

The Psalms or Songs of Ascents

1 – Introduction

One of my favourite hymns is “To be a pilgrim” taken from the text of John Bunyan’s wonderful story of Pilgrim’s Progress. Bunyan was imprisoned for 12 years in the middle of the 17th Century in Bedford in England because of his firm faith in Jesus. The Pilgrim’s Progress, he wrote while in gaol, tells of the journey of a man from the City of Destruction, (this world) to the Celestial City (God’s heavenly kingdom). It tells of all the trials and dangers the pilgrim met on the way to his goal.

The English word “pilgrim” comes from the Latin word “peregrinus” meaning “stranger”, for a pilgrim is going on a journey through a world full of enemies and strangers and his goal is the safety of God’s presence.

On the first (and only) time I visited Israel, some years ago now, our plane landed at Tel Aviv airport in the dusk. After the customs routines, we boarded a coach to take us up to Jerusalem to our hotel. You do go up to Jerusalem from the coastal plain. I knew this, but I was made very aware of the symbolism of going up to Jerusalem as our coach overtook, on climbing a hill, a minibus full of male (Hasidic?) Jews. They were standing in the bus, prayer books in hands, black hats firmly on their heads, side locks dangling at their temples, swaying back and forward as they recited their prayers. They were going up to Jerusalem, and for them it was a significant act of devotion simply to go up on pilgrimage to where, in the long years of their history, their magnificent Temple had stood over their most holy spot, the very dwelling place of God. The Temple is no more, destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, but the place where some of its great stones still remain, is now attended almost constantly by Jews in prayer.

Those Jews in the minibus, devoutly praying as they went up to what is now left of the Temple, reminded me of a set of fifteen very special Psalms in the Bible, numbered 120 to 134, called the Songs of Ascents or “goings up” or “stairs” as one old translation of the Bible has it.

This group of Psalms was probably used by parties of pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the three special festivals of the Jews: Passover, when they remembered their escape from Egypt, and the Feasts of Weeks and Tabernacles when they remembered God’s goodness to them in guiding them through the Sinai desert to the Promised Land.

The Songs of Ascents begin in Psalm 120 with distress, and end in Psalm 134 with joy. They begin surrounded by enemies and end at home in Jerusalem, where they are surrounded by the servants of the Lord presenting their sacrifices in the Temple, the goal of their pilgrimage.

The first Christians, who were all Jews, had to face the fact that Jesus had prophesied the destruction of the Temple and had brought in a new relationship between God and the whole of mankind, not just the Jews. This new relationship didn’t depend on the existence of a physical Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus told his followers that they were the Temple of God from now on - just think of it - God can live in you and me! Writing to the Christians in Corinth, Paul could say in 1 Corinthians 6 verse 19: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”

Where can God be found today? We don’t have to go on pilgrimage to Rome or Canterbury or Jerusalem to find him. Jesus once said to his disciples, “Don’t look

here and there for the dwelling place of God, for his Kingdom, for he lives among you and within you." Wherever there is a heart that is sorry for its sins against God and man, and sincerely cries out for God's forgiveness, and puts all its trust in Christ, there God lives.

Jesus once told a story about two men who went into the Temple in Jerusalem to pray, one was a religious man, the other wasn't. The religious man stood praying and telling God how good he was, the non-religious man just asked God sincerely to forgive him of his sins. It was the non-religious man who found that God had come to live in his heart and not the other man, said Jesus.

So, it isn't a physical Temple we need to visit, but God himself in humility and trust. And yet, there is a sense in which we can join the pilgrims going up to Jerusalem singing the Songs of Ascents. We shall be looking at some of these fifteen pilgrim songs and we shall find out they have a lot to tell us about how to make our pilgrimage as we go through life. They have many wise and encouraging things to say to us. Let me leave some of them with you:

From Psalm 120: "I call on the Lord in my distress, and He answers me."

From Psalm 122: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"

From Psalm 128: "Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways."

From Psalm 133: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity."

And from the last Song of Ascents, Psalm 134: "Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord."

For all of us life is a journey. We have begun it and one day we will finish it. For the unbeliever, and for those who say there is no God, their journey is going nowhere, it has no ultimate goal. It is just going to end in emptiness and eternal judgement; it is a downward journey. But for those who have placed their faith in Jesus for salvation, life is a pilgrimage; it is an ascending journey that has both a purpose and a goal. It has a wonderful end when we reach the eternal Temple which is God himself, the one we have loved and served on our pilgrimage down here.

2 - Psalms 120 and 121

In our study of the fifteen Songs of Ascent, Psalms 120-134, we can imagine a band of men, women and children, some playing on stringed instruments, walking steadily towards the Jerusalem hills and the holy city where they are going to worship the Lord God.

Let us read the first two of these Psalms of Ascent: First, Psalm 120:

"I call on the Lord in my distress, and he answers me. Save me, O Lord, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues. What will he do to you and more besides O deceitful tongue? He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom tree. Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar! Too long have I live among those who hate peace. I am a man of peace, but when I speak, they are for war."

The Psalm begins with a cry of distress to God because of enemies which surround the pilgrims: people who tell lies and hate peace and are always looking

for trouble-they do exist in our world today don't they? You can be certain that the man or woman who wants to follow God and the ways of peace and justice will have many enemies. It takes great courage to be a man or woman of peace. In many parts of the world today there is conflict and caught between the two sides of those who hate each other and do violence to each other are men and women of peace and reconciliation. As we journey on God's highway we will be disliked by some for not going the way of the world. For not worshipping money and things we will be despised by some people. For insisting on a personal relationship with Jesus as our only hope of getting right with God, we will be misunderstood even by some so-called religious people.

