

How I want to be there!

Psalm 84

August 23, 2015

How I love your Temple, Lord Almighty!

How I want to be there!

I long to be in the Lord's Temple.

With my whole being I sing for joy to the living God.

You only know it if you know it -- that passion, that longing, that joy. I can't persuade you to have it. No one else can give it to you. You can't even manufacture it yourself. It has to come, of itself, from within you -- this feeling, this passion, this desire.

How I want to be there!

It is born out of your own personal experience, your own personal taste, of the presence of the living God.

The poet knew it. He (or she) was filled with a consuming desire to be there, to be in the Lord's Temple. The Temple built by Solomon for the worship of the Lord stood in Jerusalem and the poet almost certainly lived far from that city, perhaps in a distant corner of Israel or even in a foreign land. It would only be on special occasions, once or twice or three or four times a year that he (or she) would make the pilgrimage, make the journey of several days or more to Jerusalem to offer worship at the Lord's Temple. So being there was precious, because it was rare, but that alone cannot explain the poet's passion.

Why make the trip? Why such intense longing? It's not because God lives only there, not because God is contained in the Temple and you must go there to find him. Solomon made that clear when he dedicated the Temple in the first place with this prayer:

Can you, O God, really live on earth? Not even all of heaven is large enough to hold you, so how can this Temple that I have built be large enough?

No, the motivation is not to find God, but to be found by God, to put ourselves in a holy place where we are paying attention, where we are consciously opening our whole selves -- spirit and mind and body -- to the word and touch and presence of God. The Temple is holy -- set apart -- not because God makes it so, but because we make it so, because it is there that we set ourselves apart to be with God and God alone.

And so the poet is eager to make that pilgrimage, along with all the others that do the same, eager to taste again the joy of being in that holy place. It is a happy journey, but daunting and difficult, too. Before reaching Jerusalem, pilgrims must traverse the dry valley of Baca, a place both actual and metaphorical, a barren place where bodies are consumed with thirst and spirits are consumed with tears, because "Baca" means "weeping."

But God blesses ... along the way! God is not there only at the end of the journey, but along the way, too, providing refreshing rains for parched bodies and comfort and strength for sagging spirits. As the pilgrims move closer and closer to Jerusalem, "they grow stronger as they go." The pilgrimage itself is joy, because of the ever-growing anticipation of reaching the goal, but also because God is there, in the journey.

The anticipation is keen, the way itself is renewing, but nothing can match the satisfaction, the ecstasy, of standing there at last, literally standing there before the Temple gates.

One day spent in your Temple is better than a thousand anywhere else!

How I want to be there!

How I want to be there ... To stand again in the doorway at the entrance to the sanctuary, to see the gleaming organ pipes and the glassed portrait of the young Jesus, the curving pews and the plain, but compelling cross, not for the wood or glass or metal themselves, or the beauty of the shapes into which they have been fashioned, but for the stories and the people and the experiences, the experiences beyond telling, that are indelibly attached to them.

How I want to be here! Because here things are clearer. For whatever reason -- because I am more attentive or because I am less distracted or because I see and hear things here I rarely see and hear anywhere else -- here things are clearer. I know what matters and what doesn't matter.

How I want to be here! Because I am transformed here. Pride is utterly deflated. Any pretensions to greatness seem completely ridiculous here. And sins are utterly forgiven. Not excused, but forgiven! I know that I am because I am loved.

How I want to be here! Not because it feels like home, but because it doesn't. I am drawn here by the strangeness and the wonder, by all that I don't understand but that leaves me in awe. I come here to be challenged, to be made uncomfortable, and to be changed. I want to be where I feel like an outsider or an impostor, and yet, somehow, belong.

I want to be here! To be surrounded by the comforting presence of friends, and yet understanding that they -- you -- are something more than friends. You are saints! We are saints! Not by our own virtue, but by God's call. We are all and each called here along the way of our individual journeys to reflect and enact God's love ... together.

I want to be here! Because here, not always, but because here, often enough, when I freely offer my body and my mind and my heart to God, God finds me. And to sense the presence of God -- surrounding me, overwhelming me, embracing me -- that is pure joy!

How I want to be there! You only know it if you know it -- that passion, that longing, that joy. Do you know it?