

4th Sunday of Lent, Year A

We will begin our reflection today by looking at the Responsorial Psalm. The fact that it is so popular is another good reason to take a closer look at it.

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. FRESH AND GREEN ARE THE PASTURES WHERE HE GIVES ME REPOSE. NEAR RESTFUL WATERS HE LEADS ME to revive my drooping spirit.

He guides me along the right path; He is true to his name. If I should walk in the valley of darkness no evil should I fear YOU ARE THERE WITH YOUR CROOK AND YOUR STAFF; WITH THESE YOU GIVE ME COMFORT.

YOU HAVE PREPARED A BANQUET FOR ME in the sight of my foes. MY HEAD YOU HAVE ANOINTED WITH OIL. MY CUP IS OVERFLOWING.

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life. In the Lord's own house shall I dwell for ever and ever.

The author of the psalm is thinking of the journey of the people of Israel through the wilderness and their entrance into the promised land. He is thinking, of course, also of his own life. We are all on a journey, a journey hopefully to greater freedom and to the promised land of heaven. I have printed the psalm in such a way as to bring out the three main themes. The words in lower case black speak of the difficulties that we inevitably encounter in the desert. The words in **CAPITALS ITALIC RED** speak of the wonder of God's action in our lives, and the words in *lower case italic blue* express the faith of the author.

Let us look first at the words in lower case black. Often as we journey through life we find that our spirit is drooping; we are surrounded by darkness; and our enemies are on the lookout to harm us. However, while we have to contend with suffering, pain and disappointment, and the journey is often difficult, if we look at the words in **CAPITALS** we hear the author of the psalm recalling the wonderful ways in which God, our shepherd, looks after us. He brings us to pasture, taking us from oasis to oasis where we can slake our thirst and be fed and find rest. When all is darkness and we cannot see, the familiar sound of the shepherd's voice and the touch of his staff reassure us that we are not alone. With such care we are confident that we will not stray or lag behind, but will always be guided and protected. God, our loving shepherd welcomes us into his tent and spreads out a banquet for us, and when the time comes for us to have to move on, he comes with us. We do not walk alone. God is continually guiding and protecting us.

In the light of such experiences, the author of the psalm is encouraged to continue his

journey, placing his faith in God. Reading the words in *lower case italic blue*, we hear the psalmist declare: 'There is nothing I shall want'. Do we really believe that God is providing all the love and grace that we need for our journey, even when it seems so arid? The psalmist is convinced that God 'guides me along the right path'. Even when other people or our own folly means that we are on the wrong track, do we really believe that God is guiding us back towards life? Even in the darkness he can say 'no evil would I fear'. Finally the psalmist looks to the future full of confidence: 'Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life. In the Lord's own house shall I dwell forever and ever'.

This confidence is found also in a beautiful passage from the prophet Ezekiel. It is rather long, but it continues the image of the shepherd. As we listen to God's words, let us imagine them being spoken directly to us: 'Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak' (Ezekiel 34:11-16).

Psalms 23 speaks of the refreshment of perfumed oil with which God anoints us at the banquet. It is this image that is picked up in the First Reading where David is anointed with chrism by Samuel. This, in turn, reminds us of the anointing we all received at our baptism. Just as the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus at his Baptism, so at our baptism we were united to Jesus and God's Spirit filled our hearts. Baptism unites us in a special way to Jesus, the shepherd, by welcoming us into his flock. Only the most grave and obstinate sin can separate us from this communion. Whenever we feel lonely, or confused, or lost, or find that we are straying, all we need to do is cry out and the shepherd will come seeking us in love. The Second Reading also focuses on our baptism. From the paschal candle, symbol of the risen Christ, a candle is lit in our hearts. Paul asks us to let the light of Christ shine on us.

All of this is beautifully expressed by John in today's Gospel. Like the man born blind, we are enlightened by Christ by bathing in the waters of baptism and opening our hearts and minds to the gospel that comes to us through the Christian community. The key question which Jesus asks the man is the same question which John's community asked those who wanted to become Christians: 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'

To believe in the Son of Man is to recognise God's love in the love of Jesus who identified with the broken and the outcast and who, in Jesus, heard the cry of the poor. To believe in the Son of Man is to believe that God comes to us in and through our weaknesses. Just as grass finds its way to the light through the cracks in the concrete (in fact it often causes the cracks), so the life of God comes to us through the cracks that seem to spoil our best-made plans and ambitions. It is where we haven't got everything together that the oil of God's gracious Spirit enters like balm to heal us. It is where there are breaks in our solid defences that the light streams through. To believe in the Son of Man is to acknowledge that of ourselves we are blind, but that we are not left to ourselves: 'You are there with your crook and your staff, with these you give me comfort'.

We have made mistakes. We have been hurt and we have hurt others. Today's liturgy reassures us that it is in the real wilderness of our lives, where tracks run out, where we lose our way, where we make enemies and find that reconciliation seems impossible, where there is long way between oases - it is in this real desert wandering that God walks with us. As we thank him for the grace of belonging to this community through baptism, and as we come today to this banquet where he nourishes us with his love, let us renew our trust: 'Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life'.

In another psalm we read: 'May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfil all your plans' (Psalm 20:4). Speaking through Jeremiah, God says to us: 'Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope' (Jeremiah 29:11). Often what we need to do is to heed the advice of Moses: 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today ... The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still' (Exodus 14:13-14).

Let today's communion be our assurance of the tenderness of God's care for us and of his desire to draw us into intimate communion with his Son. In this lies our hope as we journey.