Christians are suffering for their faith all over the world today. If a Christian has done wrong he or she must suffer for it, but many are in prison, attacked or even killed simply because they belong to Jesus. The first Christians were called Followers of the Way. They had started on a journey, a pilgrimage and Jesus was the way they were travelling on, and as Jesus had many opponents, so they had, too. The Christian life is not a matter of keeping rules and regulations and rituals outwardly but first and foremost being at one with Christ. Jesus told his disciples to do good to their enemies and to pray for them: He said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew chapter 5 verse 9). To be truly a person of peace we have to have Jesus, the Prince of Peace, living in our hearts. The wonderful thing about the Christian good news is that it gives us this peace in ourselves to love others by God actually coming to live in within us. John the apostle writes: "No one has ever seen God: but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." And "'If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God" (1 John chapter 4 verses 12 and 15).

Jesus died on a Cross to bring peace between God and mankind; because of his death on our behalf people like you and me can be at peace with God and with our fellow men and women. Can we say in the words of this first Song of Ascents "I am for peace" and can we say, "I am for Jesus, the Prince of peace"? No matter what race of people you belong to, no matter what language you speak or culture you were brought up in, the One who keeps the pilgrims going to Jerusalem can be your helper and guardian, too. May I invite you to join this road, this way which is Jesus?

3 - Psalm 121

Psalm 121 continues by declaring that the Lord is always showing his care and concern for the pilgrim. Neither the sun's scorching heat, nor will even the moonlight at night harm his pilgrims. Now let us read the second of the Songs of Ascents, Psalm 121:

"I lift up my eyes to the hills — where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot to slip — he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you — the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, not the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm — he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and for ever more."

Looking at hills and mountains can be very inspiring. I go quite often to see my friends in Slovakia and usually go by train from Prague in the Czech Republic. It's a long nine hour journey, mainly through flat or rolling countryside until the Tatra Mountains come into view. Then the familiar peaks appear, rugged, high, mighty and always the same. The scenery may change a bit in the lowlands from year to year, but those Tatra Mountains have always been the same over the fifty years I

have been going to them. God is like that, unchanging, dependable, sure and trustworthy.

The Psalmist looks up at the hills of the Holy Land as he and his companions journey to Jerusalem from the lowlands. Can he get help from those hills? No, they are just symbols of God's strength, but his real help does come from the "Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (verse 2), from the One who made those very hills.

The key word in this Psalm is "watch" (verse 4), "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (verse 5), "The Lord watches over you", (verse 7) "he will watch over your life", (verse 8) "the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and for ever more." You may ask, but can these promises given to Jews on pilgrimage long ago apply to me, to us, today? They can, because the term "Israel" applies to those who trust the God who revealed himself in the Law and Covenant of the Old Testament. Jesus, is the fulfilment of that law and is the One who, as both God and man brings us to God. Christian believers are one with all those in the days of the Old Testament who truly believed in God, the Lord of hosts.

In the 18th Century a group of Christians were being persecuted in Central Europe; they fled westwards and came into the region of Saxony in Germany. There a Christian nobleman called Nicholas von Zinzendorf gave them land to settle on. They built houses and a chapel and became self-supporting. They called their village, Herrnhut, which means "the Lord watches". Because they had come from Moravia (part of the Czech Republic today) they were known as the Moravians and became very influential in missionary work world-wide. You see, they didn't escape persecution and trouble, but they did know the care and guidance of God, that he was watching over their lives. And so it can be with us.

The Lord God has watched over his people over many hundreds of years of history. They often had it hard and unpleasant, but God preserved them in their faith.

If you have started on the journey to God by accepting Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, then you will be watched over right to the end. Take heart, my friend, if you are finding following Jesus hard, he is watching over you. The apostle Peter, who had many trials himself, wrote to his fellow Christians: "You can now hope for a perfect inheritance beyond the reach of change and decay, "reserved" in heaven for you. And in the meantime you are guarded by the power of God operating through your faith." (1 Peter chapter 1 verses 4 and 5 Phillips)

4 - Psalm 122

Psalm 122 is the third in the fifteen Songs of Ascents which we are looking at, songs of pilgrimage as we journey to God.

"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'. Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together. That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel. There the thrones of judgement stand, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your citadels. For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, 'Peace be within you'. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity."

Despite its hardships and problems this pilgrimage is a joyful experience, its goal

is the joyful praising of God in heaven, pictured for us here as the city of Jerusalem. To journey to the one we love and who loves us gives us great joy. The Psalmist says he was glad when friends came along one day and invited him to join their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In a Christian newspaper I get each week there are often stories told by people whose lives were desperately unhappy because of the way they were living and thinking, then someone invited them to join the pilgrimage to God and they became transformed people.

Now your life may not be in a mess, but perhaps you have no point, no goal in life and you were meant to be travelling to God, your Maker. In this Psalm Jerusalem is seen as a strong and compact city, totally in harmony with itself; a place of righteousness and justice and security. The Psalm-writer knew that all around him there was chaos and instability, his world was like that and so is ours. There is no true security and peace except in God's presence. And this place of security is for all kinds of people; note verse 4 "the tribes of the Lord". Old Israel was composed of 12 tribes, all different and varied and you and I are called by God to join a people of God wider even than old Israel, composed of all nations and tribes and peoples and languages, but all travelling in the same direction. The Christian faith is not just for Westerners, or people of the East only or the South, not just for one race or ethnic group, but for all peoples.

The good news of the Christian gospel, while it started in Jerusalem, is for the whole world. From its very beginning the gospel broke down racial and social and gender barriers in its day, because the first Christians knew that Jesus was Lord of all, King of the universe, and Saviour of the world. One of their earliest messages was "For God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him".

God calls you today to start on this pilgrimage by coming to Jesus his Son, and by walking with his people together towards his heavenly kingdom

5 - Psalm 123

Now let's continue to sing the songs of ascent going up to Jerusalem with the pilgrims by reading Psalm 123:

"I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven. As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their Master, As the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her Mistress, So our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he shows us his mercy. Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us, for we have endured much contempt. We have endured much ridicule from the proud, much contempt from the arrogant."

The mood of this next song of Ascent swings back from the joy of the last Psalm when the psalm-writer is invited to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to a cry for mercy. The psalm-writer and pilgrim is having to face contempt from his enemies. Contempt is hard to bear. Jesus said that to be contemptuous of someone, to pour scorn on them is worse than being angry with them. He said: "Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew chapter 5 verse 22).

