



From where does my help come?

Rev'd Dr Ellie Sanderson, 16th October 2016

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14-4.5

Luke 18:1-8

I lift my eyes to the hills

You may or may not know that that verse, from Psalm 121, has been the verse printed on the little cards that we created for St Alban's to give to people enquiring or connecting with us through our retreat ministry.

I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

That invitation given to people to connect with us as a place of retreat, is a deeper invitation for people to connect deeply with God. We can only offer that invitation if we have confidence, faith, that God draws near to those who seek to draw near to God. Partly our confidence also comes from the belief that as people draw closer to the environment, an ecological environment, a garden home away from the city, people are reconnected to the earth (and I think we can fairly say, the heavenly quality of the earth in this part of the world) and consequently with the maker of this earth. So why is a place of retreat, or the pattern of retreat, significant and potentially necessary at this point in history and in this place?

To answer that question, let me talk us through the rest of our scriptures today. There is a lot of battling and wrestling going on in the scriptures this morning! To put that battling in its right context, let me unpack, first, a little bit more about the significance of the hills in Psalm 121. When we hear the words, “I lift my eyes to the hills”, we perhaps immediately think of the bush clad hills that surround our bays. Therefore, for us, the thought of lifting our eyes to the hills might be a gift of perspective, grace and thankfulness. But for the psalmist the hills meant something different. The hills were the high places where the altars of sacrifice were positioned to the idols and other gods. The hills therefore were often the reminder of idolatry, and worship to things other than the one true God, which in the context of the psalmist is to say, “I lift up my eyes to all that would overwhelm me and take the peace of God from me”. So to lift your eyes to the hills, in that context, would immediately conjure the following question, “from where does my help come?”

So, to our other readings. First, Jacob wrestling with God. Jacob has used his own cunning, his own trickery, to procure blessing; that’s the story of Jacob. He cheats his brother out of his father’s blessing and then he goes through a long journey of meeting and living with the biggest trickster of all, his father in law, who tricks Jacob into marrying both his daughters. After gaining his freedom from his father in law, Jacob here is returning to his land and in the night of this journey Jacob wrestles with a mysterious man for a blessing. Jacob is wounded in the process of this wrestle and needs a walking stick for the rest of his life. Jacob comes out of the encounter, blessed and reliant upon something other than himself.

Perhaps Jacob is a good image for us, if we consider ourselves to be people of strength, ability or power. Jacob wrestling and being wounded, reminds us that we must walk humbly with our God. When we lift our eyes to the hills and see injustice, or power or desire that we crave to interact with, we need to know that if we go into battle to

wrestle a blessing for ourselves or others, we do so willing to be wounded, to be humbled – so that we don't replace those idols with images of ourselves, instead of the one true God.

Now let's think about the Gospel widow. She is a symbol of utter powerlessness in a corrupt system. She also wrestles. She wrestles for justice persistently. Although she is given justice in the end in the gospel story, she is not given true justice in terms of respect. She is belittled as a pain in the neck who only gets what she wants because she is a pain in the neck. She isn't given the dignity of apology or the honour of being recognised as righteous. She is a good symbol for those of us who feel powerless, who see ourselves within a big world that does not seem fair. She is a reminder to persist, even if we are never valued. Because God is not like the unjust judge.

So what is God like? Well in our epistle reading, the letter to Timothy, we see the encouragement to wrestle, to endure and to enter into suffering for the sake of others. That is what God is like, shown to us in the person of Jesus. We are to walk in Christ's image. We are to wrestle with scripture, to let it shape us, correct us, grow us. We are to wrestle with proclaiming the living story of Jesus, in season and out of season. We are to do all these things trusting in the blessing of God that is already ours through Jesus and knowing that it is Jesus who is our righteousness.

Each of these scriptures, contains a degree of angst, of hard work, realism and challenge. Each is the reality of this world. The reality of wrestling, securing, proclaiming the blessing of God in this world. These three readings from scripture contrast starkly the simplicity of Psalm 121. In that psalm we have the acknowledgement of all that opposes God and then a detailed and beautiful exposition of the breadth, depth and height of God's salvation. Here in Psalm 121 we have exactly the sort of faith that I think Jesus might be looking for

when he asks, “but will the son of man find faith on earth when he comes?”

Now let me come back to retreats. We don't have the option of not living in the world where there is struggle and battle. Like Timothy, we must endure, we must enter into that world if we are to be as Christ, who came to the world as light into darkness. But to fully enter that world, we need to also fully enter the place of faith. To be still, to not strive, or wrestle and to know that God is God. Christians have always drawn aside intentionally into God. Jesus did this frequently. It is a normal pattern of our spirituality. It is a moment of humility when we let go and let God. I think this was so profoundly experience for me in our grief and healing retreat earlier this year. People brought such a range of experiences in this world that were experiences of struggle, and as they came, they were profoundly met by the faithfulness of God. After all, we must remember Jacob, it is not us our cunning our ability that keeps us from evil, but God. And as we battle with a sense of powerlessness like the widow, we can know that “the Lord who watches over us does not sleep”. Christ's intercessory commitment to us is more consistent and persistent than even this widow. And as Timothy, we are people sent out into the world with the message of Jesus, and we can know that The Lord watches over our going out and our coming in. To be a place of retreat, means to be a sacred space where we know that God's Spirit will meet people, and that we are the flax woven together as a *kete*, as a basket offering hospitality and protection through our love and prayers, that help to make that encounter take place.

Next time when you lift up your eyes to the hills, remember the battle and remember the battle belongs to the lord: not by might, not by power, but by my spirit says the Lord