

The Lord's my shepherd: Psalm 23



Many thanks to Michael Pye for today's reflection on Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is for many of us a favourite psalm of reassurance. I remember it ever since my childhood, especially in the well-known metrical version (think of the melody!) “The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want / He makes me down to lie / in pastures green, he leadeth me / the quiet waters by”. For the last two or three days, while letting this thought for the day arise, I haven’t been able to get this melody out of my head.

The Psalm touches on various situations in life, including negative ones. There is the possibility of being troubled by others, yet they will be held at a distance while a festive table is spread before me. And I may walk in the valley of the shadow of death, whether my own or of others, as I often wondered, yet without fear. What exactly are the Lord’s rod and staff which will comfort me? They must be for protection and guidance. When little, I tried to imagine them, and I wondered how the Lord could hold both at once, not doubting that he could, but wondering just how, exactly. And how would I know which is the rod and which is the staff? (I now realise that I don’t need to know that.)

My other feeling about this psalm, as a child, was that “I” seemed to be completely spoiled with special attention and care. And as a child I was indeed grateful for all the care given to me. But look at the pronouns in the psalm: I, my and (of the Lord) he, you, your. These are prominent, indeed dominant. So where is the “we” and where are the “others”— except for those who trouble me? The sheer beauty of this psalm and its versions should not prevent us from going forward to a Jesus-led, Christian reflection about it. We must beware of an individualistic piety in a protective ethnic cocoon.

During this “Novena” of prayer, we are supposed to be praying for others, and also thinking about just how to pray, including daily structured prayer, with or without musical renderings as in the Psalms. Regular prayer includes prescribed forms and may have space for extempore prayer and silence. As life goes on, people sometimes feel a need for more clearly prescribed forms, while others, at other times, apparently need less. In any case, there will come a time, as we get older, when we simply cannot maintain full ritual order.

Yet *fragments* will remain, fragments of prayer. And these can be with us, for example when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death. The threads and fragments may be more important than the preceding system. And so let us be grateful for the fragments of prayer which stay with us throughout our lives. May they resurface just when we need them. In this sense may we all “dwell in the house of the Lord for ever”!

Michael Pye