So the psalm-writer looks to God trustingly, to heaven where God is seated on his righteous throne. He looks, says this Psalm, as a servant looks to his Master or Mistress, confident in their goodness to him. Our Lord God is a trustworthy Master.

Today not many of us have servants who are utterly dependent on their Master or Mistress as in the Bible days, so a modern equivalent of this relationship would be the faithful, patient look of a well-trained dog looking to its master, ignoring everything else as it waits for a word of command to obey.

Today most people would not like to think of themselves as dependent on God like that. We like to think we are masters of our own lives. But that is not the Biblical view. The writer cries out here in verse 3 "Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us". We depend on God's mercy to forgive us our sins and to help to save us from our own selfishness and folly and to lead us in paths that are right. And as we receive mercy we become more and more glad to show mercy to other people. Mercy is a great blessing. The great English playwright Shakespeare wrote that mercy comes upon us "as the gentle rain from heaven"- we all need it very much indeed. Mercy is holding back from us punishments we really deserve. Without mercy a nation is in danger of injustice and cruelty and when we don't show mercy to each other we create much misery. The Christian knows he has been shown mercy. At the heart of the Christian faith is the Cross of Jesus where God's mercy on a sinful world was shown. The Christian is one who has received that mercy from Jesus and is glad to pass it on to others.

The Eastern Orthodox churches have a prayer that is repeated: "Jesus, Lord, have mercy on me". It's a prayer we need to pray sincerely as we continue on our pilgrimage up towards our heavenly Jerusalem. Join us again as we continue to read in the Psalm of Ascent.

6 - Psalm 124

We are continuing our look at the fifteen Psalms of Ascent composed probably for pilgrims going up to worship God in Jerusalem. The next one, Psalm 124:

"If the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel say, If the Lord had not been on our side when men attacked us, when their anger flared against us, they would have swallowed us alive; the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us away. Praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth. We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."

This Psalm is said to be a Psalm of David. It is a song of deliverance from Israel's enemies. Many times David, King of Israel, was threatened by overwhelming attack from nations surrounding his country, particularly from the Philistines who, lived in the area we know today as the Gaza strip.

This song is a powerful description of the opposition we face if we are on the King's Highway, living a life that pleases God. Without God's help we cannot overthrow our spiritual enemies. In David's case it was literally attacks from men, from armies, verse 2, and it could be that man are literally trying to harm you today. Look to God, as the writer of this Psalm does, for rescue from them. But for most of us it will be Satan's attacks in our inner lives that we need help against. Peter tells us that the Devil (or Satan as he is also called), God's enemy, is like a roaring lion going around looking for people to swallow up. He writes: "Be controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Resist him standing firm in the faith" (1 Peter chapter 5 verse 8). James urges us: "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James chapter 4 verse 7).

Note the pictures this psalm-writer uses to describe the enemies of God that are attacking him: they are like a great beast verse 3, a flood, verse 4 or it is like

being caught in a net, verse 7, as a wild bird so that the more we struggle the more we get caught up in the net. We can't get out of the net unless someone comes and makes a hole in it so that we can escape. That is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Don't let us get caught up in temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One". We may be trapped by past sins, by remorse for what we have done, by regrets, by sadness, by doubt, by selfishness: Jesus is the only One who can really set us free from them; there is no one else to help us.

The Psalm ends with an appeal to the name of the Lord, to the character of God as a loving and all-powerful Father, the Maker of heaven and earth. I know Christians who are caught up in all sorts of terrible circumstances not of their own doing, but they are free in spirit because they know this truth-their help is in the name of the Lord, they know the Lord is on their side. Call out to him now, he will deliver you.

7 - Psalm 125

We look now at the next of the Psalms of Ascents, Psalm 125:

"Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and for evermore. The sceptre of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart. But those who turn to crooked ways the Lord will banish with the evildoers. Peace be upon Israel".

Is it right, do you think, that wickedness should go unpunished and that good people should suffer at the hands of the bad? This psalm writer is sure that it is not right. He is a realist. He knows that there are people in this world who "turn to crooked ways," (see verse 5) and they cause a lot of misery. He is sure that, in the end, evildoers will be banished, sent away from the holy city. Who are "evil-doers" and what are "crooked ways"? They are people who put themselves first in what they do, they refuse to consider the law of God and his love, they hurt the innocent and use them for their own ends. Note that this Psalm shows us that such evil people can sometimes take control of a society; look at verse 3; this has happened many times in history. When it does happen, even good people can be influenced to do wrong. We must watch out constantly to see this does not happen to us. One day all evildoers will be banished from society but until that day "those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion" (verse 1). Zion was one of the hills on which Jerusalem was built and became a symbol for the Lord's presence among his people, sure, solid and everlasting, verse 2. So those who trust in the Lord (the Eternal One, for that is what that word means in the Hebrew), cannot be shaken, cannot be overthrown. If we are trusting in the Lord to save us and keep us in the way of righteousness, then we should rest assured that, although earthquakes may come into our lives, tragedies, disappointments, bereavements and sorrows, they cannot cause us to collapse.

This Psalm writer thinks that the mountains which surround Jerusalem are like a fortress and says that God is surrounding his people like that. The Lord surrounded his people in the Old Testament days and in our own days, too. He lovingly surrounds those who call on him in faith and humility to protect them.

It is wonderful to think that we can be part of his people today. The Bible says Jesus died to bring many sons to glory. All people in all nations of the earth can now become part of his people, breaking down racial and social and gender barriers because of Jesus' death on the Cross. Paul points out that before Jesus died, it was the Jews who had God's special blessings, but now these can be

shared by all people: "At that time you were apart from Christ. You were foreigners and did not belong to God's chosen people. You had no part in the covenants, which were based on God's promises to his people, and you lived in this world without hope and without God. But now, in union with Christ Jesus, you who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ". (Ephesians chapter 2 verses 12 and 13 GNB).

