**Psalm 121**

You will see from the pewsheet that, this week, I was due to be preaching on financial giving as a spiritual discipline. But given recent events, at home and abroad, I hope you will forgive me for changing the theme at the last minute. Because I think it would be wrong of me to ignore what has been happening lately.

At the heart of what it means for us to be a mission-shaped church is for us to be truly connected in word and deed to the community of Enfield. We want to live out the truth of our strapline and truly be: “Church at the heart of Enfield”.

Well, this week, the heart of Enfield, metaphorically and literally, has been rocked. We have seen terror unfold in an unimaginable way on the streets of Paris - and I know that many of us have friends and relatives living there. We have heard of bombings and attacks in Lebanon and Syria and Iraq, claiming the lives of hundreds. We have watched the news from Mali and witnessed the murderous terror there. We have experienced an attempted robbery at Nat West in Enfield that could have unfolded into a horrific trauma for many. We have had the bomb threat and the controlled explosion on Friday that exposed to us, in a very real way, just how vulnerable we feel as a London community.

In many conversations this week, I know that many of us, perhaps all of us, are living with a heightened sense of fear and nervousness. Our children are asking questions that we don’t know how to answer. Jo and Barry are having conversations with school children who are genuinely scared. Some of us are taken through our daytime jobs into danger zones around the world and are nervous about that. For myself, it becomes ever more dangerous to move around London wearing a dog collar, as it marks clergy out for random attack.

Heightened fear and insecurity, for many of us, is becoming an increasing reality. And I think it would have been irresponsible of me not to address this issue in my sermon today.

Not that I have any answers, of course. I have no more wisdom or insight than you do. I am not closer to God than any of you. I am just one more spiritual traveler through life, just the same as you, with my own doubts and fears and lack of faith and very real human emotions.

So I don’t stand here this morning with any answers. But I do want us to come together as a Community in this act of worship this morning and at the very least, acknowledge together how we are feeling, and for us to stand in solidarity together, and for us to let each other know that we are brothers and sisters together: one family and that we will be there for each other, whatever life throws at us.

And as we stand together in solidarity as a Community of the Gospel, we will become “Church at the heart of Enfield”.

But where do we start with an issue such as this?

Well for me, as so often, the starting point is Psalm 121, which, if you want to follow it with me, is on page 600 of the pew Bibles.

Psalm 121 is, for me, one of the most beautiful passages of Scripture - a passage that I return to again and again in various seasons of my life, in good times and in bad, because it speaks so profoundly of God’s love and care and protection for us.

It is a Psalm that we know was regularly used by the Israelites as they traveled to Jerusalem each year for the Passover. It is almost certainly the case that it is one of the Psalms that Jesus himself would have been singing as he went to Jerusalem that last time to face his crucifixion.

And the Psalm, as you can see, is based around the idea of a journey: the idea that life itself is a journey. The idea of the Psalm is that as we travel through life, the Lord will protect us always, by day and by night and that he is always, always looking out for us. Six times in this Psalm we read the idea that the Lord is our keeper: verse 3: “He who keeps you will not slumber”; verse 4: “He who keeps Israel…”; verse 5: “The Lord is your keeper…”; verse 7: “The Lord will keep you from all evil”; verse 7 again: “The Lord will keep your life”; verse 8: “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in”. Whatever else we take from this Psalm, we are left with the absolute confident truth that God is our constant protector in times of danger.

But it is important to remember that, in the Old Testament, God was speaking primarily to the community of Israel rather than specifically to individuals. And so we are reminded that, when there are dangers to be faced in our everyday lives, we need to come together and find support in the community. We must not allow divisions to come between us but we must constantly be seeking to build one another up, to strengthen one another, and to find support and encouragement from one another so that we can face times of trial together.

So we come to the Psalm itself, which opens with these well-known words in verse 1: “I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?”

In the original Hebrew, that verse is actually a lot more ambiguous because it is not clear whether this is a statement or a question. It might say: “I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?” or it might say, “I lift my eyes to the hills, from where comes my help”. It might be a question – “where does my help come from?” or it may be a statement of fact – “where my help comes from”. We can read this verse both ways and I think that we can get two slightly different ideas out of it, according to how we read it.

First, let’s read it as a question: “I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?”

Here we have the people of Israel journeying from their homes towards Jerusalem: a dangerous journey, an arduous journey for many of them. If any of you have been to Israel, you will know that the hills and mountain regions are not like Snowdonia; they are not the green, rolling hills of the Peak District. The mountain regions are desolate, rocky wildernesses, perilous to walk through, dangerous to travel across. The mountains were the place where bandits and terrorists lived: you remember the story that Jesus told of the Good Samaritan who looked after the man who had suffered a physical attack as he journeyed from Jerusalem to Jericho through this mountainous and desert region.

So the Psalmist is making a journey through an area where there is danger and physical threat, and he asks a legitimate question out of his fear and nervousness: “I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?”

But there’s something else very discomforting about these hills too that cause the frightened and nervous believer to ask the question…

During the Biblical period, Old Testament and New Testament, the hills of Palestine where thought to be the home of the gods and when you stood in the Valley and looked up to the hills, you could see yourself surrounded by pagan Temples and idols to be worshipped. As the traveler looked to the hills, he would have seen glinting in the sunlight the false gods and the idols and the temple roofs of pagan practice and false religion. And he would have looked at all this and realized the inability of these gods to help, and so he asks the question: “I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?”

