance: "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked"

Is it that the psalmist lives amongst a flourishing but rebellious people who have forgotten what it is to love and serve the Lord? Maybe the psalmist is in exile - residing amongst a foreign people who don't know and love God in the same way they do. It's very fitting this would be an exile Psalm, as it comes in book 3 of Psalms, which drive at a division between God's people and God's blessing.

There's a bittersweetness to this poem, as the psalmist considers their situation in verse 3: "Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young - a place near your altar" He acknowledges that God is not only praiseworthy for his presence, but also his provision and protection. There's a sense of safety in the presence of the Lord that can't be found anywhere else, one that the psalmist longs for but cannot have. Give me one day Lord, he cries in verse 10. "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.". One day, even as a doorkeeper, Lord. And yet, as he waits, he will trust in God.

The richness in the names of God written in this psalm are wonderful, and they're worthy of meditation on their own.

- Lord Almighty which we hear in verses 1 and 3, 8 and 12 is the same as the older translation "Lord of hosts", quite literally Yahweh of armies. Yahweh is a God of power and strength, of whom the whole of the heavenly assembly and the earth is at his command.
- And Yahweh has shown his might and power as he brought his people out of Egypt, as he defeated the foreign nations, as he established a people for himself in the promised land. And so he is also King.
- In verse 11 Yahweh is a sun and shield. As the sun he is provider, giver of life, and as shield he is protector - this language of shield is often used to describe Israel's king. Here, as sun and shield God himself is the kingly provider, the one in whom ultimate protection and care is found, and the one to whom loyalty is owed.
- It is this king who is able to bestow favour and honour, it is this king who provides all the good his subjects need. He doesn't withhold from those who follow his decrees. And so, this powerful God, who rules his kingdom with benevolence, he is the God who is worthy to be praised and worshipped.

So there is so much richness bound up in verse 3 as he recounts to whom he is speaking "O Lord Almighty, my King and my God." Even as the psalmist possibly finds themselves in a context where the Lord is not worshipped, where he is not relied upon for provision and protection, where their faith and praise is directed elsewhere: here he affirms his trust in God.

And this is a challenge for us too, to draw on the riches of scripture, to know God's strength, goodness, trustworthiness and worthiness. David writes in Psalm 34 "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes

refuge in him". Do we fill our heart and our mind with truth about God that we might taste and see his goodness? Then as things get tough, and as we ourselves feel far from God, do we draw on what we know to be true and praise him anyway? Do we allow the Spirit to impress on our hearts the truth of the gospel, God's infinite love toward us, and so despite our worries and fears do we call out to God in prayer?

I know it can be hard, I find it hard, especially as someone inclined to mental illness, so often my impulse is to give in to my struggles and to neglect to praise God, neglect to call upon him in my dependence, forget that just one moment spent in his presence is of far greater comfort and worth than a chocolate bar and giving myself over to a hobby or TV as a distraction. But God is unchanging. Even as I fail, he does not fail. Even as I struggle, he is still the trustworthy provider and protector. And as the Spirit calls me back to him, I know I can depend upon him. To draw my strength from him.

3. A pilgrimage of the blessed

In October of 2014, Angie and I got married. There was quite the drama as we prepared for our wedding and for our honeymoon. Of course, in the current climate, holidaying internationally is still essentially unthinkable, but oh 2014... it was a different time back then in the old days... I was determined to make our honeymoon my first ever trip overseas. But there was a problem. I didn't have a passport, and being born in 1988, I fell foul of a strange law that required me to have either Australian parents when I was born, or to prove that I had lived in Australia for the first 10 years of my life.

Well neither of my parents were born here. My Mum is from Bristol, and my Dad was born in Hong Kong. We also couldn't prove we hadn't left the country, my Mum had travelled on my Dad's British passport, so had no records of her own, and that passport had actually been destroyed in a car fire. I was left scrambling trying to find any sort of record to prove I had lived here my whole life, while we also set about trying to prove that my Dad was in fact a real person! In this whole process we discovered he essentially classified as stateless. My immunisation records were nowhere to be found either, so the fate of my honeymoon rested upon multiple statutory declarations, my Dad being recognised as a permanent resident, me being formally recognised as an Australian citizen, then applying for a passport, and hoping against hope it would all come together in time to apply for a visa.

Angie floated the idea of travelling to North Queensland, but I was determined. I had my heart set on making the trip across the ditch to New Zealand. In God's kindness all fell into place and we were able to make a pilgrimage of sorts to see, finally, the place I had dreamed of so many times. And it was breath-taking. The air, the clear sky and the glaciers in the distance, the perfectly calm water reflecting every mountain peak. It was better than I could

have imagined. So much pain and frustration and stress finally giving way to the most remarkable reward.