So this Psalm ends with: "Peace be upon Israel". The word peace is "shalom" which means God's blessing, joy and presence. Christ came into the world to bring us God's shalom. "Shalom" means-all is well because I am resting in the strength of the Lord my God". Shalom upon you, my friends.

8 - Psalm 126

In the Song of Ascents for pilgrims journeying to God's holy city of Jerusalem, which we are looking at, we have come to Psalm 126. In this Song the writer sings joyfully about the time when his people Israel returned from their captivity in Babylon, a seventy year exile, and once again stood in the holy city on Mount Zion.

Let us read the Psalm together:

"When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them". The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him."

The nearest rejoicing I can think of for my own country is what happened on VE (Victory in Europe) Day in May, 1945, when people went wild for joy and the streets of London were filled with dancing people waving flags and celebrating victory over the greatest evil that had ever come on Europe. On that day even the Queen of England, then a young princess, with her sister, left Buckingham Palace to mingle with the rejoicing crowds.

Why was the return to Jerusalem such a joyful event for the Jews? God's presence was in the Temple there, symbolised in a small dark room by a gold-covered box containing the Ten Commandments given by Moses. Now, once again, after seventy years, in which they had been cut off from this holy room during their exile in Babylon, the people of God could rebuild the destroyed Temple and their High Priest could enter this room once a year with the blood of a goat, a symbol of the covering of the people's sins. All of that was a picture of what was to come when Jesus, our great High Priest offered his life for the sins of the whole world in his death on a Cross just outside Jerusalem. So, today, Christians can enter even more fully into the rejoicing of the people of this Psalm as they approach Jerusalem. We can sing as in verse 2 in this Psalm "Our mouths are filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy". Can you say, with this Psalm writer, in verse 3, "The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy"?

Our Enemy, the Devil, delights to see God's people lose their joy. The Jews lost their joy when, because of their sins, they were taken captive into Babylon about 600 years before Jesus was born, but because they repented of their sins, God brought them back to Jerusalem and back to joy. Can you imagine how the pilgrims felt in the Psalm we are now considering as they went up to Jerusalem, they were sure, once again, that God was with them.

One of the men who returned from Babylon to rebuild the city of Jerusalem was Nehemiah and as he saw his people gathered together to listen to God's Law in Jerusalem, he said to them: "Don't be sad, the joy of the Lord is your strength". Joy brings us health and peace, but the deepest and most lasting joy is the joy we find in being God's children. Even for the children of God there will be times of sorrow, particularly if we stray from God when we will have to come back to him with tears of repentance, but, as we walk with God day by day, we will have "songs of Joy".

Please note how joy comes to a believer in God according to this Psalm. Verses 4 and 5 show that it can come "like streams in the Negev". The Negev is that part of the Holy Land which lies to the south towards the desert of Sinai- it was a dry and barren area. Suddenly, refreshing winter storms of rain would come upon it and it would blossom and be fruitful. God can bring us joy like that rain as we wait for him to bless us. God can turn our dry experiences into a time of sowing seed because the refreshing rain of his blessing has come upon us. So, go on seeking God's blessing in your life. But also, verse 6, shows us that it is up to us to carry seed, to co-operate with God, to work hard for God, to do his will. This will cause us to sing songs of joy. If we are not doing his will, if we will not repent of our sins, confess them and forsake them, there will be no harvest, no sowing and reaping and so no sheaves to carry home, no rejoicing.

Many people today are seeking joy and happiness in the wrong places, in things, in wealth, in sensations, but there is only one experience that brings real, lasting joy. It is when we return to our roots, back to the heart of God who made us and loves us, back, so to speak, to Jerusalem, the holy city where God dwells. When we come to Christ we come back to the very heart of God. We return home and, like the pilgrims in this Psalm, we realise just what God has done for us and we are glad. "The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy", verse 3.

9 - Psalm 127

The next of the Songs of Ascent, is attributed to King Solomon.

"Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat- for he grants sleep to those he loves. Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame, when they contend with their enemies in the gate".

The Psalm is attributed to Solomon who was the greatest builder in Israel's history, so it is natural for this Psalm to be about building. Solomon built the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem for the Lord. The reason why his Temple was a wonder of the world in its day is that he built it for God's glory and to fulfil God's plans for Israel. His father, David, could not build a Temple, because nearly all his life he was engaged in warfare with his enemies. He was told directly by God "You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight" (1 Chronicles chapter 22 verse 8), but in Solomon's reign there was peace. So Solomon built the Temple, in his own words, "for the name of the Lord my God", that is to celebrate the goodness, truth and holiness of God.

Now, in a sense, we are all builders. Because we are made in God's image, we are all creative beings, each one of us. We go through life making things, good or bad or indifferent. We are not called upon to build a magnificent Temple of

stones and cedar wood, adorned with gold as Solomon did, but we are, more wonderfully still, called upon to be ourselves stones in God's Temple. Listen to St. Peter; in his first letter chapter 2 and verses 4 and 5 he writes: "You, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ". What a privilege to be a living stone in God's Temple.

What a joy to be actually a part of a great house which is built to honour God. This house is his Church. Are you a stone in this building? Have you, by faith in Christ, come to be part of his people, part of his Temple? In verse 2 the workaholic is described who worships work, rising up early and staying up late, just to get more work done, but the inference is that he is doing it without any reference to God's honour and glory. By our work we can glorify God by doing it well and honestly, but not by making it the be-all and end-all of life.

In the second part of this psalm the Psalm writer tells us of another kind of building-the building of a family. Just as we need God's help to build a house, verse 1, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain". So building up a family for God is a "reward from him", verse 3. If you are a father or a mother, you are not the creator of your children, God is, they are his heritage to you, you are just a pro-creator, one who helps to bring into being a family for the honour of the Creator of all things, your loving heavenly Father. Have you dedicated your family to God so that you are building up a family that will give joy to their heavenly Father? Happy (blessed) is the man or woman who does that. Do you pray for your children and help them to love God?

