

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

Psalm 120 (121)

This psalm is part of the group of psalms known as the Psalms of Ascent (120–134). It is thought that they were used in conjunction with the pilgrimages to Jerusalem which Jews were meant to undertake on the three major festivals of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles (see Deuteronomy 16: 16). The psalm is therefore linked to making a journey, and is perhaps a blessing on someone starting out. The first question is uttered by the traveller, while the answer would come from the priest or the group wishing the traveller a safe journey.

The psalm's main point is that God provides safety for all pilgrims. They look up to *the mountains*, the traditional dwelling place of God.

God is the maker of *heaven and earth*. This is the central tenet of their faith, different from the other deities which the pilgrim might encounter on his journey.

He sleeps not nor slumbers, unlike other gods, who were thought to be asleep and only awakened at important times of growth or harvest.

He provides shelter from the sun (essential in the hot, dry climate of Palestine), and from the moon (ancient beliefs held that moon rays could induce madness – as is reflected today in words like 'lunacy' or 'lunatic' which derive from the Latin word for moon 'luna'). Moreover, the sun and the moon were seen as deities by the people of this part of the world (the Egyptian sun God was named Ra and the Mesopotamian moon God, Nanna).



As we read this psalm, we may reflect that although journeys nowadays are generally much less hazardous than in ancient times, God is nonetheless always present, guarding the traveller who turns to him for help.

'The Lord will guard your going and coming, both now and for ever.'



Gospel Luke 18: 1–8

The unjust judge and the persistent widow

We find two of the main themes of Luke's Gospel in this passage: Jesus's teaching on prayer, and his compassion for those neglected by society. This parable is unique to Luke.

The Judge

The judge is a typical Roman magistrate, who twice insists that he 'neither feared God nor respected man [or woman]'. Such men were all-powerful and often passed judgement on a whim.

The judge's monologue (Luke 18 : 4–5) is typical of Greek comedies and creates a bond between the audience and the character: Luke is writing for a Gentile Greek audience. The judge's change of heart comes, not because he accepts the justice of the widow's claim, but because he wants her off his back.

The Widow

Contrary to the judge's social standing, the widow is totally powerless. (In his stories, Luke often alternates men and women as examples of the points he seeks to make.) Widows had no legal status, and since she has no male relatives to speak for her, we can see her total vulnerability. She may be seen as representing all those who are oppressed, hurt by others and who can't defend themselves.

'Will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him ...?'

Parables often have a sting in their tail, intended to make us ponder and reflect on the underlying meaning of the story. But of course, God is not represented by the unjust judge in this story. Rather the judge is used as a contrast to God, for he is everything God is not: selfish, uncaring, lacking in compassion. If the corrupt judge was able to relent, *how much more* will our loving God, a compassionate judge, answer our petitions.

'When the Son of Man comes ...'

This story is also to be read in the context of the End of Time. It was becoming evident that the kingdom of God was not likely to come as quickly as some had thought and hoped; indeed, when Luke wrote this Gospel, Christians were coming to the conclusion that God's kingdom of God would be established, but not immediately. Luke's writing shows that this delay was already hinted at by the Lord's words to his disciples. This parable was therefore intended to show the disciples 'the need to pray continually and never lose heart'; this way they can persevere in faith, and wait for the Son of Man's return.

