

August 25, 2024 (Trinity 13) – Revd Wim Kuiper
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Readings: 1 Kings 8.22-30, 41-43; Ps 84; Eph 6.10-20; John 6.56-69

Do you like birds? Do you have any favourite birds? I think they are all very special and I have many favourites, but I do have a particular weak spot for swallows. So I am very lucky that I now live in the attic of a building in a small village in rural Germany, just across the border. I can see so many of them in this season. It's a joy to watch them flying swiftly through the sky. They are so elegant and agile; flipping, swooping and lunging around. And they look beautiful with their long tails. They built the most magnificent cup-like nests out of little mud balls. Often making use of manmade building structures such as stables. I once used to live in a converted barn, with a swallow's nest in my living room. They have a unique sense of direction and an amazing memory as they can get back to their own particular nests after flying for thousands of miles. Because, as you know, they are here only in the warmer season. As the saying goes, apparently from the Greek philosopher Aristotle: 'One swallow does not make a Summer'. So they will soon be on their way to Africa again. Flying an amazing amount of some 300 kilometres per day.

Swallows are mentioned in the Bible just a few times and nowhere in such a beautiful and appreciative manner as in Psalm 84, the Psalm set for today. 'The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young.' A nest even close to the sanctuary, the altar at the heart of the house of the Lord. That very special dwelling place of God, which at some time in history, used to be associated uniquely with the temple in Jerusalem. First build by King Solomon, the Son of David. Later on, reemerging in new versions, until the time of Jesus. When shortly after his death and resurrection was burnt down by the Romans. For God's chosen people of Israel it used to be really important to have that very special, holy place. A place where they could focus on God. Having the sense of being as close as possible to him. It is important also for us, to recognise that yearning, a longing also in a physical way, not just in spirit, to be close to the Lord. And certain times and places are able to offer that. So called thin places, where heaven and earth seem to be just a little bit closer to each other. Also places where the rituals performed, the prayers said, the songs that we sing and the words spoken can indeed bring us closer to God. There are many people who are struggling with their faith, and certainly with the church as an institute. But many of them are still somehow attracted to those special buildings, that are able to convey a sense of holiness. Of approaching and being in the presence of something, Someone that goes far beyond ourselves. Sensing also a peace that passes all understanding. It is of course not the case that God can only be found in such a space.

As king Solomon rightly puts it: "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you." But it is there that the prayers and yearnings of so many Christians, especially when the building is old already for centuries, have joined up together. And you can feel that and join in with them.

Once we have discovered God, tasted his beauty, his goodness and loving mercy, his strength and supreme wisdom our longing for him will only become stronger. The Lord God is indeed

'both sun and shield. He will give grace and glory', as the psalmist beautifully puts it. Our longing for God, our searching for him, knowing that he is also looking for us at the same time, grows when we continue to regularly feed it, for instance by going to church. Then it becomes like an instinct, a second nature. Something we are doing even unconsciously. Just like those swallows who know when it's time to go south and who also know how and when to go back north. Finding again the safe space of their own nests to lay their young. Just like them, we can also have a sense of 'home', that is of being in the right place for us at a specific time in life, even while we are journeying. Even when it all seems to be very unstable. At baptisms, I always use to say to the parents; you don't know where your little boy or girl will go when they grow up. Perhaps they will start traveling around the world. Perhaps they will live in far-away places (which of course I don't hope for those parents to happen, as it happened to me). But as baptized members of the worldwide church, there will be practically everywhere around the globe, places which they are entitled to call their homes as well. Churches, cathedrals, chapels, or just houses where fellow Christians meet. And isn't that a wonderful and reassuring thought? So even when we are unfamiliar and perhaps slightly uncomfortable with certain places of Christian worship of the many different denominations and traditions around the world, we should still try to recognise them as dwelling places of the Lord. As sacred spaces where we can get closer to God and to his Son Jesus Christ.

Though it may come in many different ways and variations, not always to our liking, in almost all Christian churches there is regularly that very special and holy moment when the body and blood of Christ is offered to us. And if they allow us, we should feel free to accept this greatest of all gifts of our Lord, that is offered to us in such places. Trusting that it is always the Lord himself who is inviting us, as he explains in today's Gospel, to eat from the Bread of life, to drink from the Cup of salvation. His body given for us, his blood shed for us to keep us in eternal life.

To set us free to a life filled and guided by the Spirit. Gifts that will help us to build up that whole armour that St Paul describes in his letter to the Ephesians; the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the proclamation of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the word of God. Amen

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