But what if you are not married, or have no children? You still have the great privilege of bringing people to faith in Christ and so, in a sense, they become your children. The person who has influenced people for good is like a father or mother to them. Such a person, says this Psalm, verse 5, will not be put to shame. Begin to be a builder of God's house today by receiving his gift of love and forgiveness into your hearts and by starting to honour him. We can all be like King Solomon in that way.

10 - Psalm 128

We continue the study of the Songs of Ascents, the psalms of pilgrimage sung as the worshippers went up to the Temple in Jerusalem, by looking at Psalm 128:

"Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways. You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots round your table. Thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Zion all the days of your life; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem, and may you live to see your children's children."

The Psalm begins by describing how happiness (that is, being "blessed", verse 1) is found. Happiness is an elusive quality of life which we are always seeking, but very often not finding; we often come away from our pursuit of happiness disappointed. Augustine of Hippo, a great theologian in the Early Church, pointed out that people still wish to be happy even when they are living in such a way as to make happiness impossible.

The ancient Greeks had a philosophy called Epicureanism after the thinker Epicurus. He taught that we all want to find happiness and it is right to build our lives around the pursuit of happiness. This Psalm and the teaching of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) tells us that happiness is found outside of ourselves, in living in the fear of the Lord, which verse 1 describes as "walking in

God's ways". But what does it mean to walk in God's ways? It means to be passionate for righteousness, justice and truth; to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves, and, adds Jesus, to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us and treat us badly. You see, the Bible is saying that happiness is found in looking away from ourselves in order to live for God and others. Jesus put it like this: when we lose ourselves in the service of God and his kingdom, we find ourselves.

Family life will be blessed (happy) says this Psalm of Ascent, when the parents follow God's ways. And for those who do this, there is the prospect of an even wider blessing than happiness for the family, the whole of society is blessed: Jerusalem, symbol of God's society on earth, will be prayed for and generations to come will be blessed. So, a family and a nations' prosperity come from following God's ways. But, a warning; if we run after prosperity for its own sake we will almost certainly miss it. If we say "I'll become a Christian and then God will make me rich", we are distorting what the Bible says. The Bible, as in this Psalm, puts doing God's will first. Prosperity may come from this-but the important thing is that we are doing what God delights in, that is a reward in itself.

Any of God's blessings we receive in this life comes "from Zion", see verse 5. Getting riches and prosperity by fraud or by depriving others of blessings, or by the lottery or games of chance is not getting blessing "from Zion". God has his own ways of making his people happy, often unexpected ways, and always a blessing to the whole of society not just of ourselves. Whenever a person begins to walk in the fear of the Lord and walk in his ways (verse 1 again) other people get blessed, too.

When Peter and Andrew, James and John, began to follow Jesus and his teaching, they left their fishing nets and the family job by the Sea of Galilee and so left their prosperity, but became a blessing to the whole world in giving the rest of their lives to spread the gospel. And Jesus himself became poor that we may become rich. Listen to Paul: "Do you remember the generosity of Jesus Christ the Lord of us all? He was rich beyond our telling, yet he became poor for your sakes so that his poverty might make you rich" (2 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 9 JB Phillips). So there you have it. Jesus became poor for us. Make riches the goal of your life and you will be spiritually poor, think of others and serve God and God will bless you in his own special way. The choice is ours.

11 - Psalm 129

In the Song of Ascents we are looking at now from the book of Psalms in the Bible we are going to read Psalm 129. Here it is:

"They have greatly oppressed me from my youth-let Israel say- they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me. Ploughmen have ploughed my back and made their furrows long. But the Lord is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked. May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame. May they be like grass on the roof, which withers before it can grow; with it the reaper cannot fill his hands, nor the one who gathers fill his arms. May those who pass by not say, 'The blessing of the Lord be upon you; we bless you in the Name of the Lord'".

In this Psalm the writer complains at the treatment he and his people have received from their enemies, verse 1. It is a sad fact that Israel has often been the object of attacks from enemies simply because they are the Lord's people. It is not that Israel has been faultless; in the Old Testament time and time again, through its own prophets, Israel is denounced for its sin and wickedness, its injustice and violence on the innocent and falling away from God's law.

Nevertheless there have been concerted attempts in the course of history to wipe them from the face of the earth. The Egyptians tried to do this as we read in the book of Exodus, and the Persians nearly a thousand years later tried to do it. In recent history the Nazis tried to do it in the Second World War. All these attempts failed. And the psalm writer testifies to the Lord's deliverance in his own life. Look at verse 4 "the Lord has cut me free from the cords of the wicked." And so he prays for the downfall of his enemies. Is he right to do this? This Psalm 129 is one of several Psalms which are known as "Imprecatory Psalms", that is, Psalms which ask God to punish those who oppress the Lord's people.

But Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those whom persecute you" (Matthew chapter 5 verse 44). Jesus' command is to us as individuals, that we should not strike back when our enemies hurt us, not to take the law into our own hands and seek revenge, but to pray for the good of our persecutors. The imprecatory psalms are not against this teaching of Jesus, they are not speaking of personal revenge, but for God to act against injustice and wickedness. It is not inconsistent to pray for our enemies and yet also to pray, "Lord, please sort these wicked folk out, they are doing such harm". We can pray that people who hate what is good and continue in their wickedness and violence should be stopped in their tracks; but equally we should pray that they will turn from their evil to God; we can pray "Father, forgive them; but don't let them go on doing such acts of violence and harm". If, in fact, the first of these prayers is heard, that they receive forgiveness, then it will mean that they will also stop their wickedness.

Have you someone who is opposing you? Love them. Pour God's love on them. Forgive them. They may not accept your forgiveness, but that is their responsibility, not yours. A truly loving, forgiving spirit is rare in the world today, but it is the hallmark of the true Christian. And, still being loving, we can pray that evil men and women will be stopped from doing their evil and brought trembling under the Word of God to repent and forsake their ways. Jesus said that someone who caused a child to sin would be severely judged by God and this is right and proper and how it should be.

But we must remember that this psalm writer, and those of the other imprecatory psalms, wrote before Calvary, before the day when Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, so he could only see the judgement of God coming against sin; he couldn't see that evil people can be changed. The Cross of Jesus has changed many a wicked person's life; in fact all of us stand condemned before God and need the forgiveness which comes from that death of Jesus on the Cross.

