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### No place like home?

Mark Betson has written an extremely helpful reflection today on the role our homes have played during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Mark points out, our homes have served a wide range of functions over the last year, including - for many - as schools.

This week, children, parents and, indeed, teachers across England are rediscovering the joys and challenges of leaving their homes for the classroom! Some children in Scotland have, of course, already been through this process and others will follow in the coming weeks. The youngest age groups are also back at school in Wales and others are due to follow. In Northern Ireland, the youngest children have temporarily returned to school this week but others are not due to return until after Easter.

For some, this return to the classroom will, I'm sure, be an entirely positive experience but for most it will be a mixed bag: the joy of seeing friends, the anxiety of adjusting to an environment that is both familiar and a distant memory, the challenge of sharing a teacher's attention with a roomful of other children or young people. And, of course, for many a return to school raises the possibility that COVID-19 levels, which have been heading resolutely down after over two months of lockdown, will start to level off or even begin to rise.

Please pray for children, parents and teachers over the coming weeks, for compassion and understanding, for affirmation and the acknowledgment of the challenges and opportunities of the last few weeks. Pray, too, for decision-makers in all four UK governments that they will make wise decisions about the further easing of restrictions, and for those anxious about the wider implications of greater mixing.

If you're a parent with school-aged children or young people, be kind to yourself this week and make sure you take some time to catch your breath, rather than just bowling into the next thing.

If you don't have children in your household but know families or teachers, why not consider sending them a text, baking a cake or dropping round a meal on Friday evening?

Go well...

*Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team*

### What makes a good place to live?

#### Bible reading: Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place,

O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints

for the courts of the Lord;

my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may lay her young,  
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,  
my King and my God.

Happy are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise.      Selah

Happy are those whose strength is in you,  
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.  
As they go through the valley of Baca  
they make it a place of springs;  
the early rain also covers it with pools.  
They go from strength to strength;  
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
give ear, O God of Jacob!      Selah  
Behold our shield, O God;  
look on the face of your anointed.

For a day in your courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness.  
For the Lord God is a sun and shield;  
he bestows favour and honour.  
No good thing does the Lord withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.  
O Lord of hosts,  
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

## Reflection

What makes a good place to live? Psalm 84 focuses on the house of the Lord, God's dwelling place. The subject of home has been much on my mind recently. Two weeks ago, the Archbishop's Commission on housing released ***Coming Home***, a report in which the Commission set out what they think makes a good home. They state:

'A good home is a place that enables us to live in harmony with the natural environment, it is a place where we feel safe, it enables us to put down roots and belong to a community, it is a place we enjoy living in and which is a delight to come home to.'

Psalm 84 offers us a vision of a 'good home'. It's a place that is lovely, where even the sparrow can find a nest, where God is our shield and where we can go from strength to strength.

For many of us, our 'dwelling places' have become intimately familiar to us as we have travelled through one lockdown after another, as we have been asked to 'stay home' to protect the NHS and save lives. It is the place where we have not only eaten and slept, but where we have worked, socialised and even attended church.

My connection to the place where I live has been on my mind recently as we have seen the English roadmap for coming out of lockdown. I have realised I am actually very nervous about leaving home now. I do so regularly for exercise and essential activities, but only to local, familiar places. When I think about both the places I used to travel to and the activities I used to get involved in I find myself wondering if I will be able or want to do them again.

I remember when I was young, living and growing up in the countryside, I was quite nervous around people and took comfort in knowing my home well and in being able to get out into the fields and hide in a copse of trees if I needed to get away. As I got older, I discovered I was quite good with people, particularly one on one, to the point of describing myself as an extravert and feeling completely at home in and among lots of people and community life.

Zoom and other technology have been great at keeping work going for me but has not substituted for being with people. I now realise I am going to have to relearn both how to be with other people and the fact that I actually like being with people.

The idea of coming home is about more than just bricks and mortar. It's the place where you live, where you are most fully yourself. Psalm 84 reminds us that 'coming home' is about returning to dwell with God, a place where you are in harmony with your environment, where you feel safe and where God's love builds you up from strength to strength.

I have found this lockdown Lent has – without any effort from me – stripped away much of who I am and pushed me in ways I would not have chosen. The challenge I have now is finding my way back home. I'm not sure I know what 'home' looks like anymore, but God's love is consistent and his presence leads us on.

## Response

- Take a moment to consider whether there are things that are worrying you as we approach a time when we can again leave our homes and meet one another. The journey towards Easter is a good time to acknowledge these and offer them to God. God cares for you, so turn all your worries over to him (1 Peter 5:7).
- Take time to listen to friends, family or those in your community who have fears or anxieties about the future at this time.
- Spend time thinking about what home means for you, that place where you are in harmony with your environment, where you feel safe and where God's love builds you up from strength to strength.

## **Prayer**

O God who calls us to live in your presence  
and make our home in you,  
help us to feel when you are near  
and give us courage in the next steps you ask us to take.  
Amen.

*Mark Betson, National Rural Officer for the Church of England*