**Psalm 121
John 3.1-17
8th March 2020

 Where does my help come from?**

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen*.

Psalm 121 is much loved, especially if you enjoy hills and mountains. It’s opening line is a winner: *I, to the hills will lift my eyes…*
For a time we lived in the Worcestershire spa town of Malvern. It’s eight-mile ridge of hills formed the backdrop of our lives. We walked on them most weeks in most weathers. And people in Malvern love Psalm 121. It would be read and sung at weddings and funerals with folk even referring to it proprietorially as ‘Malvern’s Psalm’.

Like many things in life we can all too easily adopt ideas without fully appreciating what they actually mean or stand for.

I say that because the second line of the psalm is only translated in the positive in one version of the bible, the Authorised King James’ – which most of us probably grew up with! So, it reads like this: *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.*

That sounds like a great strapline for any hill walking club, or Alpine appreciation society. The hills and the mountains are beautiful, they are inspirational. I draw my strength from the wonder of nature, I find my strength in walking the hills.

However, biblical translation has come a long way since the King James’ version of the bible was published back in 1611. Today’s versions never put the second line of Psalm 121 as a statement but rather as a question. In doing that it changes the meaning completely because now it reads, as in the version of the church bibles Janet read a moment ago: *If I lift up my eyes to the hills, where shall I find help?*
Now you may prefer the poetry of the King James’, but just about every bible commentator around today will tell you that it’s the modern versions that get it right when it comes to what the original writer of Psalm 121 was probably trying to say.

The writer was not saying the hills inspire me, quite the opposite: the hills terrify me! Bad things happen on mountain roads – ask the Jew travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho who came upon thieves and bandits as he walked through the hills in the story of the Good Samaritan.

We might paraphrase verse one of Psalm 121 like this: I look to the hills, those dark forbidding hills, and I see so much danger as I set out on my journey, where will I find help and strength?

Well, this is a sort of ‘good cop/bad cop’ sermon, so, having just disillusioned you about what might be your favourite psalm, it’s time for me now to present the positive about this morning’s reading from the Jewish scriptures!

Today’s psalm is one of fifteen called Psalms of Assent and it was sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to worship God at the Temple.

They sang as they walked; songs about God and faith, hymns about being on a journey.

Some Christians make physical pilgrimages even today. I have a friend who was only ever a passive supporter of Christianity. He loves his wife, so took her to church but rarely attended the services himself and he did that for decades. That was until she convinced him to join her on a Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of the Northern Saints. They walked in the footsteps of Cuthbert and Aiden. One afternoon they walked that well-worn track across from Bamburgh to Lindisfarne when the tide was out. It was part of their pilgrimage to visit Holy Isle. He talked to the husband of the group leader and tells me that it was that conversation, walking across the sand, talking about those Celtic saints who always strove to make a connection between what they believed and how they behaved that made him reassess Christianity and take it on board for himself.

After that northern pilgrimage he not only takes his wife to church, he now attends the services with her.

The pilgrims who first sang Psalm 121 weren’t walking on sand but through dangerous hills. Pilgrimage would cost them. Going up to Jerusalem was a risky business. This was a journey that would test their faith, but just maybe it would deepen it too. On the journey they would ask questions about God, belief and worship. The point of pilgrimage wouldn’t just be what went on when they got to the Temple but all they leant En route.

Today’s psalm, I think, helps answer the question posed in verse one: Where does my help come from? On this pilgrimage and on this journey of faith through Lent and beyond, what sort of God can I believe in?

Well a characteristic to encourage any pilgrim is that this God neither slumbers not sleeps. This is the ever alert and present companionable God who walks every step alongside us. That idea can lift the soul and bring encouragement to our spirits. The God who neither slumbers nor sleeps will always be at our right-hand.

That imagery had added poignancy to the original hearers because it was a common feature of Israel’s neighbour’s gods that they slept through winter. These gods were dormant at the darkest time of year and, it was thought, roused themselves with the coming light and the new life of spring.

So, maybe against this background of gods who hibernate, the psalmist sings of a God whose presence is dependable every day of the year. Whether your village went on pilgrimage in autumn or summer, the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps will be your constant companion and guide.

Another source of help hinted at in Psalm 121 is that whilst on pilgrimage these travellers will be shaded. What does it say: *the sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.*Being shaded was an important form of protection in a Mediterranean country. Too much sun meant exhaustion and maybe even death.

So the idea of being given shade becomes a metaphor for the life-giving presence, even the protection of God.

Last month we visited my brother in Spain. He and his wife live in the south of the country up in the mountains where it’s currently about 22 degrees and sunny every day. When we communicate, I never tell him about how cold it is here!

I couldn’t help but notice whilst we were there that they basically live outside under verandas. Since our last visit they’ve even built another one so they can have breakfast in the right part of the garden on sunny days in the shade.

They love the sun, as long as they are under a canopy.

