

Psalm 122 by Rod Pierce – 1 July 2011

In his book 'The Message of the Psalms', Walter Brueggemann writes: "In season and out of season, generation after generation, faithful men and women turn to the psalms as a most helpful resource for conversation with God about things that matter most".

And we find that they express many aspects of our lives that can help to comfort or reassure us, or convey gratefulness, happiness and joy when we feel especially blessed.

One of my favourites is psalm 122, which begins with that well-known first line "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the Lord". This is a psalm of movement, of joyfulness and of change, and although I have always liked the words, I felt I understood it so much more when we were given a chance to study it more closely whilst training for ministry.

Indeed, for many people it's the setting by Hubert Parry of this psalm that is one of the great pieces of choral music, and no doubt many of you heard it recently when it was chosen by Kate and William for the bridal entrance procession at the Royal Wedding.

But the words also repay a closer look. This psalm is one of those that are loosely put into a category of "songs of ascent" and almost certainly refers to the custom, obligation even, of the Jews to visit Jerusalem each year if possible, a pilgrimage to the holy city on Mount Zion.

So, disregarding for a few minutes, that image and majestic music of the royal wedding,..... let's now transport ourselves back and imagine a youth, perhaps, expressing great joy at being invited to join a group of pilgrims on the journey to Jerusalem. "I was glad when they said unto me – let us go to the house of the Lord"

He is overjoyed at having been invited to join the group. The road to Jerusalem was not a safe place to travel on your own – think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, who helped a man who had been attacked by robbers whilst on such a journey.

The youth eagerly anticipates the pilgrimage, and hastens home to pack a bag with provisions for the journey. Perhaps he is thinking that it is good to travel in high spirits and he no doubt imagines what it will be like when he arrives in the Holy City.

Jerusalem, part of the Promised Land, land that had been God-given to the Jewish people. It was a place they venerated, much more so than we might think of the great holy places in this country such as Canterbury, York, Glastonbury, Walsingham – or even abroad, such as Rome, Assisi, Santiago de Compostella, Lourdes and so on. When this psalm was written, the Temple had most likely been rebuilt not long beforehand, after the Jews had been allowed to return to their homelands after many years exile in Babylon.

For the Jews of course, Jerusalem represented everything that their religion and their God stood for, and to make that trip regularly, as we know Jesus did with his family when he was 12 years old, was part of their religious upbringing.

As many of us have experienced ourselves, pilgrimage is a sociable and enjoyable experience when travelling in company – chatting in joyful anticipation of the arrival makes the distance seem shorter and the time passes quicker.

And so “our feet shall stand in thy Gates, O Jerusalem” is a sign of joy and relief when they finally arrive in the great city after their long journey.

“Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity in itself”. The city was specially chosen by King David because it was part of the promised land that was not divided between the 12 tribes of Israel – it was a sort of neutral ground.

“For thither the tribes go up, even the tribes of the Lord, to testify unto Israel and to give thanks unto the name of the Lord”. Because the city did not belong to any one tribe, all who visited were to be treated equally. All who came on pilgrimage were expected to give thanks for themselves, their families, and their land..

And it was more than just a religious centre...“For there is the seat of Judgement – even the seat of the house of David” recalls that this was a centre for administration and justice, the central law courts of the Jews were there, too.

And there they give thanks. The youth calls on the others to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem”, for the temple and “peace within thy walls and plenteousness within thy palaces”.

But a significant change has come over this youth with the joy of the journey and the companionship he has experienced. “For my brethren and companions sake, I will wish thee prosperity, and for the sake of the house of the Lord , I will seek to do thee good”

Remember how it all started out, when he was invited to join them, his companions were just referred to as ‘they’ (I was glad when they said unto me), but, of this group of people that invited him, ‘they’ are now referred to as ‘my brothers, sisters and companions’ – he is now a member of a group of close friends.

Pilgrimage is a spiritual journey – it has changed many people over the years as a result of the experience of the journey. This young man has been changed.

We too can be changed. Our lives are such a journey, and I am sure that the royal couple made an excellent and appropriate choice for the start to their married lives together when they chose this psalm.