

PROPER 16

for a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.... Ps.84

To stand up close against a city wall is an interesting experience. Have you done that?

It has been my privilege on more than one occasion now to walk around the circumference of the mediaeval city of Carcassonne. And today in my mind's eye I can see Elsie Stewart walking that path, interested and alert, loving every moment of the experience.

It seems to me that this feeling of being at a city wall evokes some strangely ambivalent feelings – and I admit that these might be quite personal – but they are resonant of earlier times, great wars, battles, sieges. The fortified town in Europe during earlier centuries represented strength, security, stability – they were a delineating force between anarchy, chaos and general evil-living, and the city within where there was peace, unity and integrity.

No surprise then that Martin Luther was to choose as the theme of his greatest hymn – the powerful rallying theme of the reformation – Ein feste burg ist unser Gorr. “A mighty fortress is our God, A strong defence and weapon; He helps us out of all distress, That has us now afflicted. The old evil foe, With power now attacks, Great strength and much guile His dreadful weapons are, On Earth he has no equal.”

So let me try to define in visceral terms what those walls represent in our imagining. To stand up close to them, the city walls of the great mediaeval cities is to feel something of that sense of safety.

The walls of Jerusalem were no different, I suspect, in the intestines of those who made their way there to bring their sacrifice and worship to Yahweh. They reached out from the confusion and uncertainty of their daily living to a strength and certainty which would somehow see them through.

To see the walls of strength, of fortification, of refuge, of coming home – this is the stuff of life. It is what we all long for, what we all hope for.

The Psalmist lives at the heart of these feelings. And so when he brings little birds into the scene – what can we do but pause and consider “What does this mean?”

Talking of the mighty walls of the Jerusalem he says:

Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young Ps 84:3

There is a contrast there that stops you in your tracks; the mighty bastions of stonework, and the small beat of a tiny bird's heart.

The Psalm speaks of travelling to the temple in Jerusalem and of the awesome experience of entering into that holy place. There is nothing that quite compares with the temple as the place God has chosen to be present to us in power and might. This psalm is a Psalm of Ascent. It was obviously spoken and sung by pilgrims who sought God, who desired the presence of the Lord, and who were prepared to make a journey to achieve that.

PROPER 16

The temple was a place to come home to. One travel writer speaking about Jerusalem, says "Everyone comes home to Jerusalem." Even the sparrow builds a nest, finds a home, in the temple. In the temple, verse 3 reminds us, I meet "my King and my God," a double title which refers both to the ultimate power of the universe and the centre of our personal lives.

An experience in the temple could be both overwhelming like the mighty fortress walls, and intensely personal like the sparrows and swallows that flit in and out of the crevices of those same strong walls.

Great strength, and gentle welcome. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord."

After the long journeys – perhaps across half the known world – the pilgrim spying the Temple in the distance must have felt the call of home.

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We all need a home. And the church is about making a home. It is about trying to communicate the message that we are – in a sense – all God's people in exile, and we need a home. We need to create a place to come to. So where is our temple? Where is our home?

Let's get personal. Let us consider that this is – in a very real sense our home. Let's think about what that may mean. Let's especially wonder what it means that this is a potential home for the people around us. Let's dare to do that thing.

Firstly, let this be a home with strong walls. One of life's lessons is that you have to make a home wherever you are. God's people in exile knew that. For example, the synagogue as a place of worship was created in Exile and in Diaspora – as people found it impossible to get to the Temple in Jerusalem. There is no point moving somewhere to live unless you are prepared to make it – for however long may be – your home. Homes have strong walls for a reason. There are times when they are our bulwarks against the countryside around. Just like the European fortified city of Reformation times. Just like the walls of the Temple of Jerusalem.

So when we say that this has to be a home here with strong walls, what do we mean? I think that there are times when the countryside around has to be escaped from. There is no shame there – although often people have derided the church for doing that. But actually – as long as it is part of a mixed economy of purpose, as long as we intend that the church should have both strong walls and no walls at all – then we are grasping what it is all about. This is not an enigma! It is an understanding that to this house we bring different needs – and receive different blessings – at different times, each of us and all of us.

Sometimes we need the blessing of the "feste burg"! Not all the time, but sometimes there needs to be a place where we can be with God far from the world – knowing that in a few moments we can be with God at the very heart of the world.

Secondly, let this be a home of gentle acceptance.

What awaits us when we come in the door? Safety, grace, God. What is the most important ministry fulfilled in church on a Sunday morning? I ask that question because there are many, and most of them are not immediately obvious. But I think that certainly one of the

PROPER 16

most important lies with those who are on door duty. What an awesome responsibility you have! Just think of what you represent when you stand at that door – “safety”, “grace”, “God”.

Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young Ps 84:3

You are responsible for the sparrows and the swallows. If you read on from today’s quoted text a little you find:

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.

Well, the doorkeeper is the one who has to lead the way into the home of gentle acceptance – the place where sparrows and swallows can make nests and flit about the walls.

A house with strong walls – a home of gentle acceptance.

Morningside United Church? I hope so, don’t you?

Because that is the way we will build community.

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Can we do it? Dare we do it? I say that because it asks much of us. It asks us to be ready to receive with open arms those we may not like, or those whom we fear.

Here is a quote for you:

We try to be an open and welcoming congregation here in South Edinburgh.

+We meet weekly in worship of God who unites us in all our diversity.

+We seek to be inclusive and open to dialogue and not to draw boundaries. We all bring our convictions and our doubts, mutually supporting one another as the body of Christ.

+As a result, we are an eclectic mix of people from almost every Christian background and many nations.

Those are the words that last year the Kirk Session agreed to use to describe us, and to publish on our webpage. They are the words that will go on the leaflet to be distributed among the houses in our new streets – just newly come to the parish.

And they are potentially shocking. In this house “we are going to be inclusive and open to dialogue and not to draw boundaries.” We are going to bring “convictions AND doubts”! We are going to “support one another”.

Yes, we have a house of strong walls – but the nooks and crannies are going to shelter all those who come to our home of gentle acceptance. And that may very well cost in terms of our comfort. But we build that way a community that models a loving and merciful God. We build a community where we will indeed love to be – love to spend a day, and even all our days. For here God dwells, and here we are welcomed home.