

Friday March 19

Psalm 84 – keep digging

1 How lovely is your dwelling place, O 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.

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, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God.

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

5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

6 As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

7 They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.

8 Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob. Selah

9 Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one.

10 Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

12 O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you.

When someone says to you, “keep digging” it’s usually because they’re watching you make a fool of yourself. But when Psalm 84 says “Keep digging”, it’s congratulating you! It’s verses 5 and 6 I’m thinking of here, and the version we sing in church puts it this way:

“Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee: in whose heart are thy ways. Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well: and the pools are filled with water.”

Well, ‘vale of misery’ is laying it on a bit thick. The ‘vale of misery’ or ‘valley of Baca’ refers to an arid place in the landscape of Israel where there were some trees or shrubs; the New English Bible uses the phrase ‘the thirsty valley’ here. Perhaps you can see the way my mind is working. But I also have this in mind: “Who going through the vale ... use it for a well.” Put it another way: the pilgrim might see the time that lies ahead in the valley only as an ordeal to be endured. But the language suggests that there’s some sort of blessing to be found there; not mark you, that the pilgrim simply sits there and wait for it to fall out of the sky, as it were. What the language does suggest instead is some sort of blessing that has to be sought out and then dug up.

This might well involve blessing to be shared with others rather than something just for yourself. That’s another perspective on PERSEVERANCE, our theme for these few days. Years ago I was told of a lady who had endured years of treatment for cancer. Eventually she ran out of road: the doctors told her that all they could do was to keep her comfortable until the end of her earthly life. Then she found what we could call “the peace that passes all understanding.” And having found peace, her hospital bed became a haven of peace as hard-pressed ward staff found her to be the person they could talk to and let off steam with at the end of another exhausting shift.

So if the pandemic, and the restrictions we’re living under make you feel as though you are going through a vale of misery, have you found some sort of blessing as you’ve journeyed through? If not, perhaps it’s not too late to get your spade out and start digging.