

Psalm 91 - 6th March 2022.

I asked Sheila to read the whole of Psalm 91 today, as it has a significant history; and from the King James Version of the bible - for reasons that will become apparent; first and foremost of which is that it is closer to the original Hebrew in translation. It is often known as the 'Soldier's Psalm', or 'Soldier's Prayer', because it invokes the protection of God in times of trouble, attack, and adversity. It was distributed to US troops in a pack with a camouflage bandana, for those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

My uncle - who may be on zoom with us now - served in the Army after WWII, being too

young to fight, even at the end of the war, as a child of five. He told me that he had been 'given' this Psalm to use for comfort and reassurance in times of danger. I know little about his military service except that it was in Germany; nor do I know how many times he had recourse to reading this psalm - if he did.

Nevertheless, it has a longer history than the venerable age of almost 92 that my uncle Keith will reach in 9 days time.

Unlike most of the psalms, which are usually attributed to David as author, Psalm 91 is supposedly written by Moses on the day he completed the building of the tabernacle in

the desert. Verse one - 'He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty', is supposed to be Moses going into the Tabernacle and being enveloped by a Divine cloud.

Before I get into too much detail, I would like to draw your attention to the symmetry of the poem. You will note that it is divided into two portions, with the opening couplet of the second half (vv.9-10) echoing the theme of vv.1-2.

In the first half, the godly are assured of security from four threats (vv.5-6) - though thousands fall (v.7). In the second half, they

are assured of triumphing over four menacing beasts (v.13).

The promises, or oracle of God in vv.14-16 guarantees ultimate safety and comfort.

You will be aware - I hope, if you were awake - that the verses 11-12 are used by the devil to tempt Jesus in the desert, by telling him that he could not possibly be hurt if he were to throw himself down from the top of the temple, because the angels would catch him and keep him from harm.

However, I thought what we might do is to pull this psalm into the 21st century and see how it might come out.

Let's look at verse 3: 'the snare of the fowler' really doesn't mean much to most people these days - unless you are a professional poacher, in which case you might be aware of the net in which birds are caught. Not a nice thing if you happen to be a bird, and frequently causes broken wings as they struggle to get loose.

How to translate that into modern day imagery?

What came to my mind is the con tricks that are played on all of us, but particularly on the elderly.

My mother-in-law, who I was actually very fond of, was a gullible soul and was not

infrequently targeted by people attempting to con her out of money.

Someone would ring her up and tell her how she could save loads of money on her heating bills if she installed double glazing in her house. Could they come and do an inspection and see what sort of windows she had now, and what sort of heat loss was occurring?

Well, of course you can - and he sounded such a nice young man too!

Before you know it, a smooth talking con artist has arrived and told her that she's losing heat all over the place from her leaky windows, and that she really needs their super-special, state-of-the-art, heat-seal, bollock-proof,

Ferrari speed installation fenêtres; a mere snip at 5,000 earth pounds, and she will never be cold again!

The snare is a snare because the bird doesn't see the net - neither did my mum-in-law.

What about the 'noisome pestilence'? This doesn't mean it's loud, but noxious, harmful. The pestilence can be any disease you choose today, and you can add to it the 'destruction' (or plague) that wasteth at noonday. Let us replace those terms with Covid 19, HIV, cancer, and - say, diabetes. It would be a good trade to be sure of not getting any of those, for trusting in God!

But the deal doesn't end there; we are to be spared the terror that comes at night and the arrow that flieth by day.

Have you ever had appendicitis? I have operated on countless cases, and the interesting thing about them is that almost all of them come in at night. Why? Because you have nothing else to distract you from your abdominal pain in the middle of the night, and the pain builds up in your mind to immense proportions, such that you are soon terrified you are going to die.

It's an aphorism of *General Surgery* - most abdominal pain comes in to hospital at night.

For me, the 'arrow that flieth by day' would be a fast-moving truck. The point is not exactly what - but that the Lord has you covered by his protection both day and night - 24/7 as we say these days.

The imagery that thousands may fall either side of you, while you remain safe is one that should reassure, but often doesn't these days. When I have been in war zones, I have been lucky despite being shot at and had to put up with missile and bomb attacks. When people you know get killed and you survive, there is an odd phenomenon whereby you find yourself asking, 'Why not me?' Indeed, why not?

There is an odd sense of guilt that goes with surviving an attack that kills those close to you, or escaping a disaster by being on the next train, bus, or airplane - after the one that crashed with no survivors.

Why should you have a 'Get out of jail free' card?

Let's move on to the threats in the second half of this poem; here our protection is against the sort of mortal threats that might be found out in the bush or the desert - though the author seems to run out of ideas pretty rapidly!

In the King James Version, we have 'the lion and adder, the young lion and dragon' - so we

have doubled up on the lions; in the NIV, we have 'the lion and cobra, the great lion and serpent;' here doubling up on both snakes and lions. I am sure they could have managed something a little more rarified, but perhaps Moses was not at his most imaginative, having had a hard day again with the obstreperous Israelites.

I would have thought he could have thrown in a large camel spider and a scorpion or two, for a little extra terror. But - hey ho. - we'll have to settle for a brace of lions, a snake and a dragon.

What would these be today? We still do have a few varieties of snakes, but only one is

dangerous to us - the rattlesnake. You are unlikely to get too badly mauled by a gopher snake or a garter snake.

Moving up the scale, we could be taken out by a moose if we hit it in our truck, or we could try the merits of who owns the garbage can with a hungry bear - usually a short-lived occupation.

The last three verses of our psalm tell us that basically whatever we encounter, the Lord will protect us and keep us safe. There is a caveat; we need to keep in touch. It says, 'He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him.' There is no point in whining after the event that you were not rescued, like the couple who

drowned in a flood having waved away rescue boats and even helicopters, whilst waiting for God to save them. I can imagine God saying to Jesus, 'You know, Son, I can just about save ignorant - but stupid - well, they are something else!'

So this has been a light-hearted look at one of our favourite psalms; one that has brought comfort to many in isolated and dangerous situations; one that is still thought relevant to today's military, and that the Jews use not only in their burial ceremonies, where it is repeated seven times as the casket is carried to the grave, but also daily in their Bedtime Shema - or nighttime prayers.

And now you know that it is always appointed for us to read on the first Sunday in Lent - and you will hear it again on Good Friday.

So if you see someone running away from a bear and you stop your truck to pick him up, don't listen to his protestations that the bear might try and get in as well - just reassure him - 'It's OK, he can't drive.'