

TALK FOR CAREY, ALL-AGE, 8.5.22, PSALM 121, PHIL 2:25-30

'HELP – WHO NEEDS IT ?'

Funny old thing isn't it? Life I mean. The way we behave and think can also be funny too. As Alice in Wonderland said, 'Curiouser and curiouser'. For example: sometimes we think we don't need help, when actually we do. Sometimes we know we need help, but don't always get the kind of help we need. I am pretty sure we have all been there at one time or another. Needing help but refusing it when it is offered. Or, needing help and getting something different.

In contrast, these 'Psalms of Ascent', like Psalm 121 are good news. Good news because these are songs of people both looking for help and finding it. This collection of 15 Psalms is like a special collection. In today's language, this is a music album. These songs are meant to go together, to be used by Jewish pilgrims just as they are in sight of Jerusalem, at the end of their pilgrimage.

It is likely that Jesus himself sang these songs, whenever he came to Jerusalem for a festival. And it is very likely that he was singing one of these Psalms just as he saw Jerusalem from a distance and began to cry over the city. There's a real mix of emotions in all of these short Psalms. There's a real sense of the Psalmist wondering what is going on. Wondering why and how things have gone so wrong, now and in the past. Yes, there's always an electric sense of excitement. How amazing it is for people like us to be able to approach God. How wonderful to draw near to the place where God dwells... But there's also a sense of God's people carrying great burdens and big questions with them.

Each of these songs ask searching questions of God and God's people. And they don't always find neat answers. Some of the songs are left pretty open-ended, Psalm 120 especially. But usually, by asking questions, of God and themselves, they hear some kind of helpful response. The God they have been longing to meet in the Temple, is already speaking to them, even before they arrive at their destination. As Jesus said when he last came to Jerusalem, it is as if the very stones of the walls of the city & Temple cry out & speak for God.

I am sure all of this echoes our own experience. Of longing to meet with God. Hoping to hear from God. But all with this backdrop of anxiety and distress. Of not really knowing what the outcome will be. But with each of these songs, the outcome is that the seeker finds help. Not always the exact type of help the seeker was expecting. But some form of help, from God and from others too.

Psalm 121 is a list of all sorts of fears. This writer is scared of losing his footing on his journey. He is scared of both the sun and the moon. Of the day and the night. A bag of nerves. But the many fears mentioned here are matched by the repeated assurances of God. This message is impossible to miss. In 5 out of 6 verses the Psalmist (and we) are reminded that 'God watches over you'. This is the irresistible conclusion of the Psalmist's statement of faith in the opening verses: 'My help comes from the LORD, Maker of heaven and earth'. Our Creator doesn't just stand back and admire this creation. Our LORD and Heavenly Father is passionately involved in creation on a daily basis.

So, our help comes from the LORD, every day. Alleluia! And our help also comes from those around us. Which brings us to story of Epaphroditus in Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi. Epaphroditus was sent by these Christians with a specific mission to help Paul in prison in Rome. And he did. He helped in the place of those who couldn't help Paul more directly. Paul clearly deeply appreciated the help he offered. A close friendship developed between him and Paul. So, when Epaphroditus came down with some illness, it caused Paul and the Philippians great concern. So instead of helping, he had to accept Paul's help. Praise God, Epaphroditus recovered and saved Paul and those who sent him a lot of sorrow. But his illness signalled the end of his mission. (I have an activity sheet for young and old to do some challenges, colouring in & answering some questions about this story. I will hand these out in moment)

Sometimes we can't help, but others can. Sometimes the help we give is for a short time, for a specific purpose. Both these facts mean that we don't need to get exhausted with the burden of helping others. We need to know the limits of our own resources.

But how wonderful to be the answer to someone's prayer. How blessed it is to provide someone with the help that they need. Perhaps this is what we should pray from all this. That we ask God to show us who needs help. To show us what kind of help they need. And to show us when our job is done. Sometimes we can help others by praying. Sometimes we can offer a helping hand in some way. Sometimes we know someone else who can help.

Praise the LORD, who helps us and who encourages us to be a help. And helping is not just limited to helping people. We can help God's creation. Just one way, for example, is to plant flowers to grow to help the bees. Another way is to get advice and plant trees during the Queen's Jubilee year. There are all sorts of ways we can help each other and our fellow creatures too.

