

A Reflection on Psalm 121

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

He will not suffer your foot to stumble; he who watches over you will not sleep. Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord himself watches over you; the Lord is your shade at your right hand, so that the sun shall not strike you by day, neither the moon by night.

The Lord shall keep you from all evil; it is he who shall keep your soul. The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth for evermore.

Psalm 121

Psalm 121 begins with an experience which all of us can relate to, of beholding a spectacular landscape and feeling a sense of awe; of drawing from our sense of the majesty of the creation as a whole a perception also of the majesty of *God* who created it. Simply to see the glory of a sunrise or a sunset can be an experience which is in some way *religious*, even if we are not very 'spiritual' as a whole: it takes us *out of ourselves*; it *transports* us; it exalts us with a kind of *ecstatic delight*. For some of us, this is the start of our understanding of 'spiritual experience' in the first place.



This sense of awe and of wonder is closely related to what is meant by the more explicitly religious word, *worship*. Obviously we do not worship the *hills* or the effects of the *sunlight* as it illuminates them; but we can begin to understand why someone might worship the one who *created* them – and it can be easy to

return to the sense that creation is not only the product of a *creator*, of *God*, but that it is held in the hands of God's *care and protection*, just as Psalm 121 describes. It is not a matter of logic or proof or of evidence: that is the wrong way to think about it altogether. It is more like a response of deep *instinct*. It is like a moment of clarity and sudden *recognition*.

The Psalmist speaks elsewhere of the way in which the creation itself glorifies God, expressing awe and wonder before the Living God:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.*

Psalm 19.1-4

There is a famous anecdote which describes the bewilderment felt by the Kalahari people of southern Africa when they discovered that Laurens van der Post, a European visitor among them, *couldn't hear the stars*. They concluded that he must be very *ill*. There is a kind of ailment – a moral and spiritual dis-ease – which is reflected in our own culture's alienation from this ancient and instinctual perception of coherence and shared exultation at the very heart of things.

In the tradition of Christian theology – formal reflection on the *meaning* of all this – some theologians have favoured a view that it is not only the revealed word of God – the *Bible* – which describes and explains who God is, but that the *creation itself* also bears witness to the character of God in so far as it *reflects the identity of its maker*. At the start of the Bible this idea is embedded in the description of our own humanity as something which is made 'in the image and likeness of God' (Genesis 1.26-27). It is not only *words* which explain God, but also our *moral and spiritual character* in itself. These theologians go a step further. It is our creation in God's image – as a kind of *refection* of the character of God – which enables us to *understand* God to begin with. And the testimony to God's character which is coded into the very structure of the universe helps us make sense of the words of the Bible, just as the words of the Bible help us recognise and make sense of image and likeness of God according to which we were made. The two testimonies are *analogies* of each other; and we make sense of their relationship not through logic or abstract description and 'knowledge', but in wonder and awe and *wisdom*, just as the Psalm describes. May these qualities become ever clearer within us as we, too, lift up our eyes to the hills, and recognise there the Glory of God.