Psalm 84

St Francis

You get some funny things said to you as a vicar! On one occasion, I went to do a funeral visit and there was a little girl there as well and when I left I heard her whispering to her dad, is he an angel! On another occasion, a few years ago I might add, another girl called me George Clooney. That was nice! The other thing people say is “do you live in the church”. No I don’t live there, I do have a house and a bed and a roof over my head next door.

But this church is my spiritual home. It’s a place I can feel close to God in, it has the people I love in it, and I believe God is at work in it. I love it. I am pleased my family like it too. When I was on sabbatical last summer, I was back for one weekend and I said to family I’m going to go somewhere else this Sunday, do you want to come with me? My kids, said no, they wanted to go to their own church.

They say home is where your heart is, where you feel you belong, where you feel accepted and known. The Danes have a word for it hygge which is untranslatable. Sitting by the fire on a cold night, wearing a woolly jumper, while drinking mulled wine and stroking a dog - probably surrounded by candles, and people you love. That's definitely ["hygge"](http://www.visitdenmark.com/danish-meaning-hygge).

Eating home-made cinnamon pastries. Watching TV under a duvet. Tea served in a china set. Family get-togethers at Christmas. It’s something we yearn for and long for when we are rushing around commuting, shopping, getting soaked in the rain. We yearn for rest, peace, and conviviality.

Perhaps church should be a spiritual hygge. A place of spiritual as well as emotional warmth, - a feeling of God with us, encouraging us, strengthening us, reviving us. I think we have something of that here in this church. This is echoed in the words of our psalm, one of the most famous in the Bible.

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 writer is longing and aching to be where the living God is, to dwell in the house of the Lord, to abide with him, to rest with him. Do you look forward to coming to church? Do you long for moments of quiet before the Lord as well as moments of praise? The next verses reinforce it even more.

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.

The common birds have found a place to make a nest and a home, right there in the temple of the Lord. Somehow even humble creatures are drawn to the presence of the Lord – where they can feel secure enough to rear their young. They mould their nests to the cracks and crevices they find, and feel right at home.

But sometimes we are far away from home – or perhaps we have lost our sense of home altogether. Perhaps we have been tempted by dazzling sights – the colourful tents of wickedness which seem much more exciting than the modest courts of the Lord, but that shine has faded. Perhaps home is a place of conflict or illness or sadness and so it doesn’t feel the same.

When we were first married I had to go on a business trip to Las Vegas. I stayed in the MGM Grand the biggest hotel in the world. Michelle tried to do something romantic and send me postcards ahead of me going which I would receive when I got there to encourage me so far away from home. Somehow I never got them and then she was cross I never acknowledged her efforts. It wasn’t the best time in our marriage!

And the psalmist also acknowledges that we are not always in the place we want to be. Some commentators suggest the whole psalm is written from a place of exile, a place a long way from home. So it urges us to set foot on the way of pilgrimage, back to our spiritual home.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
    whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.  
**6**As they pass through the Valley of Baka,  
    they make it a place of springs;  
    the autumn rains also cover it with pools.[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=ps+84&version=NIVUK" \l "fen-NIVUK-15266d" \o "See footnote d)]  
**7**They go from strength to strength,  
    till each appears before God in Zion.

But the pilgrimage is not an easy way to follow. It goes through the valley of Baca, or the valley of weeping. Baca refers to the type of tree which would grow in this dry valley, the balsam tree. Apparently, when you cut the tree, it weeps out its sap, like tears, hence the valley of weeping. So pilgrimage may take through the valley of weeping, but we don’t do it alone. We do it in the company of other pilgrims. There is comfort and strength in doing the pilgrimage together. We are lifted up and strengthened by worshipping, praying and praising together as we do in church. Are you in a valley of weeping? Are passing through difficulty? Then come and worship the Lord and pray with others and your strength will rise, pools appear in the desert, springs pour out and we go on from strength to strength as we head home.

In our churches together Lent course last year we looked at a movie called the Way. It’s about a set of pretty unreligious people ebarking on the Camino – the way of pilgrimage from France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, 500 miles in total. They all have their own issues and there is much conflict, sadness as well as humour. But slowly they gel as a group and learn to love each other and when they arrive at the cathedral in Santiago each has a spiritual experience. One, who vowed never to enter a church feels the presence of God, others put down the burdens they carrying, and leave them at the house of the Lord. All emerged changed forever, but then disperse on their separate ways.

There is a sense that however spiritually we feel at home in our lives, our hearts are still restless. Augustine said, “our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you”. Even Jesus had nowhere to lay his head. We are all strangers, refugees, we are all wanderers on the earth, we are all pilgrims never quite reaching our destination.

Our ultimate home is heaven and perhaps we will never be totally at peace until we reach there.

But until that day comes what should we do?

* Make a commitment to worship in the house of the lord as often as we can
* Join others in the pilgrimage through the valley of weeping and keep praising whatever the circumstances
* Look forward to heaven as our true and glorious home

Amen.