Some of the psalms talk of the Temple as being a place of shade and protection, a shelter where God’s presence is to be experienced. People felt safe and secure in the temple. So, in the psalm that idea of finding God’s presence, as expressed in the metaphor of shade and shelter, is extended. The psalmist is making a big statement here and it’s this: not only will you find God’s help and blessing in the temple, you’ll also encounter it in your journey to the temple. As you make your way on pilgrimage through the hills: the sun shall not strike you by day, neither the moon by night.

I love that. I love that sense of continuum. The God who is with us in worship stays alongside us on the journey. The shelter of the temple is also available out on the streets.

I think this makes for a connected life. It brings together all that goes on in the temple and blends it with all that is experienced at home.

Nicodemus, I suspect, in our New Testament reading today, was finding this difficult. He was very religious, but life seems for him to have remained curiously and frustratingly empty. He comes to Jesus by night and after talking until the wee small hours he’s introduced into the idea of making a fresh start, having a new birth into a way of thinking that is more connected, so that his faith life and his everyday life are not compartmentalised but blended.

Maybe our psalmist wants to make the same point. The God who will welcome you into the sanctuary of the Temple, who will shelter you under his wings as you come to pray, is the same God who will walk alongside you in the noontide heat and strengthen you when the sun is at its highest.

Such an understanding of God does much to challenge and redefine the false sacred and secular boundaries that we so often create. The God of love and justice we worship in church has much to say to us about our use of money, our commitment to family, our choice of career and the way we approach retirement. God is in our DNA and therefore the connection between faith and life is total and perhaps the idea of a division between what we view as sacred and secular is both unhelpful and ultimately a false divide.

The shade to be found at the temple will also be there on pilgrimage and that’s part of the help being offered in Psalm 121.

Now, I think I’m moving into bad cop mode as I end this sermon. That’s because I want to ask the question: what are we to make of this psalm if we actually come to some harm in those hills? The psalm says: The Lord will guard you against all harm. Yet, most of us in church this morning will have known tough times in our lives. How do we read words like these and still own a sense of faith in God?

Of course, the reason why bad things happen to good people taxes all of us? If it were the only thing we believed or experienced maybe faith would be impossible. But I suspect it isn’t the only thing we believe.

Nicky Gumble, the Vicar of Holy Trinity, Brompton in London and founder of the Alpha Course was interviewed on last week’s Songs of Praise and I really valued what he said. Asked if he understood all the bible, he said a definite ‘no’ with a smile on his face! Instead, he used the idea that works for him that faith is like a crossword puzzle. Bit by bit he’s filling it in as he goes through life. He looks at the clues and has come up with some of the answers but even now the puzzle has some gaps. The gaps don’t define him, but what he’s already been able to fill in does, and he continues to work at the crossword, bit by bit, year on year filling in more boxes.

For him it’s a picture of his faith and I was glad that he spoke with such eloquence and honesty as a Christian leader on TV.

We go up to the hills and sometimes what lurks behind the corner hurts us.

If this psalm was written by King David, or at the time of David, or by a colleague of David, then the writer would have known struggle, conflict and hurt too. David is sometimes thought of as the model king, yet his personal life, family life and even chapters of his reign contain a litany of struggle, conflict, shame and failure.

In spite, or maybe even because of this, he composes a psalm that shows great trust and confidence in God.

One of my favourite stories from the Jewish scriptures is that moment when, in exile three followers of God are placed in a fiery furnace because of their faith. It was surely the most testing moment of their lives, yet their response amazed those who looked on; they said they would hold fast to their faith in God, whether they lived or died. Their response is echoed by the words of Julian of Norwich. She experienced the Black Death, the Peasants Revolt and almost lost her own life through illness just aged 30. Yet she wrote: All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well…

I’m sure, for David, the three Jews in the furnace and for Julian of Norwich, the crossword puzzle was only half filled in, yet they carried on trusting.

In Desmond Tutu’s fine words they believed that: light is stronger than darkness and life is stronger than death.

How poignant then that the story goes that when the flames were at their strongest it appeared as if a fourth person joined Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego in the furnace. Scripture’s way, perhaps, of saying God came amongst them in their suffering, he’s always out there on the hills with us helping us find the shade.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that. As he battled with a world so tragically falling apart in the lead up to the 2nd World War he said that; only a suffering God can help. And in these days of Lent that’s the God we encounter in Jesus Christ.

God’s nature as revealed in the life of Jesus is also seen so clearly in his death. Jesus prays in the garden as he experiences anguish and uncertainty, yet still he embraces the cross. Even upon the cross he encounters such a sense of isolation, yet still he seeks the forgiveness of others and in the end places his spirit trustingly into the loving hands of God.

If Bonhoeffer was right, then one of the most precious pictures we have of God is the crucified Christ. The one who holds us in the night-time of our fears and does so with nail pieced hands.

Psalm 121 helps me fill in part of the cross word and the life and death of Jesus show me many other words too in the puzzle.

May that be our experience as we travel through the hills, in the name of the God who never slumbers nor sleeps and whose character is best revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 5th March 2020*