

Sunday reflection for Sunday the 20th February:

Psalm 121: a song for our journey -

Pisgah am and Ecumenical pm 20/2/22

Joel, Loette and I were discussing our love of singing,
... when we met up at Martha's the other day.

None of us feel we're particularly talented,
...but we all love a bit of a good sing -

Whether that's beseeching God for his BREAD OF HEAVEN,

Or saying hello to Dolly -
...or fiddling on the roof with Te-ve

IT'S good for the soul and the emotions isn't it?

Q - WE HAVE SOME GREAT SINGERS IN THE CONGREGATION,
...BUT I'M SURE IT'S NOT JUST CONFINED TO CHURCH -

...HOW MANY OF YOU -
Q like singing in the car for instance?

One of my most vivid Childhood memories,
...is cramming into a hot (non-air conditioned) car (the was the 70's and 80's)

Whining for a bit as I and fellow siblings start moaning
(Which on occasion turned physical),
... about who's got the most (or least) room in the back seat -

And then MUM turning round -

...with a (O' my Lord, we haven't even left our town yet,
... and I'm already at the end of my holiday tether)
= kind of look on her face -

Mum BEING THE TROOPER SHE WAS -
...would try really hard to turn her scowl,
.....into a forced cheery 'this is Fun, isn't it' holiday facial expression

Which looked so forced,
....THAT IT COULD BE MISTAKEN FOR A PSYCHOTIC GRIN

And then mum -
...keen soprano and church choir member that she was -

Would launch into HOLIDAY CAR SONGS -

Soon we'd be going round the mountain when we come
...before going on a summer holiday
.....and of course before you knew it the sun would have his hat on,

And woebetide us,
...if we we didn't go 'hip hip hip hooray' at the right point.

YOU HAVE HAVE TO INFLICT THIS KIND OF TORTURE,
..... ON YOUR KIDS WHEN YOU'RE A PARENT,
DON'T YOU -
...I believe it's what they call 'character building'

AND WE DESERVED IT FOR FIGHTING IN THE CAR!

But on a serious note -

...songs and journeys go together well -

Whether platoons of soldiers,

...or Boy Scouts on parade ,

.....families in cars or long walks,

.....carnival processions,

.....or me humming along to the music on my headphones as I go for a run -

= music combined with singing - seems to help the journey progress.

And so we come to our psalm -

We tend to be sitting down when hear psalms read in Church,

...or even when accompanied with music -

=. perhaps standing up on the spot,

..... and singing along with the old Church organ

Which probably would have LOOKED A BIT ODD,

....TO THE PSALMIST AND THOSE FIRST SINGERS

Because PSALM 121 is one of the journeying psalms

...A psalm to be read at the start of or during a new journey -

.....Especially a challenging one.

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This psalm Was an important to me in 2009 -

...I felt God leading me down a different life road,

..... but I also felt really uncomfortable,

- what if it all goes wrong?

- What if I'm a really rubbish minister?

It didn't help that some of my colleagues gave me odd looks,  
..... when I told them why I was leaving my profession.

Judging by their reactions-

...going into the ministry

...was about as odd as joining the circus to become a trapeze artist!

FURTHERMORE -

It didn't inspire my confidence,

... when my manager pointed out that we were heading into a recession,

... ..and now wasn't the time to be putting aside stable employment,

... ..and risking insecurity by retraining for the ministry!

SO I WOULD BE LYING,

...IF I said I no doubts or anxieties,

.....As I took God's hand to walk down this new life path

WHEN I HAD MY 'student pastor' evening induction service,

.... in August 2009,

(my mini induction b4 the bigger 'ordination in 2011'

= I requested psalm 121 as the church reading.

BECAUSE I NEEDED TO MAKE A CLEAR STATEMENT-

To myself and others,

...where my help was coming from,

.....As I took my first steps along this intimidating path

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So Psalm 121 is a poem, a song,

..written by King David.

.....In most Bibles it has the title "a song of ascents".

For a long time that term -

...used to describe a section of the psalms -

..... didn't have any meaning for me.

It was just a word - the psalms of ascent

(I hadn't BOTHERED asking myself why they were called that)

Q - do you know what a song of ascent is?