As we live in Enfield today, with heightened levels of fear and the threat of terror on our streets, and as we undertake about our jobs that may take us into more dangerous places and situations, perhaps we can identify with the Psalmist and we too, quite legitimately, see verse 1 as a question: “I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?”

The answer to that, of course, comes by no longer seeing verse 1 as a question but by using the alternative Hebrew reading and seeing it as a statement of fact: “I lift my eyes to the hills – where my help comes from”.

In the Bible, the mountains and hills is not always negative imagery - the mountains and the hills don’t always speak to us of danger and physical threat and false religion. The mountains and the hills are also used as a metaphor for the strength of God: the immovable, unchanging love of God for us, hemming us in and protecting us on every side.

So, we ask the question in times of heightened fear and danger: “I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?” And we answer that question by removing the question mark: “I lift my eyes to the hills where my help comes from”. God himself is our mountain, our hill, our rock - and he is the source of comfort and security, and the rest of the Psalm goes on to develop that idea for us…

In verse 2, the Psalmist makes a bold and confident claim: “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth”. That is the answer to the question. The truth is, that in times of fear and heightened threats to us, our only help can come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth and we must learn to put our trust in him.

So what does this mean for us in Enfield today? Does it mean that, because we are Christians, nothing bad will ever happen to us? Does it mean that we will never face a terror attack? Does it mean that we will remain perfectly safe in our places of work as a result of our faith?

No.

That can never be God’s promise to us - and it most certainly has not been the experience of Christians through the centuries; that we somehow become immune to the tragedies of life as if God somehow puts an invisible force field of protection around us the moment we believe in him.

And actually, that is not what Psalm 121 says to us. You will notice that the remaining verses are all general statements, not specific. At no point does the Psalmist say: “As you journey to Jerusalem for the Passover, you will not be attacked by robbers” or “As you journey through life, you will not face a situation of terror”. Instead, the Psalmist is saying something different altogether: he is telling us that, no matter what we face in life – good and bad – God will protect us and hold us: Verse 3: “He will not let your foot be moved”; Verse 5: “The Lord is your shade”; Verse 7: “The Lord will keep you from all evil” and so on…

So what does this word ‘keep’ actually mean?

Well, I think it means that whatever evil we are confronted with in life, it does not have the power to determine our eternal destiny. Whatever happens to us, God is our ultimate destiny and our ultimate future - and so no harm can ever rob us of that.

Isn’t that the testimony of Christians throughout the ages? As each disciple was martyred for the faith, as the apostle Paul was beheaded for the faith, as thousands upon thousands of martyrs and saints through the centuries have been crucified and shot and burnt at the stake and eaten by lions and so on, each one of them have testified with their dying breath to the fact that evil can claim their bodies but evil can never claim their souls and their eternal destiny as a child of God.

The Lord will keep us, the Lord is our keeper. As we read in verse 7, “The Lord will keep your life…”

God can never promise that evil will not harm our bodies. But God does promise that evil will never harm our eternal destiny and that we are safe and secure with the Lord our keeper.

And, of course, the greatest example of that is the witness of Jesus Christ upon the cross. The ultimate act of evil, carried out in the name of false politics and false religion against a truly innocent man, resulting in his torture and tragic death. And yet, with his dying breath, Jesus Christ was able to say: “Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit”. No amount of terror or evil that was thrown at Jesus could separate him from the love of God. And that was proven three days later for the whole world to see, through his glorious resurrection, his being raised by God from the dead.

And no matter what life throws at us, the destiny of Jesus has become our destiny, as Paul tells us in Romans 6:5: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

So how are we to respond to the situation in the world today that creeps ever closer into our community and our lives? Just three brief points…

First, we must stand together as a community, as a family. That means that we must listen to one another with kindness and compassion when any one of us expresses emotions of fear and nervousness. St. Andrew’s must increasingly become a safe place to express who we are and what we are feeling, without any fear that we will be judged or rejected or laughed at. We must be a community, a family that listens kindly to one another…

And, as we listen to one another, so we must pray for one another. We may not know what words to say to one another to ease fear but prayer is powerful as we thought about last week and we can offer deep support to each other as we pray.

Secondly, I ask that we are particularly kind and loving towards our Muslim neighbours. Yes, we may feel fear and nervousness - but I cannot imagine how the average Muslim person feels as they cope with not only fear and nervousness but also having people look at them constantly with suspicion and face unfair portrayals in the media and are scapegoated by the rest of society for the evil so wickedly carried out in the name of their peaceful and beautiful religion.

Pray for your Muslim friends and neighbours. Show kindness and compassion and understanding to your Muslim friends and neighbours.

Let them know that they are loved and not judged…

And finally, I say that we must increasingly put our trust in God who is our strength and our redeemer, who is our rock and stronghold, who is our keeper. Each one of us needs to grow in the knowledge and spiritual insight that, no matter what befalls our bodies, our eternal security is assured in him. As we heard in our Gospel reading, he is our Good Shepherd, who calls us and leads us out and keeps us safe and secure in the fields and the pastures. You are a child of God and as the Psalmist says, “The Lord will keep your life” - whatever that means for you…

I want to finish with these ultimate words of comfort that Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, in chapter 8: “If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Today, we lift our eyes to the hills. Where is our help?

Our help is God, who is our strength, security and protector.

Our help is God, who shepherds us into intimacy with him.

Our help is God, who today is leading us into life in all its fullness.

As world events unfold, as community events unfold, may we know the keeping power of God in our lives - and may our lived be truly lived in all its fullness. Amen.