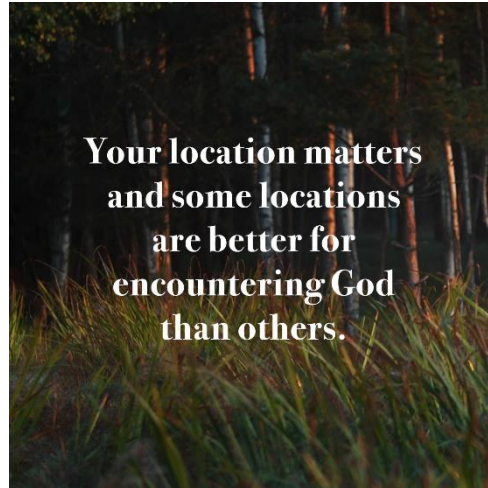


SUNDAY 24th July
2022.

Psalm 122 – A Thin
Place.



One of the matters that saddened me during the COVID lockdowns was the forced isolation. I live alone and there were many days when I did not speak to anyone. Each weekday I would make my trek to the mailboxes in the retirement village where I live and I would hope I could say at least a hello to someone. Most days I did not. For me, there was the regular daily chat with my mother around 11am each day.

Most weeks there were two days when I would speak to someone. There was Tuesdays at 10am, later changed to 9am. During the first COVID lockdown, the church which is my regular church initiated what was, and still is, a ZOOM Intercessory Prayer Program. It is 30 minutes of intercessory prayer under five broad topics – COVID Prayers, Post-COVID Prayers, World Concerns, The Church and Christian issues, Community Issues, and Personal, Family or fellowship issues. This program, called ZIPG, has now been in operation for about two and a half years. There are only two people involved however the prayers are powerful.

The other day when I would speak to other people was on Sundays, also via ZOOM, as our church services used this program, as did our Parish Council meetings. It was communication at a distance but at least we could

see and speak to other people. Zoom is still used within the Parish yet it is sad. There is nothing like actually mingling with other people. This was brought home to me in a very sad way at the funeral of my mother. Many of her friends and relatives could not attend for only ten who loved her could be in attendance and that has caused a ruction in our extended family. There were 134 people at my father's funeral in 2005.

Throughout the COVID lockdowns Psalm 122 kept resonating in my mind. This may seem strange in relation to funerals but, in many ways, we are closest to God when we farewell someone who has died, if that person believed. It is so sad to attend a funeral of someone who does not believe. Where is that person going?

You may not consider it in this fashion but going into the house of the Lord is a pilgrimage. We are all pilgrims in this life, if we have accepted Jesus. There are few actual and formal pilgrimages in Australia however each of us who believes makes one each time we enter a church. A church is not just a building. It is every one of us for we are the body of Christ, we who believe. A church is the physical symbol of God's presence. We are His servants on earth and by our actions and our lives we serve as His servants.

Symbolically each time we enter a church we stand in God's presence. We are standing in Jerusalem. God chose Jerusalem to be where His presence would be known in the ancient world and His presence is still there. However, when Jesus came and the Word of God spread beyond Jerusalem and Palestine, Jerusalem became wherever a church was established.

We are in Jerusalem right now; each of us here in this church. It may not be where Jesus walked 2000 years ago but when we accept Jesus into our hearts He walks with us. He walked with each of us into this church and He will walk with us wherever we walk in our lives. He will walk with us even if there is only one set of footsteps in the sand. Once we have accepted Jesus into our lives, there are two sets of footprints in the sand, side by side.

Yet each of us walks in a thin place. Each of us lives under the threat of temptation, Jesus may have defeated Satan on the Cross however Satan is still fighting a rearguard battle for the hearts and minds of each of us. None of us is fully vaccinated against evil and temptation. Each of us has to fight.

Recently I attended the baptism of a young girl about 14. I was reminded of the words that come after the signing of the cross:

*Live as a disciple of Christ; fight the good fight,
finish the race, keep the faith.*

These are words from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy in chapter 4 verse 7

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

If we can keep these words in our minds, we can avoid breaking through those thin places into Satan's clutches.

How do we achieve this?

We have part of the answer in Psalm 122: 6-9 –

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.

