



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

30th June, 2023

"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."

Psalms 121:1-2

I don't have many memories of the interview for my first -and only- teaching job, -at Steyning Grammar School, in the summer of 1976, but one memory has grown in the 47 years since: standing in front of the entrance to the Shooting Field building, I saw, rising above the flat roof, the smooth outline of the South Downs. It still draws me to those opening words of Psalm 121.

My first classroom on the Church Street site (now closed and decaying) looked up to the same view; it was a gift to a Geography teacher and I think (if I remember rightly) I posted those Bible verses on the window.

There is another possible way from the familiar one of translating that first verse. Let me explain. In the Ancient Near East hilltop sites for settlements and sacred places were the norm. Just like Chanctonbury and Cissbury, they commanded good views, were easily defended, and were symbolic of power and strength, -so they were the natural 'homes' for the gods of the tribes. The idea of mountain-top deities finds its way into Greek Mythology (the gods of Mount Olympus) and right through to the sacred mountains of history and myth, and to J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis et al..

God's chosen people, the earliest Ancient Hebrews, were a wandering pastoral nation-tribe. Until later they had no urban settlements, they travelled the plains between 'alien' city-states with mountain-top fortresses and deities. So here's an idea for Psalm 121 verse 1: that not just the second part of the verse, but the first part also is a question. Then it reads "Should I lift my eyes up to the hills (like all the others do)? Where does my help come from?" The Psalmist looks around to surrounding communities with their nation-deities and asks, 'Are we like that? Is our God to be found in mountain mists and summit sacrifices?' ... And then comes a resounding No! "My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth." And he goes on to extol the God who is not limited to symbolic summits of power and fear, -God who lovingly pervades every corner of heaven and earth, every moment of time and life.

We also live in a world of 'mountain-top deities': -power, status, wealth; -aspirations, ambitions, acquisitions, 'influencers' and celebrities, -'have this, do that, look like her, compete like him'; self-worship and hedonism. (Although of course -like those societies of old- there is poverty, suffering and slavery for the 'underclasses' today).

The modern Christian Psalmist, ploughing a furrow through today's wilderness, might cry, "Should I lift up my eyes to those 'hills' (like the culture does)?" *Where does my help come from?* And the defiant cry in the 21st century remains the same, "NO!" "My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth." And even today, all other phrases in that ancient creed remain the same, as does God, who, in and through Jesus Christ, *"is the same yesterday, today and forever"* (Hebrews 13:8).