

## PSALM 122 PRAYER FOR PEACE

### ***Introduction***

The first word in this psalm is the word for rejoicing. The psalm overflows with joy at being in Jerusalem, contemplating its significance and praying for its peace.

### ***The joy of arrival (1-2)***

The pilgrim has now arrived at the gates of Jerusalem (verse 2). The family groups are coming together. They invite each other to make the pilgrimage to the house of the Lord. They are happy beyond belief. They rejoice. They have moved from alienation and violence seeking peace and now they join with others to come into the presence of God. There they believe they will find what they are looking for.

### ***Praise for Jerusalem (3-5)***

In verses 3-5 the city is praised for three characteristics. First, it is a place of refuge, a city built compactly and solidly. It is a place of refuge against powers both cosmic and national. That is probably the best sense of v.3. Here people also compact together to take their stand against the powers of hatred, abuse, and violence seeking peace.

Second, it is a place of worship and praise. It is a place where God's name is thanked and praised. God's name is thanked and praised because the God of covenant love, faithfulness and peace is there.

Third it is a place of justice. This is a central attribute of God's name and character. God's rule, God's throne, is not founded upon coercion, authoritarianism or whim. It is founded upon justice that seeks to put all things to rights. Righteousness and justice are the

foundations of the throne. Taking action to put the right into place and further action to put things that are not right back to rights is a definition of God's character.

And God expects his earthly representatives i.e. David in this case to do the same. Jerusalem is a place that reminds the pilgrim not only of God's presence but also of the pilgrims' commitments. Under their leaders they must represent the peace and justice of God on earth.

### ***Prayer for Jerusalem (6-9)***

Justice which the royal house was supposed to embody reflecting God's rule was supposed to issue in peace, *shalom*. (Pss 29.10-11; 72.3,7).

The implication is the city is not peaceful. Jerusalem has always been one of the most conflicted and contested cities in the world. And in the time of exile Jerusalem was far from secure i.e. at peace. Yet Jerusalem held this symbolic place as the place which its name implies (possession of peace or foundation of peace). Is the Psalmist simply being nostalgic, thinking back to David and Solomon? How can the city of no peace and little security be the symbol of both.

Well, nostalgia is not the clue. The unlocking of this lies in the present and the future. In the present it is a reminder of the promise of God. It is a sacrament; a reminder that God has promised peace and security. It is a visible sign that God's promise still holds. That is why when the Babylonians destroyed it they longed to rebuild it. The needed a visible reminder of God's promise of presence; I will be your God, you will be my people.

It is thus a sign of the people's desire to live "in Jerusalem" i.e. not in the geographical space but in the promise of the covenant, the promise of presence, protection and power. Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

is participation in the sacrament, in the promise and in the renewal offered in the promise. Pilgrimage is the commitment to live under God's rule.

But the present reality is that Jerusalem is not secure, they still struggle with contempt and derision. They long for the new day to come that is symbolised in the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. To come to Jerusalem in this sense means to enter another world, a new world, where God does reign, where God's peace is real because God's justice governs all things. Like all sacraments the pilgrimage to Jerusalem is counter-intuitive.

What this means is that although the old realities are still there, hatred and war, trouble and turmoil, something deeper is determinative of this world. To enter Jerusalem, to commit to the reality of God's reign of peace and justice in one's life and in the nation is to be transformed and empowered to live in an extraordinary manner in the mundane world. It is to see that the real determining world is God's world, all that Jerusalem represents, and that the other world of contempt and hatred is to be swallowed up by the real real.

That is why the psalmist will pray for the peace of Jerusalem, why he will seek its welfare for his and everybody's sake. Because the world of God's reign, the promise of presence, justice and peace is the real and ultimate world and the psalmist will live so it will come to be.

### ***Further reflections***

What the psalmist saw in Jerusalem was a sign that "the Lord is here." Jerusalem is not a piece of real estate to be possessed but a

symbol of the presence of the God of Justice and peace who cannot be possessed.

The Lord is here among the daily realities of a dying world, a frustrating world where things never work out as they should, and we are never all we could be. Yet the sacrament of Jerusalem, the act of pilgrimage is transformational, enabling people to live in an extraordinary manner in a dangerous and difficult world.

We have come to the end of study one and what a journey it has been. Peace and protection have been our main themes but it is always peace and protection in a journey of pilgrimage or discipleship that are contested. We have arrived at Jerusalem leaving for the moment a world of hostility and derision to find ourselves entering the presence of joy.

## **Questions**

How can we find peace? How can we find unity even at a local level? Liturgically this psalm is used for First Sunday in Advent in Year A. Other readings on that day are Isaiah 2.1-5, Romans 13.11-14 and Matthew 26.36-44. We are reminded that we do not know when God will act so we live in anticipation and preparedness for God to come in time and space. How can we live like that?

When justice and peace fail then the entire land is in peril. How important is our prayer for the *shalom* of God to be with us and among us?