The attainment of peace is the ultimate dream. It is an elusive dream. We only have to watch the news each evening. There is little peace anywhere in the world. There are currently 23 nations in some sort of conflict. There is conflict within the streets, lanes and houses of cities, towns, villages and countrysides of every nation.

There are, it has been claimed, 40 million refugees in the world. They are not at peace. They cannot be at peace until they are in their own homes with their children safe and being safe with a positive future. We wonder if that will ever happen.

How do we obtain peace?

That has been the question from the early days of mankind. We wonder about Adam and Eve. They sinned and were cast out of Eden. They had to bury one of their first children as the other killed him.

Did they ever wonder why?

Did they ever have peace in their own hearts and therefore within themselves?

Did Cain ever think back on what he had done?

Was he capable of forgiving himself?

Did he ever have peace in his heart?

The late Viscount Montgomery of Alamein wrote a book called the History of War. In it he stated that there had been, at the time of his writing, 4,000 recorded wars in the world. As that book was published over 50 years ago, we can add several more.

Is peace possible?

By peace I mean that of God, where there can be healing, forgiveness, reconciliation and the rebuilding of lives and livelihoods. As we view the damage done and being done in the Ukraine, we have to wonder.

Yet, peace can come and it must start with us, with you and me. We need to examine our hearts.

Is there something we are angry about, or someone?

Are we able to forgive?

I have spoken before about how hard it is to forgive. It is a process that may take years, as I learned for myself. Yet forgiveness is at the heart of peace.

To forgive is to reconcile – and that may be about someone who is dead. I have spoken before about people who are still not able to forgive the German people and the Japanese people for what was done in the Second World War, yet most who survived are gone and it is those who were non-combatants who carry hate and contempt in their hearts, and that war has been over for 77 years. There are peoples and families who keep alive a

feud that may have begun generations before. There is no peace in such people.

But lack of peace is not only because of war.

There may be unresolved issues in our lives.

Have we had a dream that did not eventuate?

I have. However, I know that to be bitter about it will take peace away from me. It has in the past and it can raise itself at any time. Whenever we fall into depression, all those unresolved dreams and plans can re-enter our minds and play havoc with our emotions. That can be the end of peace within us until we speak with God again and His peace restores us.

At this point let me quote from Philippians Chapter 4 verses 6 to 8:

⁶Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Everything comes back to Jesus, *the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

(Hebrews 12.2)

And what is faith?

We read in Hebrews 11:1 – *¹Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*

If we truly follow Jesus Christ we have hope for what His coming, His death on the Cross and what His Resurrection means. This is, if we have truly given our hearts and minds to Jesus, we have redemption for we have received God's grace through His Son.

If we have received this grace we should have peace in our hearts and we should be rejoicing when we go to the house of the Lord. We can be with God in our own homes, when we drive our cars, when we walk down the street however when we worship with others, we worship in the fellowship of company.

We read in Matthew 6:6 about prayer when Jesus is speaking during the Sermon on the Mount about praying in your closet away from people and unseen. That was to contrast the Pharisees who liked to pray aloud on street corners to show their apparent piety to others. It was the attitude that I am more holier than you. Yet, to God, these prayers were only so much hot air.

Yet, later in Matthew, in 18: 19 to 20, Jesus says,

...Again, I tell you truly that if two of you on the earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three gather together in My name, there am I with them. ”

This is fellowship in prayer. It is not boasting prayer as with the Pharisee. It is sincere prayer, intercessory prayer. It is fellowship prayer whether in the

house of the Lord, whether in a small group in Bible Study, whether online, or whether in a church service. In all such praying may there be joy.

In one sense the house of the Lord is anywhere that prayer is in sincerity. The house of the Lord is anywhere that Christians gather to worship. A building is the symbolic presence of God in bricks and mortar. It is the people who are the body of Christ. That is, you and me – us.

We are the body of Christ. When we are together in worship the Lord's Spirit is with us.

I will end with a prayer.

*Eternal God,
open our eyes to see your hand at work
in the splendor of creation
and in the beauty of human life.
Help us to cherish the gifts that surround us,
to share our blessings with our sisters and brothers,
and experience the joy of life in your presence;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.*