Well clinging on to his hope of intimately knowing God's presence, the psalmist sings in verse 5 of the ones who would be able to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to Zion to meet with the Lord there. "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage". Whether the people he has in mind are those making an annual pilgrimage, or maybe those returning from exile, the journey is not easy.

There's some beautiful word play in verse 6 in the Hebrew that bears this out, but simply isn't visible in an English translation, so I'll describe to you.

The Valley of Baca is very likely a reference to a place, but baca is also a word for weeping, crying bitterly. As they travel to Jerusalem, in their resolve these pilgrims pass through their grief, and the wells of tears they cry become springs. Springs carries with it all the hopeful connotations of new life, a source of growth and renewal. As the autumn rains fall, this valley is covered in pools, and here we have another word play, as pools and blessing have the same word-origin or root. This language is just as the return from exile is promised in Ezekiel 34: "I will make them and the places surrounding my hill a blessing. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing."

And so it is, as their tears give way to new life and the Lord rains down blessing, "They go strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion". The Psalmist reflects, how blessed are those that are able to make the journey, who's strength is drawn from God.

4. A prayer of the faithful

Every psalm has a structure, and very often that structure wants to draw us in from the extremes of the outer verses into the centre where the focal point is found. And as we've journeyed inward together through the longing, the reality of separation, the character of God and the blessing for those who journey in his strength to be in his presence, we're left wondering - what is the fate of the author? What blessing is there for him? At the very core of the psalm is a prayer that God might bring fortune and blessing not only to those who are able to journey, but to all of His people.

Even as he finds himself estranged from God's temple and God's presence, and even as it seems he's unable to make the journey to Zion - maybe due to old age, or illness or responsibility, we'll never know, he still cries out to the Lord, praying for God's blessing. He knows to whom he is praying: this is the Lord God almighty, the God of Jacob, from whom all the tribes of Israel came, and to whom God said "I will be their God". He knows that Jacob wrestled with

God and would not let go until he was blessed. With boldness the author says: Hear my prayer, listen to me, he knows his prayer does not fall on deaf ears.

And what is his prayer? "Look upon our shield, O God; look with favour on your anointed one."

Where in verse 11 it's God who is the shield, the ultimate ruler of his people, the prayer here is for God to raise up His earthly King, to look upon the anointed ruler of God's people with favour, and by extension to bring his blessing to the whole kingdom. The psalmist prays that God will re-establish a king and a kingdom, to restore the fortunes of all God's people, that God's Temple might be a resting place for all, not just the pilgrims and the birds, and those who work there.

What the psalmist so longed for in this prayer was good and right, but it was also just a shadow. He didn't know the full extent of what he was praying for. His prayer is just a precursor to God's ultimate plan enabling all people to meet with him. To know the intimate love and provision of God, to be in his presence. As the psalmist prays for the anointed one, as he prays for the shield, the king of God's people, he prays for one who will sit on God's throne forever, and the one who is in himself the true meeting place between God and men - Jesus Christ. God answers the psalmist's prayer in the most remarkable way through Jesus.

Ephesians 2:4-7 describes it so wonderfully:

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

No longer do we pilgrimage to the temple, no longer do we meet with God in a temple built by human hands, rather now the Kingdom of heaven has been established and we have been raised up with Christ to have communion with God in the heavenly realms, and by a new temple - again Ephesians 2:19-22:

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Even as we, like the psalmist, experience loss and fear, or like the pilgrim's grief and struggle, we can know intimately, and surely, the presence of the Lord in Jesus. The wonderful truth of the gospel is that God has stopped at nothing to ensure our access to him, to know his love and presence by the Holy Spirit, and to assure us that one day we will be blessed as we meet with him unveiled, seeing him face to face.

As Romans 8 says: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

And again: "Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Even as we seek God's presence now in the present age, as we pray for God to make himself known to us, to establish our steps, to bring blessing and favour into our lives as we seek to live blamelessly before him, we can know that God has already established us on a firm foundation that is his Son and we are already united to him forever, receiving the fulfilment of Psalm 84.

So as he prays, the psalmist trusts. By faith, he puts his trust in the Lord that he will do this. He will not see it in his lifetime, but God is a trustworthy God. And it is here that the psalmist receives his blessing. Verse 12 "O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you."

So, St George's - trust in the Lord, call upon him in prayer, and you will be blessed.