Talk for Sunday 13th July

I can’t wait! I just can’t wait...Life is often lived at a fast pace, and yet still we can’t wait for the next thing. We can’t wait for...school to end for the term, for my holiday to start, for something more exciting to come along. Along with much else, travel nowadays is quick and efficient. In the 1800s, transatlantic crossing times generally ranged from 8 to 14 weeks by sailing ship. Today, crossing the Atlantic Ocean can take just a few hours by plane. We’re all in a hurry and our aim generally is to arrive as quickly as possible. God’s ways, though, are not our ways; his thoughts are not our thoughts. God works very differently from us and to a very different timescale. He values patient persistence, and the long, slow journey of faithful obedience in the same direction. This is the description of pilgrimage. A pilgrim is a traveller who is on a journey to a holy place. As Christians together, we are pilgrims on a journey, fellow travellers on the way. We are spending our lives travelling towards God, and our path for getting there is Jesus Christ, the Way. In my talks over the next few weeks, we will be exploring the value of travelling the long, slow journey of discipleship which is a journey of faithful obedience in the same direction.

In the Hebrew Psalter there are a group of songs known as The Psalms of Ascent. They are travel songs which were sung by the pilgrims as they went up to celebrate the great worship festivals at the Temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the highest city in Palestine so all who travelled there spent much of their time climbing a road that led upwards. Pilgrims don’t just make a physical journey, they make a spiritual one, developing in maturity as they travel ever nearer to what St Paul describes as ‘the goal, to which God is beckoning us onward- to Jesus’. As we travel with others on pilgrimage our goal is to grow closer and closer to Jesus.

Psalm 121 is one of the Psalms of Ascent. It’s a well-loved Psalm, which assures pilgrims of God’s protection in the in-between times in life which we all go through: the time between leaving home and arriving at our destination; the time between leaving childhood and become a mature adult; the time between leaving doubt and arriving at faith. ‘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.’ This psalm provides courage, support and inner direction for getting us to where God is leading us in Jesus Christ.

Everyone who travels through life needs help from time to time, as we see in The Parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable has its main focus on the stranger who helped. What of the traveller himself? What we know for sure, because Jesus tells us so, is that he was someone travelling alone from Jerusalem, the highest city in Palestine, to Jericho which is known as the lowest city on Earth. The steep, mountainous road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a notoriously dangerous way to travel. It was a road with narrow, rocky outcrops and blind turns, which made it a place to be wary of robbers. On his journey this sole traveller does indeed fall into the hands of robbers, who strip him, beat him, and leave him for dead.

Help comes to him from an unexpected source: a Samaritan who turns out to be a good neighbour. According to Jesus, being a good neighbour involves both giving help as modelled by a person who is not “like us”, and also being willing to receive help, even and especially from those we see as strangers. We are fellow travellers on the Way, here to help each other travel onwards and bear the load. It’s so simple and yet so hard. We are to break out of our routine, even when it’s not convenient, and serve and help those we may come across, as well as appreciating help from those who may be different from us yet act with generous compassion.

Everyone who travels the road of faith needs help from time to time. We need cheering up when our spirits flag; we need direction when the way is unclear. For those who choose to travel as pilgrims, the Psalms of Ascent combine the cheerfulness of a travel song with the practicality of a guidebook and map. They offer us footprints in which to place our own feet on the way. They offer us the reassurance that we can turn to God not just for the big issues in our lives, but for those small, troubling things that pop up day to day. The God of Creation who brought light out of darkness is also the God of this day who guards you from every evil.

To be clear, though, just because we have said ‘no’ to the world and ‘yes’ to God, we don’t suddenly find that all our problems are solved, our questions answered and our troubles over. Disappointing though it may be, the Christian life can still be full of troubles, and we find ourselves scanning the horizon, looking for someone to give us aid. None of us can guarantee our security, however luxuriously we travel through life. Illness, accidents, doubt, fear, fatigue and anxiety can happen to any of us. ‘In this world you will have trouble’, says Jesus, ‘but do not fear, for I have overcome the world’. All the water in all the oceans cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside. Nor can all the trouble in the world harm us unless it gets within us. The promise of Psalm 121 is this: God guards you from every evil. Faith is the solid, massive, secure experience of God, who keeps all evil from getting inside us, who guards our life, who guards us when we leave and when we return, who guards us now and always. None of the things that may happen to us, none of the troubles we encounter, will have any power to get between us and God, to separate us from his grace and love. God’s interest in us does not go up and down depending on how well we’re doing spiritually. He loves us because he loves us because he loves us. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from that love. And so we travel on together rejoicing, safe in that everlasting love.