

Wednesday

Even the sparrow has found a home, Psalm 84:1-4 - Stephan de Beer

The background to Psalm 84 is the destruction of the city, and the hopelessness of God's people. In the midst of their hopelessness they longed for God, for shelter, for refuge.

It is an expression of the tired pilgrim, or the homeless wanderer, or the fed-up human being, longing to find rest for her soul, a pillow for her head, safe shelter for her body.

So intense is this longing that it speaks of a soul yearning, even fainting, in its desire to be caught in the arms of God.

Psalm 84:1-2

How lovely is your dwelling place,

LORD Almighty!

² My soul yearns, even faints,

for the courts of the LORD;

my heart and my flesh cry out

for the living God.

The word translated with dwelling place, is actually the word used for 'sanctuary'. A sanctuary can refer on the one hand to a sacred place, a holy place, a place of proximity to God and spiritual connection. A sanctuary can also refer to a place of refuge, a safe haven, away from war, persecution or homelessness.

It can be understood in a spiritual sense as the dwelling place; in a spatial or physical sense as home; or in a political sense as refuge for the amnesty-seeker or refugee. With our Western-shaped mindsets we read the Bible, and only read it spiritually. In the Old Testament world – and African mindsets – such strict boundaries did not always exist.

The poet longs for the sanctuary of God – for intimacy with God, for a place of rest from the agony of life, for refuge from the city at war with itself.

Maybe in the shelters you oversee at the moment, a similar threefold longing unfolds: a longing to be at peace with God and self; a longing for home; and a longing to be secure from being criminalised, just for being poor; in other words, a longing for the right to be human in the city we are in.

Make space, therefore, in these days, for the deepest yearnings and cries to be hospitality held, in the sanctuary spaces you now create. Allow for people to express the desires of their hearts, which they seldom get a chance to share. In doing so, the presence of the living God might once again disarm you. May you, in coming days, have a renewed sense of the loveliness to dwell with God, in new and unknown spaces.

The poet goes on though, almost expressing a sense of envy.

³ Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
LORD Almighty, my King and my God.

⁴ Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.

The poet is longing for sanctuary. The walls of the city are broken down. There are ruins all around. The temple itself is wrecked. How then is it possible that the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself? These little creatures in God's creation, now having ringside tickets near God's altar; a special place of privilege where they may raise her young, protected and nurtured, in spite of their harsh surroundings.

"How is it possible", might the homeless woman or man ask –when they see the birds of the sky, and the swallows in their nests – "that these ones are held by God, with special care, and yet, we, who are supposed to be the crown of creation, live our lives with indignity, without any form of shelter against life's storms? Since when did God become so unfair?"

Perhaps the spaces you now create are to be seen as sanctuaries, where God longs to dwell with you and your community. Should not we consider our temporary shelters as sanctuaries, in which people can find spiritual, physical and political refuge and care; places in which the living God can meet the yearnings of bruised people? Do those now in these communities not deserve, for a change, a special place of privilege where the deep love of God can surround your places with strong but tender wings?

For the swallow the place near the altar became a safe space where she could raise her young, until they were ready to fly. We hope our shelters could be similar safe spaces, where people will find the courage to embrace life anew, and from where they can be released to fly, only once they are ready.

May you, and those with you, experience the blessing and embrace of God, in the sanctuary God now created for you.

Prayer

My soul longs for you; my heart and flesh cry out to you.

Like the sparrow found a home, and the swallow found a nest,

May we find refuge, for our souls and our bodies.

May your love make us strong, until we can fly again.

Amen