

Easter 4 Yr A 2020

Good Shepherd Sunday

I had decided, even before I began reading the texts in preparation for writing, that this sermon was going to be based on the First Letter of Peter. We have heard from that Letter for three Sundays now, and it is worth a little thought – well, perhaps more than a little. So why have I ended up writing about Psalm 23?

Firstly, because sermon preparation isn't just about reading, it is also about prayer – and the Holy Spirit has a habit of getting in on the act, and secondly (or perhaps it is still 'firstly'), as yet more terrifying numbers of the sick and the dead are announced, both at home and abroad, Psalm 23 seemed like a beacon of hope in the darkest of times.

For almost all of the time of existence of human beings, death has been seen as our inevitable fate – in fact, for many, death gave life meaning; only after death would we know as we are known (*cf* 1Cor 13.12). And then along came medical science and death was no longer an inevitability, it was a problem to be solved. People facing death no longer look for a priest in a black cassock; they look for a doctor or scientist in a white coat. We no

longer look for meaning in death, we look for life extension (and thereby make death a failure). And we have been quite good at extending life through improvements in public hygiene – clean water, sewage disposal, rubbish collections – and in health care and medicine development. And then we are hit by a virus we cannot see and cannot control or treat. And the scramble is for more science – in the middle of our outrage at this unwarranted attack by an invisible enemy – science is our hope! But our hope for what? For 'normal', when 'normal' is part of the problem? when 'normal' sees greater and greater inequality, disease, warfare, hunger, where the shopping mall, or its on line equivalent, is the great place of worship, where 'getting and spending we lay waste our powers' (William Wordsworth). Even the thought of going back to 'normal' fills me with anxiety. What to do about it?

Read Psalm 23!

'The Lord is my shepherd/I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures/and leads me beside still waters.' It is a statement of trust. In a society driven by greed, not need, to be content with sufficient food and water, protection and shelter seems rather quaint or naïve. But this shepherd comes to satisfy not only our physical needs but our spiritual needs (remember

them?) – ‘he restores my soul’. Suddenly realising that science doesn’t have all the answers requires us, pushes us, to look for answers elsewhere – not to become mediaeval holdouts who see this pandemic as a sign of God’s wrath – punishment probably for homosexuality or allowing women to speak in church – but to make us assess our expectations of the ability of doctors to save us from all of life’s calamities, indeed to face up to our fragility and the transience of life. We are going to die; it is not ‘if’ but ‘when’.

As we live through the season of Easter and celebrate the reign of Christ, won at such a great price, we acknowledge that none of us is strong, independent, self-made. We are God made, utterly dependent, as sheep are dependent on their shepherd. We work, we save, we study, we plan, but it is God who meets our deepest needs, who makes us ‘lie down’, let go of the anxiety, and it is God who helps us face the future with hope and trust.

Christ has come to us with his wounds – ‘he showed them his hands and his feet’ – so he knows all about being wounded; he suffers with us in our anxiety, fear, pain, sorrow and loss, but like a shepherd walking before his sheep with his staff firmly in the hand, he brings guidance and protection, so much protection

that we can sit down to a feast and a cup overflowing ‘in the presence of those who trouble me’.

We have been brought to our knees by this virus – and what a good place to be (if only metaphorically, not physically) –on our knees acknowledging that we are not self-made, self-sufficient superstars, we are needy, nervous sheep in need of God’s comforting presence, in need of his protection, guidance, healing. And then, just as we get to that point, we are reminded that at this table before us, where the feast has been laid out and the cup is running over, the Lord is the host. He gives himself to us in Word and Sacrament, calls us by name and offers us life – ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’.

Perhaps next week I might get around to exploring Peter’s first letter. In the meantime, perhaps you would like to think about this – the reading for today was 1P2.19-25. Why did the Lectionary compilers leave out verse 18? Answers on a post-card, please.

Stay safe.

Christine