

# Homily for People and Parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables: Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2024, Pentecost 14

Readings: 1Kings 8:1,6,10-11

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

I wonder if you ever have ‘SBS moments?’ What I mean is, when you’re saying something familiar, but as you are speaking there are subtitles running through your head! For instance, when I read through the opening verses of Psalm 84, I sometimes have a series of sub-titles: *‘How beautiful is your dwelling place: O Lord God of hosts!’* I read, while in my head I think, ‘What do these words mean?’ In the vastness of the known universe, where do I think God’s dwelling place is?’

The Psalm continues, *‘My soul has a desire and longing to enter the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God’*, and the subtitle in my head scrolls, ‘Where are these courts of the Lord?’ Later the Psalmist affirms that, *‘One day in your courts is better than a thousand: I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the ungodly.’* And again, in my head, I’m asking, ‘Where, and what, is this ‘house of God’ that the Psalmist refers to?’

We have a good sense that in the ancient world there was a belief that the dwelling place of God, or gods, was up in the sky, on the other side of the clouds. So, mountains that stretched up into the clouds were thought to be places of encounter with God. If you like, ‘thin places!’ For the ancient Greeks Zeus, the father of the god’s, lived on Mount Olympus with a court that echoed or mirrored the royal courts of human civilizations! In the Old Testament Moses went up Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments, while the prophet Elijah went up Mount Horeb and received guidance from God. Any number of times Jesus also went up a mountain to pray, and on one of those occasions his disciples saw his face shine like the sun, and his clothes become dazzling white.

Even in our time, despite daily images of planet earth from the international space station, from the Hubble telescope, and from satellites exploring our solar system, we still use the language of God being somehow ‘up there’!

As human societies became increasingly settled and structured there was clearly a need for sacred spaces to be created within them. Temples in which people could have an encounter with God and return to their everyday lives without having to a faraway place, up a mountain. The Temple in Jerusalem was clearly such a place for it had courts in which people could gather and burn offerings, an inner place with an altar and burning incense, and within that a space called the Holy of Holies. This space could only be entered once a year by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is the holiest day of

the Jewish year. The Holiest of Holies is said to have housed the original Ten Commandments in a container called the Ark of the Covenant.

Throughout Christian history we find a longing to build sacred spaces in which people can have an encounter with God. A book called 'The Digital Cathedral', by Lutheran writer Keith Anderson, talks about this. In researching the book, the author visited cathedrals in many parts of the world, observed their engagement with the community around them, and learnt about their history. He comments that historically a Cathedral was not only a place of worship enhanced by glorious architecture and music, but also a community in which people found employment, education, and support. A place of meeting for those who knew Christian faith, for those who were on the edge of faith, and for those with no faith at all.

In the midst of Metropolitan Brisbane, our St John's Cathedral offers physical spaces in which people can encounter God through worship, and community spaces in which people can encounter God through relationship. If you have not been – I encourage you to go and visit and pray there... and have a yarn with the people who call that sacred space home.

But, there is a danger for us if we think that God is only found in sacred buildings: whether grand Cathedrals, or small timber churches. We can certainly encounter God in these consecrated places through Word and Sacrament, prayer and song... but, surely God is present everywhere? When this is acknowledged then there is the potential for all of life to hold the possibility of encounter with God. The holy ground of a shared meal, or a cup of tea. The holy ground of human friendship, and intimacy. The holy ground of prayer, and Bible reading... no matter where we are. The holy ground of reconciled relationships; the holy ground of new birth; and the holy ground of grief...

The prophet Isaiah looked forward to a Messiah who would be called 'Immanuel' – meaning 'God with us.' We hear these words each year at Christmas as we celebrate the Incarnation, *'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel...'* (Isaiah 7:14). Immanuel does not mean – God on a mountain, or God in a building – it means 'God with us.' And, the Jesus we believe to be that Messiah, did not say the Kingdom of God is up in the sky beyond our reach; or way off in the future beyond our time. Instead, he is remembered saying, 'The Kingdom of God is within you...' (Luke 17:21).

Similarly, the Apostle Paul challenged the Christian community in Corinth to think of their bodies as being temples of God's Spirit (1Cor. 6:19). God's Spirit not limited to places carefully crafted from stone and wood, but also present in the bone and sinew; breath and heartbeat; thought and action... of our bodies.

So, how might we helpfully reframe the first verse of this morning's Psalm, *'How beautiful is your dwelling place: O Lord God of hosts!'* Beyond mountain and distant stars, yet within church and Cathedral, home and heart. God's dwelling place within relationship, and intellect; within prayer, and beyond prayer. God's dwelling place within and beyond love...

I wonder where and how you and I will be conscious of meeting with God this week? And, I wonder, in the grace of this encounter, if there will be nurture or inspiration, comfort or challenge, joy or peace? One thing we can be sure of is that it will be good!

Would you please join me now as I close in prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift and beauty of your love. Help us to recognise you with us in our living each day and empower us with your Spirit to be a blessing in the lives of those we share life with. We pray in the name of the one called 'Emmanuel', Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.