

BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

Mind, Emotions, Will

We live between the dreaming and the coming true. We are pilgrims on the journey of faith. We know that sometimes that journey can be easy and we find it easy to know God's presence and follow him, but we also know the journey of faith can be hard, challenging and sometimes heart breaking and tragic. We know that we need help on our journey.

In the Psalms of Ascent, we get some help, help from others on the journey who have gone before us. Psalm 120 reminds us and encourages us that we have to continually say yes to God – we need to keep choosing the way of love in a world that pulls us in other directions. It reminds us to continually let go of those things that easily entangle us and to trust the one who is our catcher.

Psalm 121 invites us and encourages us, as we were so helpfully reminded last week, to look to God for our help and protection, to trust ourselves to the one who is always watching, who never sleeps and who protects us from evil. It reminds us that on this journey of faith there is nothing that can separate us from God's magnificent love – nothing, absolutely nothing!

Psalm 122 is a Psalm that invites us to remember God, who he is and what he has done. It is a Psalm that invites us to worship.

I've always loved to play football. When I was a kid I was always kicking a ball, and I would find very inventive ways to play football if necessary. Me and my brother even used to make my mum's worn out tights into a football so we could play in the downstairs room. We would play tournaments and competitions every spare moment we had. When the weather allowed we would play in the garden using the shed as a goal. Mum eventually gave up replacing broken windows and simply replaced them with pieces of wood so we couldn't break them anymore.

As I grew older I played in teams, because, after all, football is a team game. And as an adult here in Crawley, I would go training each week so that I could play in the team on a Saturday. What I loved most was playing the game – because in the end, that is what it's all about – to play the game. To play the

game with others who loved to play the game, and there was something special about that.

Followers of Christ love to gather with others who follow Christ and worship together. People of faith have always gathered together to worship God. It is one of the marks of those who call themselves Christians and before that, the people of God.

Over the last couple of years, suddenly and unexpectedly, we have found it a challenge to gather to worship God. It may be true that in some ways we had become comfortably numb about gathering to worship. We perhaps had simply got used to it and the ease with which we could make it happen. Suddenly though, we found our church closed – we were not able to gather together and express our worship to God. It was shocking!

Gathering together to worship God is so much part of our identity. But through the wonder of technology, and because of the amazing gifts of a few wonderful people, we found ways to gather for worship. As a community of the people of God we were separated, but, by the wonder of technology, we were able to gather. We made that happen because, for the followers of Christ, gathering together for worship is really important.

Psalms 122 begins with rejoicing:

- 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.

The people rejoice that they are in Jerusalem and can go to the temple, the house of the Lord. Perhaps, out of the last couple of years we have a new sense of these words. Certainly, for me, and I hope for you, there was a sense of rejoicing in our hearts when, having been unable to gather together, we came back into this building and gathered for worship. Perhaps some of you are thinking that we don't need to gather together to be able to worship God – and that worship isn't just what we do when we do gather together. And you would be absolutely right.

We can worship God anywhere, anytime and the truth about worship is it is our whole lives, everything we do is an act of worship. We'll see that later in the Psalm. But there is something special and significant about gathering for

worship. There was for the Israelites, and there is for us. We rejoice as we anticipate coming to worship because of what we are doing.

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 (Psalm 122 v 3-4)

Since the time of King David, Jerusalem, for the Israelites, was the place to worship. Three times a year, the people would make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festivals. By doing that they are remembering who God is, and what he has done. They come to remember they were created by God, rescued by God and that God is the one who provides for them. By being in Jerusalem they were placing themselves again right in the middle of the story of God.

God dwelt in Jerusalem, in the temple – the God who wanted to be with and among his people. Jerusalem was the city of the king – beginning with David. But the earthly king was only a reminder that God was their real king. When they went to Jerusalem they placed themselves again in the story of their King, the one who loved them and came to dwell with them.

Verse three tells us the city was ‘closely compacted together.’ It is a metaphor, reminding the people that in the story of their king, the pieces all fit together well, it is a majestic whole. One translation renders it ‘at unity with itself’ which is a beautiful description of the truth about God.