Our responsibility, as pilgrims journeying up to God's house, is to love our enemies and pray that they will be turned from violence to the love of God. And if they will not, we have to leave the consequences with God. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay", says the Lord. (Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 35 and Romans chapter 12 verse 29)

12 - Psalm 130

It is strange that in a Song of Ascents, a psalm sung by travellers going up to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple, that a psalm writer should write of going down into the depths as he does in this next Psalm, Psalm 130.

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailling

love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins."

But going down into the depths of soul dejection is part of life for many people. The pilgrim, especially, is very aware of his frailty and sin and realises he is travelling to the presence of a God of absolute purity and holiness. It is good to be aware of this. Today we are told there is no such thing as sin, we can do more or less what we like. Out of the Ten Commandments given to Moses only three today are censured by the society in which we live. But sins does matter. An old Hebrew proverb says it is only fools who make a mock of sin. A wise person does not. This psalm writer knows that sin cuts us off from God the very fountain head of all our good and that if God kept a record of all our sins no one could stand upright in his presence. But doesn't God keep a record of our sins? The answer is that for those who have come to God in the attitude of the psalmist there is no record of their sins kept. Out of the depths the writer cries out to God for mercy (see verse 2). That prayer is always answered by God. But the Christian knows why God does not keep a record of the sins of those who cry to him for mercy, something the writer of this Psalm did not know.

It is because Jesus died on the Cross where he bore the punishment of the sins of the whole world. Isaiah speaks of someone who "was pierced for our transgressions and was crushed for our iniquities". This one bore the punishment "that brought us peace" (Isaiah chapter 53 verse 5). Christians see in Jesus the complete fulfilment of this passage in Isaiah. For those who come to Jesus, deeply sorry for their sins and longing to be forgiven and be made right with God, the account is cleared, their sins are wiped out, God no longer has a "record" of them see verse 3. That is why this Psalm speaks of "full redemption", verse 7, redemption meaning being cleared of wrong and brought back to God's favour. And will you note, please, that it is God himself who redeems people back to himself. It is not an angel who redeems the sinner, not a created being, but God himself. I don't suppose the Psalmist could have really understood the full implications of this, but as Christians we can say, yes it really was God himself redeeming us by the Cross. As Paul puts it: "God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ". Isaiah puts what happens like this: "I have swept away your offences like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist" (Isaiah chapter 44 verse 22).

Imagine an early summer's day and the mist is lying low over the fields. Then the sun gets up and the mist just disappears. So, the sunshine of God's love, seen in Jesus, sweeps away the sins of those who trust him. Have you trusted in him like that? He longs for you to have the account of your sin removed. But it isn't automatic. We can't have our sins removed by being born into a so-called Christian country or by being brought up in a Christian family, or by being baptised. Nothing we can do can remove our sins from us. Psalm 103 puts it like this: "as far as the east is from the west, so far He has removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103 verse 12). Now if you set out walking west one day and didn't stop, you would never reach the east, you would always be travelling west. This is what God will do for you in removing your sins as far as the east is from the west, if, like the writer of this Psalm, you cry out to him to save you. Note, please, verse 4: "But with you there is forgiveness therefore you are feared". When we have been forgiven by God we really do fear him in the right way, not with a cringing fear, but with awe. We stand in awe of his wonderful, forgiving love and the cost to him self of gaining our forgiveness, the pain, the darkness, the death of the Cross.

Forgiven, the writer has hope, verse 5: "I wait for the Lord, my souls waits, and in his word I put my hope". His hope is in the character of God, in his Word. Our words show our characters, our personalities. God's character is shown in what

he says to us; his Word is Jesus. Consider Jesus and you are considering the very Word of God himself. In the New Testament Jesus is called the Word of God. Is your hope in him? Call on him to give you hope and it will come to you as the dawn comes to the watchmen on the city walls, verse 6. It is a beautiful thing to see the dawn come- first a crack in the sky of gold and silver, then more golden light until the full blaze of day floods all around us.

This Psalm 130 ends by the writer addressing his people; he wants all his people to enjoy putting their hope in God—free from all their sins. This hope is based on God's unfailing love, verse 7. The love of people will disappoint us and fail us, God's love never will-it even extends to himself freeing us from all our sins whatever they have been. You can, right now, become totally freed of all guilt and sin because God himself has redeemed you. Jesus is God in action for you. Trust him to restore you to God now.

13 - Psalm 131

Last time we reached Psalm 130 in the Songs of Ascent sung by pilgrims journeying up to Jerusalem to worship God. We saw how hope in God's forgiving love was a theme of the pilgrims. In the psalm we are looking at now, Psalm 131, the theme is still hope, for without hope life cannot be lived. But it is hope in the Lord which is meant, not a vague sort of "I hope things turn our all right".

And in this Psalm it is the hope of a little child, trustingly confident in its parents:

"My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quietened my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. Israel put your hope in the Lord both now and for ever more."

Jesus said we will never enter the kingdom of God unless we become like little children (Matthew chapter 2 verse 4). And the writer of this psalm says a similar thing, too. He knows that he cannot approach God in worship with pride in his heart. Jesus told the story of two men who went up to the Temple to pray. One was very proud of his life, of how religious he was and despised a tax collector standing nearby. But the tax collector knew he was a sinner and asked God to forgive him. Jesus said the tax collector went home forgiven, the other man did not.

So many world leaders, who have done such harm to people, have been proud and arrogant men. If they had humbled themselves before God they would never have led people into aggression and violence and despair. But all of us, not just world leaders need to humble ourselves before God. We need to be like the child spoken of in this psalm. He is not a tiny baby always crying out to be fed, he is not restless like that, but has learned to trust his mother and rests in her love and care. Now the Psalm writer says he is like this weaned child; it is something he has learned. He has learned to quieten his soul, his inner self with all its various emotions and has learned to control that inner self by not being taken up with things that it can't control, things that are not its concern. We need to learn this. So often we torment ourselves by trying to work things out our way, instead of quietly trusting God as a child trusts his mother.

