

Sunday 22nd March 2020
4th Sunday in Lent

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Reflection

As student in training for the ministry, I was privileged to be able to spend a month in the summer of 1996 based at the St Andrews, the Scots Kirk in Jerusalem, and to travel widely through the Holy Land. Before then, I had never fully realised what it meant that people 'went up' to Jerusalem, to worship and make sacrifice at the Temple of God. That all changed on my first day, as I was driven from the airport, down on the Mediterranean coastal plain, up to Jerusalem, in its hilly setting.

Suddenly, the words of the Psalms made sense, and I understood from my own experience, how the geography of the land shaped the understanding of the people, from ancient times up to the present.

For pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the great feasts of the religious year in ancient times, the journey would have been a perilous one: wild animals and bandits were a constant threat in the times of David, as they were in the time of Jesus, whose story of the Good Samaritan, ambushed by robbers and saved by a stranger, is set in that same landscape.

The 23rd Psalm, this Sunday's reading in the lectionary, is a word for our own time, just as it was an affirmation of trust in the goodness and faithfulness of God in time past. Its familiar words (especially in the authorised version of the Bible) express the trust of a pilgrim facing a dangerous journey through a hostile landscape, rugged and barren. In making the journey in faith, the pilgrim knows their very life is at stake.

Yet the danger and the risk does not deter them. It is a journey that must be made, to fulfil the obligations of faith in a living God, who has graciously and lovingly provided for all the peoples' needs. The pilgrim remembers God's goodness in times past, and God's constant loving faithfulness in the present.

The Psalm is a thanksgiving to God for the blessings of life, even as the pilgrim acknowledges life's uncertainty and fragility; a declaration of faith in a God who tends and nurtures the people as a shepherd their sheep, blessing the life we have now, walking beside us in times of darkness and danger, and bringing us to our journey's end in a place and time where life is lived to the full, and all that threatens harm is cast aside.

It is a Psalm for our times: for we face challenges now such as we have not faced for many years. Not even in time of war have we faced the unseen enemy of this new coronavirus, and not even in time of war have we been required to accept such drastic actions as are now needed, to prevent its further spread and the death and destruction it may wreak in our society and our economy. Not since the last world war have the peoples of the world together had to face such a threat to our common wellbeing and our collective future.

All the indications are, that this current situation will get much worse, before it gets better, and that many thousands of our most vulnerable are at serious risk to their lives. Many thousands more face the loss of their livelihoods, and it seems certain that nothing will be quite the same once this crisis is past.

It does indeed feel that we are walking into a valley of shadow and darkness, and many are fearful. Being afraid of the dangers that surround us is a natural human response, and there is no shame in admitting our fear. The ancient pilgrims who made the journey to Jerusalem were also afraid: yet they affirmed their trust in God, who is the God of life, not only now, but in the past and for ever.

It is in the God of life and love that we, too, must find our confidence to face these days, weeks and months that lie ahead, if we are to reach the journey's end safely, passing from the darkness of the valley of death's shadow into the light of God's future.

This journey that lies ahead will be a time of testing, when we may well ask 'where is our God?'. The answer to which can only be, that God is with us, and God's rod and staff, God's surrounding loving strength, will be our comfort and our courage, that enable us to face together the most challenging of times.

Take heart, then, and know that we are not alone. May God's abundant grace, steadfast love, enduring faithfulness, and eternal blessing be known in us, among us and around us, a light to lighten our darkness, which no darkness can ever put out.

Prayer

Loving God,
yours is the glory, and the power
to give life and to sustain it.
We thank you for this most precious gift
and ask you now to be with us in our time of trial.

Forgive us for the times when we have failed;
failed to live up to your expectations, and our own.
Forgive us for the words and actions that have hurt you
hurt others, and hurt ourselves.
Lead us out of the darkness we make for ourselves
into the light of your life and love.
Heal us of all that is wrong,
and help us to make amends.

Restore in us such a fullness of life
and confidence in your presence
that we may not doubt your goodness
nor your desire for us and for all people to flourish
and grow in understanding and faith
that transforms us and all the world.

Keep us safe, in these uncertain times,
and walk with us, that we might not be afraid.
Give us confidence and courage in all that you intend,
that we may trust you and walk in your ways.

Bless with your presence those in this world
who are most vulnerable, most endangered;
victims of violence and war, those who struggle with poverty,
the hungry and the oppressed.

Bring peace, bring justice, always grounded in your love;
guide the leaders of all nations to what is right,
and to seek to do your will in the service of the common good.

Give strength and wisdom to those who seek to heal our wounds
and the wounds of this world;
those who work to restore to health all who are sick,
to hope, those who despair;
to joy and peace, those whose hearts are troubled.

All this we ask in the name of your Son, Jesus,
who is the Christ, and the world's Saviour.

Amen.