Friends, when we gather for worship, we place ourselves again in the magnificent story of God. I don’t know about you, but when I look around at the world, I can easily become saddened and disillusioned. Even now there is talk of a new war brewing over Ukraine. We have been hearing so much of the lies and deceit which sadly seem to be at the heart of our democracy at the moment. I just read a book about a Russian who became a spy for Britain and was reminded that spying and distrust and all that goes with it still goes on.

The world is a mess, and we need to place ourselves again and again in the story of God. And as we gather for worship we do this together – all the tribes

go up (v3). Perhaps, today, right now, in these moments, we need to place our story again in God's story.

Friends, the truth about your story, the truth about my story, is that they are held in the truth of God's story.

My name is Ian and I'm the minister of CBC. I haven't always been the minister and I won't one day be the minister and how I came to be the minister is the story of my life. But it's not the whole story. My name is Ian and I was a PE teacher. How I became a PE teacher and why I'm no longer a PE teacher, is the story of my life. But it's not the whole story. My name is Ian and I was the son of a vicar. Why I was the son of a vicar and why I am no longer is the story of my life. But it's not the whole story. My name is Ian and I am a follower of Christ, saved by grace and that is the far bigger and far better story. And only God knows the whole story.

In worship, together, we choose to live in the whole story of God. Verse 4 tells us it is a command to worship but we don't worship because we have to, we worship because we want to. Worship invades our mind, our emotions and our will. We might not always understand life or the things of God. We might not always feel like we want to come to worship, but we choose to worship the God who loves us because he loves us because he loves us. We choose, however we feel, whatever struggles we have, to place our story in his story – we choose to worship. As we worship, mind, emotions, will, we do so in relationship with the God who loves us, always.

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 (Psalm 122 v 5-9)

Jerusalem, the city of the king, is where justice is found. For the pilgrims, the people of Israel, it was the place where disputes could be settled. In the bigger story of God, it tells of the God of justice who will one day bring justice

for all. In worship we remember this God and look forward to the time when his justice reigns.

To pray for the peace of Jerusalem is to ask that Jerusalem is calm and undisturbed by social conflict within and the threat of enemies outside. But it is more than that. The word pray here means to ask. It was not a word used in formal liturgy, but a word used in the everyday – to ask for directions, to ask for a second helping. It is, then, what we do between the times when we gather together in worship. Jerusalem is the symbol for the peace and security of the king and his kingdom. As the people sought peace for Jerusalem, they sought peace in the kingdom.

Perhaps another way of saying that is to say this: It is to place their story in the bigger story of God's great love. And perhaps another way of saying that is to say that to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is to place our story in the Shalom of God.

Shalom is everything God is and everything God gives to us – his magnificent story of love. When we gather to worship, we remind ourselves that we are held in the Shalom of God. We remind ourselves that when we leave our gathered worship, we then go to live in the Shalom of God.

When Jesus approached Jerusalem on his way to the cross, he wept over the city because the people of the city did not want to see what brought them true peace – Shalom (Luke 19 v 41-44). Jesus would show them by going to the cross. He would show that by his death and resurrection, peace is found in the bigger and better story of God.

Friends, true peace in all its fulness, is found in the story of God. Perhaps, as we worship we are reminded of the choice we have to dwell in God's story of Shalom. I'm wondering if God now, looks at us as Jesus looked at Jerusalem and I'm wondering what he sees?

I'm wondering if God might say something like this, as we gather together, today, to worship.

I'm so pleased that you've come to worship today. I know it can be hard and a struggle, I understand life is not always easy and simple. I'm so glad you came. I want to remind you that I hold you in the story of my great love for you. You have no idea how much I love you and how much joy it brings me to see you here today. I long to be with you, to help you, to protect you, to comfort you. I

long for you to live in my Shalom. I want you to know that in all the things that surround you at the moment, I am holding you. I want you to know that as you cling to me I will not let you go. I want you now to be reminded of all these things. And I want you to know that when you leave this place of worship, I will go with you, before you and behind you, to your right and to your left, above you and below you. I will be in you and around you for you live in my story. There will be no place I am not and everywhere you go, you will go in my presence. And when you ask, I will give you my peace, my Shalom.

Amen.

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