

Psalm 121 - 18th November 2011 by Jane Vlach

The recent joint service with Guildford Methodist Church at St Mary's took place on Bible Sunday. Along with two others I spoke briefly on a favourite passage of the Bible. My choice was Psalm 121, which is meaningful to me for a number of reasons, including the following:

The first is that it helps me keep my feet on the ground! When I hear this psalm I often think of a Glaswegian man called Jimmy who recited it to me sitting on the steps of Bonn Square in Oxford over twenty years ago. He was a middle-aged, homeless alcoholic and I was a naive student gaining work experience in Oxford for the summer. In my spare time I joined a group of like-minded students from St Aldate's Church and sat with the homeless and listened to their stories. I'm ashamed to admit that, at the time, I probably assumed that I knew more about the Bible than they did, even though my own knowledge was somewhat limited. So it was with some incredulity that after a few weeks of getting to know the people of the square Jimmy sat next to me one day and quietly recited Psalm 121. I had to hide my amazement as I realised how presumptuous I had been. It hadn't crossed my mind that as a child Jimmy had been part of a church family. As he grew older and life got tougher he'd turned to drink to the extent that he'd finally reached the point where he felt his wife and children were better off in Glasgow without him.

The experience of hearing Jimmy's retelling of the Psalm made a tremendous impression on me and I am now very careful not to make assumptions about other people's spirituality or where they stand before God.

Jimmy's story also touched me as he said that the Psalm reminded him of his mother, as she had taught the psalm to him. No doubt there had been a lot of difficulty in their relationship and she must have despaired at his behaviour, but she had passed on words that gave great comfort to him as he struggled to make sense of his life.

At times when we feel desolate we need to be able to call on passages of Scripture that we have learnt over the years. Having a grasp of a few memorable verses has helped me face some tough moments and now that I have children I realise the responsibility I have to equip them with verses that can sustain them in difficult times.

Jimmy died in the autumn that year but I like to think that he drew strength from the psalm. I am grateful for the lessons he unwittingly passed on to me, and imagine how he would have smiled if he'd known he was being mentioned in a Bible Journal!

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.