It is possible to be really agitated about the suffering in the world and why God has allowed it. As a Christian we are concerned to help people who are suffering and Christians have a very long record throughout history of caring for the suffering, the oppressed, the destitute and the afflicted. But it is foolish to be upset about why they happen. This is a question "too wonderful for me", see verse 1, the second part of the verse. Greater minds and spirits than mine have

not found an answer to this. In the Bible a man called Job is described as being terribly afflicted with all sorts of disasters in his life; one day a tornado hit the house where his sons and daughters were holding a party and they were all killed; his farm was ruined and his servants all killed by enemies who raided his land and then his body became racked with pain. Some friends came and tried to give Job an answer to why he was suffering. Job refused their answers and said simply: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised". Job knew that it was pointless trying to figure out why his suffering had come to him, but he did trust, as in the psalm we are reading now, that he was still held in God's safe and loving arms.

This Psalm ends "O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and for evermore", verse 3. It really is foolish not to hope in God, for he made us, he loves us and so will bring things out for good in the end if we are part of his family. Will you, now, quieten your soul and begin to rest in God, your hope, both now and evermore?

14 - Psalm 132

Most of the Songs of Ascent we are studying are short psalms sung by travellers going up to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple there. But the one we are looking at now, Psalm 132 is quite a bit longer than the rest. So we shall study it in two parts. The first runs from verse one to verse ten and has to do with King David's desire to have the place of God's presence in the city of Jerusalem on Mt. Zion.

Look at verses one to five. David had a hard life. As king of Israel anointed by the judge Samuel in place of Saul who had departed from God in his heart, he was hounded by Saul and had often to live rough, even once living in a cave. But after Saul's death, David came into his own and was determined to bring the Tent of God, which had been neglected in Saul's day, to his capital city of Zion or Jerusalem. Up to now, the Tent had been taken from place to place with no sure resting Place. It had been constructed when Israel, years before, came out of the Desert of Sinai. As they travelled in tents they carried with them one special tent to house the presence of the Lord. Inside was a seven-branched candlestick representing the light of God, a table with twelve loaves on it to stand for the twelve tribes of Israel and an altar of incense to represent the prayers of the people of Israel. Outside the Tent was a large bowl for the priests to wash themselves in before they offered animal sacrifices to God to cover the people's sins. But deep within the tent, in a small room, was a gold-covered box (called the ark of the covenant) containing the ten commandments given by God to Israel through Moses. The blood of a goat was sprinkled on top of this box and seven times in front of it on one special day of the year called the Day of Covering when, symbolically, the sins of Israel in not keeping the ten commandments, were covered from God's sight.

You can see how important it was for David to have this tent in Jerusalem (Zion) for all that the Jews believed about God was expressed there symbolically. When he arrived in Zion 1 Chronicles 15.1 tells us "he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it." But what has all that to do with us today? David made a vow that he would honour God by providing a place for God's presence to dwell in the midst of his people and he wouldn't rest until he had done this. David made a vow to God: "I will not enter my house or go to my bed, I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Israel.

As we journey to God in our lives we do not have now a special place on earth that we can point to and say that is where God is, but, more wonderfully, we have all of us who have received Christ into our hearts, the living God living within us.

We have become his temples. Paul writes: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you" (1 Corinthians 3.16).

David's Tent, which became Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, is no more. Twice it was destroyed by invaders. But our hearts remain in which to welcome God and worship him. Have you a desire as keen as David's to see God's presence honoured by making your life his dwelling place? There is no higher privilege on earth.

15 - Psalm 132 (Part 2)

We are continuing to read Psalm 132, one of the Songs of Ascents sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to worship God. We are looking at the second part of the Psalm from verse 11 to the end, verse 18.

In the first part of the Psalm the writer reminds us that King David would not rest until he had established the temple of God in Zion, David's capital city. Now, in the rest of the psalm, he thinks about Zion as the place where David and his descendants will rule for ever and also where God will reign on his throne for ever. God promised to keep David's descendants on the throne of Israel, see v 11 "One of your own descendants I will place on your throne", but there is a qualification: verse 12 "If your sons keep my covenant and the statutes I teach them, then their sons shall sit on your throne for ever and ever." The word "covenant" as used here means an agreement to abide by God's laws. Sadly this did not happen. Very few of David's descendants were righteous and godly men. They dabbled in immoral practices and tolerated or even supported idolatry; they broke their covenant with God. And, as a result, they lost the blessings God promised-abundant provisions and a godly priesthood, see verses 15 and 16. Things got so bad that by the sixth Century before Christ the Prophet Jeremiah wrote: "The time is coming", declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time", declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people".

Can you see now why, when Jesus was about to leave his disciples and go to the death of the Cross, he called a meal which he took with them the beginning of a "new covenant"? Luke records this in his gospel as he describes that meal of Jesus with his disciples: "And Jesus took bread, gave thanks and said: "This is my body given for you: do this in remembrance of me". In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke chapter 22 verses 19 and 20).

King David is a sort of picture of Jesus. He was brave and fought God's battles; he was just and faithful and righteous in his rule as king, but he was also a sinner who murdered and committed adultery. Jesus was without sin, the perfect man, the real King of Israel. Yet he was rejected by his people and crucified. God's covenant with David failed because of David's sin, but God's covenant with his people today has been made by Jesus, the sinless One.

The old covenants had been broken many times, but Jesus himself is the new covenant between God and his people. So now it is not just the people of Israel who are called into covenant, with God, but people from every race and nation. There is no racial barrier, gender barrier or social barrier in this new covenant. No one is superior to anyone else. We come into covenant with God through Jesus as sinners who cannot claim anything except that Jesus died to forgive us

our sins and bring us into the new covenant. Are you in covenant with God? Will you come in today?

16 - Psalm 133

Hello! We are coming to the end of our journey following the pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to worship God and singing their Songs of Ascent:

"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion, for there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life for evermore."

