

PSALM 121 PROTECTION

After the experience of deceit and oppression of Ps 120 it is no wonder then that the very next psalm is an eloquent profession of faith in God's protection and providence. It is a psalm celebrating the trust that can sustain the journeys of life and the journey that life is.

The lifting of the eyes (1-2)

A profession of trust by the individual

What the psalmist has to do is to take his eyes off his surroundings, the brutality of violence and the pain of rejection, and lift his eyes. These first two verses of this psalm are some of the best known of the Psalter.

Sometimes the hills are filled with brigands and thieves, a source of danger but in this song they are the hills that surround Jerusalem. The hills are a reminder of the presence of the Lord among his people and the promises He has made to provide and protect. They are pictures, reminders.

It is to these that the writer lifts his eyes and reminds himself of their true significance. My help comes from the Lord and my Lord is the creator of heaven and earth, of all that there is, seen and unseen.

The phrase is familiar to us as it is taken up into the Apostles Creed and is made the theological basis for our trust. It tells us that the Lord whose power in help and blessing is unlimited by anything that is. In these Psalms of pilgrimage it is the affirmation that the pilgrim goes on the journey in the full knowledge that the Lord is not constrained by even the most powerful in the created order.

I want you to notice how personal this psalm is. "I" and "my" are key. Israel, the community, believes that God is Maker of heaven and

earth but the pilgrim must make that theology his or her own. It must be the basis for the journey otherwise they will never take the risk and begin.

The Lord the travelling Companion (3-4)

A response by the 'minister'

Notice the change in verses 3-8. Someone else is speaking to the pilgrim. The pilgrim confesses their faith and a neighbour or a friend, a representative of the wider community of faith now encourages them to take the journey. This neighbour or friend witnesses to the character of God: It is a beautiful encouragement.

They witness to the companion God.

This image in 3-4 fits a person who is travelling on foot. One thing walkers can do is slip. And when they sleep, not in comfy motels but among the hills and valleys of Judea they are open to attack.

God is the travelling companion for the journey and he intends to "keep" the pilgrim. God is eternally vigilant; he does not slumber even though we are tempted to think that is what he does, "Arouse yourself. Why do you sleep O Lord" (Ps 44.23) is often our cry too. The pilgrim has to walk in the trust that God does not take rests.

The Lord the keeper (5-8)

Next the neighbour witnesses to God the keeper. The Companion God is eternally vigilant but also like a giant umbrella giving relief from the heat of the day and the madness of the night. The sun was a deadly enemy and madness might strike at night (lunar/lunatic).

But more to the point God will not allow evil to assault the pilgrim in such a way that the pilgrim will be destroyed by it. Nothing will come between God and the pilgrim for God is 'for us', for our life. All our

arrivals and departures will not separate us from God even if they separate us from our friends and loved ones because often that is what they do.

Nothing can separate the pilgrim from the loving care of God (Rom 8.38-39).

Further reflections

This Ps like 23 is one of the most influential well known Psalms of the OT. We use when we reach for words of assurance amid the trials and turmoils of our life's journey. We love the sense that God has not only got the whole world in his hands but has you and me, sister/brother in his hands. The psalmist affirms that the creator and ruler of the cosmos has a personal concern for each of us.

This Psalm has also been a psalm for travellers. On the morning of his departure for Africa David Livingstone read this Psalm. Some churches use the Psalm in their Baptism liturgy and some in the funeral liturgy. From birth to death and beyond this Psalm is the psalm of journeying.

The Psalm has been called a psalm for sojourners a name given to early Christians who thought of themselves as pilgrims and sojourners (1Peter 2.11-12 aliens and exiles), as members of the Way (Ac 9.2) as people for whom the whole of life was journey (Heb 11). "For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb13.14).

Of course our best example here is Jesus whose life was journey, to a Cross (Lk 9.57-62). This journey was no pie-in-the-sky escapism but an undermining of all the arrangements for power and privilege that the world then conceived. Herod, Caesar and the Jewish establishment knew what this journey meant and were heel bent on

destroying it. And the good news is that God was there keeping Jesus even on the Cross, keeping his life for the biggest surprise of all. The same god is our keeper.

QUESTIONS

Why do you think that the confession that God is maker of heaven and earth (see the creeds) is important for trusting God? Why is it important to remember this when we worship?

Why is knowing God's character important for trusting on the way?

What are the mundane (sun and moon) and malicious things that may assail us and deflect our trust?

How can we learn to constantly lift our eyes to the hills?