= Perhaps a more accurate translation of the title from the original hebrew is -

....."a song for a journey to a higher place,"

and that's how the travellers,

.....the pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem would have felt.

(It's believed that these psalms were written to be sung,

..... before or during the long -

.....And often dangerous,

.....journey to Jerusalem)

But at the same time -

.....They were also a more general metaphor,

..... for the BIGGER journey -

= LIFE.

In Northampton you always went 'down town' -

....or 'deyn teyn' in the old accent of my nans generation.

=It probably related to the fact that Northampton,
..... nestled in the Nene valley

The Jewish people always thought of going UP to Jerusalem, probably,
...in similar fashion,
.....because the city was higher geographically.

Walking the 17-miles from Jericho to Jerusalem,
..... the road rises by about 3,500 feet.

So - When the Jewish people went up to Jerusalem,
..... for the feasts and celebrations,
.....they had special songs to sing -

= AND Psalm 121 was one of those songs.

I just wanted to do a little exercise-
....to show how psalms like these were first sung or recited.

This would work so much better in June or July rather than Feb -
(But in your minds eye, close your eyes -
and just imagine the line of pilgrims, tramping along the hot dusty Middle Eastern road -

.....And although you've only got 1 voice -
...try to imagine these words Joel recites as coming from many voices singing or chanting these
powerful ancient words...

(Recite with passion - Joel)

- 1 I look up to the mountains— Where does my help come from?
- 2 My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth!
- 3 He will not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber.
- 4 Indeed, He who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps.
- 5 The Lord himself watches over you! The Lord stands beside you as your protective shade.

6 The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon at night.

7 The Lord keeps you from all harm and watches over your life.

8 The Lord keeps watch over you as you come and go, both now and forever. Psalm 121:1-8

This is a Traveller's Psalm.

.....It reminds us that the best way to travel in life,

..... is to travel with the Lord.

Travel with God,

...because He will help us like no one else can -

As psalm 23 remind us -

He's in the lushest pastures AND the darkest valleys.

TRAVELLING from Jericho - to Jerusalem:

.....was one of the major pilgrim routes-

Forget your Sunday School pictures of blind old Bartimaius,

.... calling out to Jesus on the Jericho road

(you've seen the pictures - nice pretty road, full of nice smiling people on a pleasantly sun shiny day)

APPARENTLY IT WASN'T NEARLY SO QUIANT

In those days the road from Jericho to Jerusalem,

..... was so dangerous,

= it was literally called "the way of blood."

Not the sort of nickname,

.... that tourist boards marketing execs encourage!

Travelers were in real danger -

The intense heat and the bandits - were genuine dangers to life.

There were no air conditioned cars or planes,
.....no mobile phones, no wi-fi, no Facebook, no TripAdvisor,

just the dust and the heat and - for SOME lucky travellers -
.....maybe a donkey or camel to carry their luggage,
..... if they were quite wealthy.

For most people -
.....A journey to Jerusalem was a wearisome footsore trudge.

They had real reason to be fearful of the journey ahead, and -
.....on their journey,
....singing these words brought them comfort and strength.

These words helped them,
..... to have the same sense of peace and security -
.....that you and I can also experience today,
.....When OUR JOURNEY gets hard.

- What are your wearisome trudges? - pause
- what wakes you up at 3 in the morning? - pause
- Are you afraid of what lies ahead? - pause

LISTEN:

= God never slumbers, and God never sleeps.
,,,,,,He is able to watch over us every moment,
..... of every day and every night.

- God is here for you right now

- if you wake up at 3o'clock in the morning feeling sick, or worried

....God will be there waiting for you

In verse 5 & 6, we see God is our Shade, our Shelter:

.....The Lord stands beside you as your protective shade.

Can you imagine what it felt like for those travellers walking along in the hot sun,

... with no air conditioning and no sun cream?

... no cool drinks -

....probably little in the way of water sources full stop.

They needed to find places of shade and shelter on their journey,

...= and often on our journey through life we do too.

- God wants to be your shelter - in the intense heat of crisis
- God's gone ahead of you,

... and is waiting for you even in the coldest darkest valley of your life's path - when fear chills you to the bone

FRIENDS -

Jesus can be both our cooling shelter when the worst comes our way,

....and also the warming Light of our life.