As the pilgrims journeyed up to Jerusalem there would have been the possibility of disagreement among them, squabbles and differences of opinion over a whole range of issues. Who wasn't carrying their fair share of the burdens, who was the real leader, were they taking the right path and so on? So the writer of this Song of Ascents describes what unity is like in his little song. Unity and harmony, he says, among God's people, is a beautiful thing, a pleasant experience. He likens it to the oil or ointment which was put on the High Priest's head when he was consecrated to God. You find this anointing described in Exodus chapter 30 verses 22-29 and Leviticus 8 verse 12. The oil was put on the High Priest's head and it ran down on to his beard. It was a sign that he had been chosen by God and was separated to God's service in the Temple.

When Queen Elizabeth was crowned, oil was put on her head to symbolise that she had been set apart as the Sovereign of the United Kingdom. So unity is like that says this Psalm, it is a sign of God's people being set apart for God. When Christians fall out and become disunited this symbol is destroyed; a divided Church cannot show that they are set apart for God; they are more interested in factions and splits than in the oneness of the body.

The ointment or oil which consecrated the High Priest is described in the following ways: it was fragrant, costly and unique. It had to be made up of fragrant cinnamon, cassia and a fragrant cane mixed with olive oil, "a fragrant blend of the work of a perfumer" says the text in Exodus. When believers in the Lord Jesus get on well together it is a very fragrant thing, it smells good. Each church and company of believers is made up of different personalities and characters, but they can blend well together. Disunity is not a pleasant experience and destroys a church's testimony that they are the people of God.

But this anointing oil was also costly; when mixed together it weighed nearly forty pounds. It is always costly to work for unity. We have to die to ourselves continually if we are to achieve unity, not insisting on our own way always being followed. This is true of communities in general as well as of churches. There are divisions and hatreds in many parts of the world today because people will not give up prejudices and hatreds for the sake of peace.

To bring unity to mankind was costly for Jesus. he had to give up his life to the dreadful suffering of the Cross that man might be reconciled back to God. But the anointing oil was also unique, it was not to be copied; "Do not make any oil with the same formula" says the text in Exodus which describes the anointing of the High Priest. We cannot pretend we have unity, we cannot copy the real thing; the real anointing oil is for one use only, to demonstrate unity. Either we really do love our brothers and sisters or we only pretend to and it is a sham. God will not accept this kind of thing.

But there's just something else about this anointing oil. Once it had been put on the High Priest it was also to be used to set apart for God the furniture in God's Temple, the altar of incense, the basins, the altar of burnt offering, the table and the lampstand. Then anyone touching those objects would themselves become consecrated to God. Harmony among the Lord's people has this remarkable effect, when others come into contact with such unity, they themselves are changed. Such harmony becomes, says this Psalm, like the dew of Mount Hermon. Mount Hermon is far to the north of Jerusalem, a symbol of strength and refreshment. When the Lord's people act together in unity, it is as if the freshness of the great mountain falls upon them. They become revived and invigorated.

So, if you belong to Christ, meet regularly with your fellow Christians of all denominations, your own fellowships and others in complete harmony. If you do, says this Psalm, God will give you the great blessing of eternal life see verse 3.

17 - Psalm 134

We now come to the last of the fifteen Songs of Ascents sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple. Imagine the scene - the pilgrims, men women and children had been travelling for some time, steadily going up from the valleys to Mount Zion. They are no doubt tired, but full of excitement at reaching their goal. It is evening, the darkness is descending on the City they are approaching, on the surrounding hills and on the Temple, towering above the walls of the city. Inside the Temple the priests and Levites, their assistants, are going about their nightly duties preparing the evening sacrifices:

"Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord. May the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth bless you from Zion".

In the first book of Chronicles in the Old Testament, chapter nine and verses 22 to 34, there is a list of duties for the priests and Levites in the Temple. Morning and evening as the animal sacrifices were offered, the Levites had to stand "to thank and praise the Lord". Some of the Levites had the duty of being the gatekeepers in the Temple, to guard the Temple from intruders. We read: "they would spend the night stationed around the house of God, because they had to guard it, they had charge of the key for opening it each morning" (verse 27). Others were in charge of the articles used in the Temple sacrifices, others were musicians and others were exempt from duties as such but seem to have been supervisors for "they were responsible for the work day and night" v33. The priests and Levites had to make sure that the burnt offering was to remain on the altar throughout the night till the morning with the fire kept alive on the altar (Leviticus chapter 6 verse 8). It is to these priests and Levites on night duty that the incoming pilgrims sing as here in this Psalm: "Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord.

This is a wonderful word picture of what it means to be a Christian. A Christian's chief duty is to give thanks and praise to God. It was Martin Luther the German reformer in the 16th Century who reminded us of the Biblical truth that all true believers are priests who have to keep alive sacrifices of praise to God night and day. Christians are called to praise God in the dark watches of the night as well as in the day; not just in words, but in deeds. When things go wrong as we seem in darkness we can still praise God for his goodness.

The pilgrims say also to these priests in the Temple: "Lift up your hands in the

sanctuary and praise the Lord", verse 2. The lifting up of the hands in worship is a Biblical way of exalting God, acknowledging his greatness and putting ourselves at his service. The final verse in the Song of Ascents is a prayer made by the Pilgrims to the faithful priests and Levites in the Temple ministering in the night watches.: "May the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion". This prayer will be answered for all faithful pilgrims who set their hearts on journeying to God. The One who made this universe will bless you and there could be no greater blessing than that.

The Temple in Jerusalem is no more, but what it stands for, the presence of God on earth, is here wherever Christ is received and loved. Our pilgrimage is not to a literal Temple of stones and wood, but to the very heart of God himself brought to us in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews says to his Christian readers: "You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God." (Hebrews chapter 12 verse 22). Have you come that far? Have you joined the pilgrimage which is journeying to the Father's House? You can do so right now as you listen, by turning to Christ for forgiveness of your sins and then, having that burden of sin taken off your shoulders, journey on in faith and joy. We invite you to come.