

At Home with God

(Preached by Cheryl Williams f@ Footscray Baptist Church, May 7th, 2023 - John 14:1-14 & 1 Peter 2:2-10)

Home – I wonder what it means to you?

It is always so much more than a house. Home – one's castle, one's sanctuary, the place of memories.

Homes can also be awful places, unsafe, violent, devoid of love. We know that many in our world do not have a place to call home, or a place of shelter and sanctuary.

I have lived in about 16 different houses in my lifetime. Most in my university days. They were all different, were with different people, in different cities and suburbs and I was there for different lengths of time. Some were old and drafty houses, some compact units or single bedroom flats, some brand new. Sometimes there was conflict, other times it was a refuge, other times a place of joy.

I began life in a downstairs flat in what was once a pub and in the early 70's I moved with my parents to the first house they owned, a weatherboard three-bedroom house with a big backyard in very, very working-class Geelong West. The land sloped downwards and sometimes the backyard flooded. It was just like all the other houses in the street, but it was home. It had a Hills Hoist (clothesline) in the middle of the backyard which Dad used to cover with tarps or sheets to provide shade for BBQs. It had a vegie garden and the boards on the back wall often had to be fixed because that is where my brother and I hit the tennis ball against for hours. I remember as a child making besa bricks with my Dad and Grandpa to make the wall of a new garage – this wall was transformed into a water feature after we sold the place and it was renovated, my besa bricks still standing.

It was also the place as a teenager I couldn't wait to escape and stretch my wings. I came to Melbourne to University but would return frequently and it was the only place I have ever really called home.

Our bible readings are about homes and households.

John's gospel talks about being at home with God. It is a most comforting reading, a reminder that we abide, live with God, indeed Jesus has been getting that place prepared for us, for all of us. Often, we interpret this to be a place we have called heaven where we will dwell after we die, however, to only think in these terms is to misunderstand John. John here is not so much talking about a place but a relationship. Living with God, being at home with God is the natural outcome of following him, he is the way, the truth, the life. At home with God is both here and now and for eternity. Following Jesus is the life! So, let's not claim this promise just at funerals but in the here and now.

The psalms, which we have not read today, also speak of being at home with God. God is understood as a refuge, a shelter.

Our reading from Peter is also about home, a spiritual home, a household of God built of people. In a context of hierarchical household codes where men were at the top, slaves, children and women down the bottom with the animals. Peter challenges that understanding. Using the image of building a house, a home he talks about what it is to be the people of God, what it is to be at home with God. For Peter the building, the house of God needs a strong foundation, and it has that in Jesus. Then the building continues with what he calls living stones, that is us.

If I may go back to my besa bricks, well sort of. As a child I spent many weekends at a farm in the Stony Rises between Colac and Camperdown. I don't know if you have been there, but the fences are made of stones. Stones of all shapes and sizes and colours. They have a good foundation but then the rest of the fence is made up of a myriad of stones or rocks. You wonder how they don't fall over, but they don't, they are strong, but they are also flexible. When I was a kid, we would go rabbiting and as I was tiny I couldn't jump or climb over the fences like the others, so my Dad and his friend would take a few rocks out of the fence so I could clamber over and then put them back. Think they got sick of lifting me over the fences.

I think those fences are the kind of 'spiritual house' envisaged by Peter. A wall made up of many different stones, that somehow all fit together and give the fence/building its strength and its flexibility. This is the household of God, this is what it means to be at home with God – diversity, flexibility, strength, protection and community.

So, as I put these images together, I begin to understand that being at home with God is being in a place of:

- Safety
- Equality
- Community
- Welcome
- Joy
- Peace
- Love
- Hospitality

Our challenge as the church here in Footscray is to think about how we mirror such a household in this temporal space.

How are our buildings and how is our community a safe place, a sanctuary for others? How are we a true community, where all are welcome? How are we a hospitable place – where basic needs are met, where people feel comfortable? How are we a prophetic place that calls for and provides sanctuary for the homeless, to the asylum seeker? How are we an equal place where no one is more important than another – no title, gender, race or background is put above another?

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Are we a place, a home, a household where all that it is and does is built on the foundation of Jesus, built on the life and teaching of Jesus?

We are restless until we find our home in God, and to quote my friend Ross Langmead, a place where we are never alone, a place where we are known. Amen.