

Thought for the Week 19th July 2020

Psalm 122

¹ I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'

² Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem.

³ Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.

⁴ That is where the tribes go up - the tribes of the LORD - to praise the name of the LORD according to the statute given to Israel.

⁵ There stand the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May those who love you be secure.

⁷ May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.'

⁸ For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, 'Peace be within you.'

⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity.

When they said, "Let's go to the house of GOD," my heart leaped for joy - that's how Eugene Peterson puts the first verse of Psalm 122 in "The Message" version of the Bible and I think he captures the essence of the psalmist very well.

So, what makes your heart leap for joy? What really excites you? It could be NEW THINGS - those new clothes you can't wait to wear now that you've been able to go shopping again and you might just have a special occasion on which to wear them. Or what about that smell of the inside of a new car? There's nothing quite like it. Or what about the safe arrival of a new baby that you're looking forward to holding?

Or maybe LOVE excites you. No matter how long ago it was, don't you remember how your heart leapt for joy when you fell in love with someone and they reciprocated the feeling?

Or it could be WINNING something. There is a thrill when you win that fills your heart - especially if it wasn't expected.

Maybe you can think of other things that give you joy, but would you agree with the psalmist that the possibility of going to join with other Christians in the worship of God thrills your heart and gets you excited? I hope so - especially since we haven't been able to do exactly that since the middle of March - but perhaps, like me, you have to confess that's not always been the case!

I'm sure you know the well-worn story of the mother who shouted through the door of the bedroom, "John, you have to get up right now, it's almost time to go to church." Pulling the duvet over his head, John replied, "but I don't want to go." The mother persisted, "But you have to go to church!" The son again responded, "I don't want to go to church mom!" The mother said..., "You need to get up." The son said, "Why?" The mother said, "I'll give you three good reasons..... No 1 - you're always glad you've gone once you get there; No 2 - you

always enjoy the music at church and today will be no exception; and No 3 - you're the minister and the people need you....."

So why was David, who wrote Psalm 122, filled with joy when someone said to him, "let's go to the house of the Lord?" It was because David had a real heart for God and a longing to offer worship to him. When David became king of Israel one of the first things he did was to capture the strategically important city of Jerusalem and set up his headquarters there. (1 Chronicles 11). Then he brought the Ark of the Covenant out of storage up to Jerusalem where it was placed in the Tabernacle (the portable tent where it had previously been sited since the days of Moses.) The old pagan worship of the Jebusites in the city was now replaced with a new centre for worship of the one true God. This may even have been the inspiration for Psalm 122. David was excited by the fact that they had a new place to which they could go to worship God and perhaps that is why Jerusalem is mentioned so many times in the psalm - verse 2 might suggest David's joy at what the Lord had done for his people so that they can now stand in safety inside the compact fortified city and worship.

Our God is a god of new things. Like all our fellow human beings we were once sin-stained, rebellious creatures who had turned our back on God. But in his love and mercy, through what Christ has done for us taking our sin upon himself on the cross, God has made us new. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:17:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new is has come!

Should that not make our hearts leap for joy, and like David of old make us want to join with other believers in praising God that we are made new? And shouldn't God's love for us in Christ give us the same heart-warming feeling we have when we know that someone loves us? And just like the thrill of an unexpected win, we surely must be filled with joy when we realise that we in no way deserve the salvation we have received in Christ.

Even before the present crisis hit us, we found ourselves living in a time of change. With busy schedules filled with activities demanding our time and the ever-expanding array of social media, it seems that many feel that church has become irrelevant and insignificant. The comment is often heard, "I can be just as good a Christian without the church." John Stott in his book "The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor," refers to an unchurched Christian as a grotesque anomaly. He goes on to say, "The New Testament knows nothing of such a person for the church lies at the very centre of the eternal purpose of God." Why church? To answer that question, we need to have an understanding of what the church is, how Christ sees the church, Christ's expectation for the church as community, and the benefits of being actively involved in the local church.

Let's go back to the psalm and those who sung it on their way to Jerusalem. They had made a common decision to go to the house of the Lord and now they were there and looked around them in excited wonder. What a privilege they had to carry all their sins and griefs to the place of sacrifice and know the peace of sins forgiven. Their whole lives had found meaning and purpose as they joined in the festal processions and followed the priests and Levites and shouted and danced before the Lord on their way up to the altar of sacrifice.

Here's what G.A.F. Knight in his Daily Study Bible commentary on the Psalms says. "The ritual of the Temple worship does not apply to us in the church today. Yet what it does reveal to us is that our faith must not be just a 'spiritual thing.' Our human minds need some form of physical movement, action, music, poetry in order to clothe the 'spiritual' approach to God that we hope to make."

Yes, we can worship God at any time and in any place - he is not confined to a building in Jerusalem or anywhere else on earth, but if we don't meet with others we will be missing out on something vital. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says this in 10:25:

Some people have got out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord's coming is getting closer.

OK, so absence from coming together has been forced upon us, but perhaps "absence has made the heart grow fonder" as the old proverb puts it and when we do get back to worshipping together again it will be with an renewed sense of the importance and benefit of being together for worship. It is our intention, subject to a continued relaxation of the lockdown restrictions, that we will have services of worship in both our church buildings from the beginning of September. In this we are following the advice and guidelines issued by the Presbytery, as adequate preparations will have to be made. For the present, and even after we return to our buildings, services will continue to be available online.

Hopefully soon we will all be saying with the psalmist, "When they said, "Let's go to the house of GOD," my heart leaped for joy.

I finish today with this anonymous little piece called,

"This Is My Church."

It is composed of people just like me.

It will be friendly if I am friendly.

It will do a great work if I work.

It will make generous gifts to many causes if I am generous.

It will bring others into its fellowship if I bring them.

Its seats will be filled if I fill them.

It will be a church of loyalty and love, of faith and service.

If I, who make it what it is, am filled with these,

Therefore, with God's help, I dedicate myself to the task of being

All these things I want my Church to be.