

The Church exists to provide hope, peace and comfort

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Pentecost + 14 – 1 Kings 8 22-30, 8 41-43, Ps 84, Jn 6 56-69

Today is the Sunday when the General Synod calls us to a day of prayer for refugees. So it's particularly appropriate that our first reading is the part of Solomon's prayer dedicating the new Temple where he prays that God will hear and answer the prayers of foreign visitors just like God hears the prayers of Israelites. *When a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you.* It was always a part of the Hebrew Law that the sojourner in the land should enjoy the same freedoms and privileges as citizens. And this spills over in surprising and delightful ways in scripture; as we've seen in Solomon's prayer. Your journey of faith – your pilgrimage of hope – deserves to be honoured, whoever you are.

Today's Psalm (Ps 84) is one we call a Psalm of pilgrimage. The pilgrim Psalms are intensely emotional songs which tell us how the journey to the Temple of Jerusalem could lift people's spirits from the deepest gloom to glorious heights of joy and hope. I wonder if that's something any of us has experienced – if this Psalm resonates with our culture – if any destinations have ever had that effect on us. Can you think of any? I have a friend who used to experience this on an annual hike in the Australian high country. We don't have much of a tradition of pilgrimage in Australia, though it's growing now (eg, Portland Vic – Penola SA; Subiaco – New Norcia WA). We've gone to Spain to walk the *Camino*, or to the Holy Land, or to sites of terrible battles.

But we've journeyed here to St John's this morning. So maybe

our pilgrimages are of a different scale. We come here to experience God's beauty, peace and care in the family liturgy; to revive in the ambience of the hundred and eighty-five years of prayers offered here – prayers infused into the fabric of this building. I'm glad to say that visitors often comment on the peace they experience here.

So today's Psalm is a pilgrim song; a song people would sing as they went up to the Temple of Jerusalem – the first Temple. We just heard Solomon dedicate the Temple with a prayer focussing on God's hospitality. The Psalm takes it to another level – including sparrows and swallows – most appropriate as we prepare to enter the worldwide Church's *Season of Creation*.

I'm struck by the Psalm's opening words; ¹***How lovely is your dwelling-place: O Lord God of hosts!*** And I'm struck that what draws pilgrims towards the house of God's presence is *desire; longing; rejoicing*. It's a safe place; even birds are safe to nest there in its inmost sanctuary.

People had a sense of God as an honoured guest with them in their own homes and villages. They responded to God who reached out to them; they came to God's house to offer thanks; to experience the hospitality of God who dwells with us; to sense God's strength sustaining us on our life's journey, through good times and bad. ⁵*Blessed are those whose strength is in you: in whose hearts are the highways to Zion; ⁶Who, going through the valley of dryness, find there a spring from which to drink: till the autumn rain shall clothe it with blessings. ... (The soft green fuzz carpeting the Judean wilderness straight after the first autumn rains).*

Psalm 84's pilgrimage is about a deep and abiding experience of God's loving care all along our life's journey. And as people have been singing this Psalm for 3,000 years, it's been fairly infused into us.

When you think of Solomon's dedication prayer for this new

Temple he'd had constructed – the way it's to be open to foreigners and sojourners, it's clear that its doorkeepers were meant to be welcomers; not bouncers. That's a call we have inherited. Because Solomon knew what God is like, even we foreigners are welcome! As doorkeepers and custodians here, we are called to prepare this place for others. And when we see ourselves as greeters and welcomers, we prepare ourselves to share the excitement of what is here for the pilgrims who are coming.

The Church exists to provide hope for those who need hope, to provide peace in the midst of chaos, and comfort in the midst of distress. We are here to participate in the costly hospitality God offers to everyone, to renew and strengthen them. And by being that beacon of hope, peace and comfort – of Godly hospitality – we are meant to be salt and light to transform the wider community of Australia and beyond.

That's the discovery we heard Peter make today when Jesus challenged the twelve with the difficulty of the pilgrimage they would have to walk, and that now we must walk. After seeing so many others desert him, Jesus asked the twelve – *Do you also wish to go away?* The answer was immediate – *Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.* And look at what they did with that belief! They worked to make the Church a welcoming community who have opened our doors to the whole world.

What can we do to open our doors wider? Let's begin by praying as General Synod asks; praying for refugees. Inside the back cover of our service booklet. Amen