I'M NOT saying this because I think I'm a mighty faith warrior -

BY NATURE I'M NOT PARTICULARLY FAITHFUL -

....OR ESPECIALLY CONFIDENT -

THE FAITH I'VE GOT IS PURELY FROM my EXPERIENCE of God's grace -

....NOT any CHARACTER STRENGTH of my own -

I suppose I've encountered the truth of his shelter, and light -

= Most acutely in the trials my boys have gone through.

- He was waiting for me in the intensive Leicester when Sam had his cardiac arrests in 96
- He was in the a+e dept in Barnstaple when Michael has his hour long seizure in 99
- He was in the bone marrow bubble in Newcastle in 2015

I didn't feel especially faithful at those times -

...and my prayers were pathetically childlike and basic,

BUT - I DISCOVERED:

That He who stands at the beginning, the end and right beside us,

- on our life's path,

.... was waiting in all those vulnerable places,

..... long before I ever knew,

.....that they were on my journey itinerary.

When God caused the first stone to be laid in this OLD CHURCH-

....He knew that YOU and I,

..... would meet with other here today.

(we were in his thoughts and future plans - EVEN THEN).

SO -

.....the psalmist is offering us realistic comfort - NOT FALSE HOPE

Being a Christian does not mean,

..... having a trouble-free journey in this world -

as the psalmist is aware - WE HAVE A JOURNEY TO TRAVEL (potentially hard at points)

.....But he's clear that we don't have to travel it alone or unaided.

= We are not alone, God is always with us.

There is great truth and great comfort in the words of verses 7 & 8:

“The Lord keeps you from all harm and watches over your life. The Lord keeps watch over you as you come and go, both now and forever.”

What a wonderful promise,
.....what a wonderful truth.

Because God loves us and cares for us,

Q Do you need reminding of this truth

Only you can answer that for yourself -

..But I KNOW WITH ALL OF MY HEART,

.... that I need God to walk with me every single step of my journey.

“I need thee every hour” - as the hymnist puts it.

— I don't think I would find the courage to take one more step,

.... if he rescinded his promise

(Not that there is the slightest chance of that of course)

=1corinthians 1:9

'God faithfully keeps his promises.

We NEED HIM EVERY HOUR

- To lead you
- To guide you
- To shelter you
- to protect you
- To save you

Let me finish by telling you a story about a boy called David,
...who was looking forward to his best friend's birthday party.

His friend only lived a few streets away,
....but on the day of the party in the early 1980's, there had been an unusually heavy fall of snow
(the kind of snow that hadn't been seen in decades)

and all the roads were blocked,
...,with three feet of snow.

David pleaded with his mum to let him go to the party,
"All the other kids will be there. Their parents are letting them walk through the snow."
'I'm nearly 10 now, I'm big'

= David nagged and nagged away at his mum.

The mum looked out of the window at the heavy snow that was still falling,
... and said, "Ok you can walk through the snow"

David wrapped himself up in his warmest coat, put on his woolly claret and white striped
bobble hat
.....,and went outside into the snow.

It was difficult to walk in the deep snow,
.... and because it was snowing heavily,
..... it was difficult to see the journey ahead.

It took David almost 40 minutes,
. to travel the short distance to his friend's house.

= David finally got to the door and rang the bell.

As he was waiting for someone to let him in,

..., he turned around to look at the snow he had walked through.

As David looked out, he saw a woman walking away.

'That's funny, he thought, she'd got the same coat and hat as mum'

The truth only hit him,

... as he sat down with his friends to eat the party food

His Mum had followed David on his journey,

.... to make sure he arrived safely.

- Friends this is exactly what God does for us!

= He follows our every step through life,

..., to make sure we arrive safely.

He watches over our journey through life,

..... so that we will reach our final destination.

Being a Christian is not the easy option -

.....we still face circumstances and situations in our daily lives,

but in everything we experience,

..... we have the promise that God is with us,

..... in every area of our lives.

AS IT SAYS IN SCRIPTURE:

Jesus will never leave you,

.... He will never forsake you,

..... He will always be with you.

AMEN

