



THE PSALMS by Father Robbie Low

3. PSALM 23

Nowadays if you look in the crematorium register of selected music pride of place normally goes to the great ballad of impenitence, 'My Way', followed closely by the obscene version of the Monty Python blasphemy. Such are the modern death rites of materialist man. In happier times, before the increasingly rapid drift to national and cultural apostasy, you could pretty much guarantee that the most regular coffin accompaniment would be some musical setting of the twenty third psalm. The reasons for this are not difficult to deduce.

The earliest images in Christian art depict Jesus as the shepherd of the flock. We know from both Matthew and Mark gospels that Jesus looked upon the multitudes and had compassion on them because they were *'like sheep without a shepherd'*. (Mk 6/Mt 9). When Jesus sends out the Apostles, they have a pastoral ministry as well as an evangelistic one.

Jesus tells a parable about the lost sheep and the single minded devotion of the shepherd who rescues the foolish wanderer. Indeed in John's Gospel is the most famous of the Shepherd sayings where Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd. This latter text is doubly critical because it is one of the 'I AM' sayings in which Jesus takes the divine name (Exodus 3) and claims it

for Himself while elucidating a key characteristic of the Godhead and His ministry in and among Man. In so doing Jesus is, of course, doing no more than fulfilling the prophecy of Ezekiel who reports God as saying (Ch.34) that the failure of the appointed shepherds of Israel is so great that He Himself will now be the Shepherd of Israel. That intervention of God will take place (according to the end of Ch. 37) through the Davidic line of kingship – hence the importance of so much early preaching to assert that genetic provenance for Jesus.

Thus Christians throughout two millennia, have prayed with confidence, *‘The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want’.*

The shepherd king of Israel, satisfies every need of those committed to His charge. Our feeding, our safety (salvation), our direction home, our defence, our thirst, our pathway, all guaranteed by the pastor of souls. In the providence of the Almighty we can indeed lack nothing.

Few psalms, never mind one as brief as this, offer such comprehensive coverage of the sacramental way in which the Divine Shepherd ministers this amazing grace.

‘He shall feed me in a green pasture. He shall lead me beside the waters of comfort.’

Mark’s Gospel takes us immediately from the recognition of the multitudes as lost sheep into the feeding of the five thousand. They are indeed fed in green pasture (Mark makes special note of the grassy setting). The feeding

prefigures and advertises the final revelation and mystery of the Mass – taking the fourfold pattern of offering, blessing, breaking, sharing.

The *'waters of comfort'* take us both back to the very waters in which we were immersed in the death of Christ to become disciples in the first place, the waters of baptism and into the mystery of Christ's death where His spear wounded side pours blood AND water into the chalice of salvation and provokes the cry of recognition and adoration from the Centurion, *'Truly, this man was the Son of God'*.

The psalmist continues,

'He shall convert my soul and lead me in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake'.

We often forget that conversion is a work of God. We must not dodge our joyful duty to evangelise by using this as an excuse but we must remember always that this is but the means of introducing people to Jesus. We are not converting people to ourselves or St. Didgeredoo's in the Marsh or the 8.30 congregation but introducing them to our Lord and Saviour who wants to be theirs too.

It is only this conversion that can lead us in the paths of righteousness. And it is not to our glory but for the sake of His Holy Name. In an age where the commonest blasphemy is OMG, we tend to forget that the reverencing of the Holy Name is one of the Commandments and the key to God's revelation of Himself to Man. To know the Name above all names is a god given privilege. All we do should be to bring glory to that Name. One of the most powerful images of that reality may be seen in the Gesu church in

Rome. At the apogee of the famous trompe l'oeil ceiling is the divine name. Ascending to it are the bambini, the innocent, the angels, the saints and the lovers of God in ever greater joy and rapture. Cascading away from it towards Hell are the tumbling, writhing, conflicted God deniers, their faces contorted in shock and terminal distress. At the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow.

'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil'

The psalms place in the funeral rites of the Faith is surely cemented by this psalm. There is a magnificent confidence in this prayer. A Christian is entitled to be afraid of the process of dying. For most of us it will not be pleasant. But we need not fear death. In Christ we know the result. And for our double assurance this prayer reminds us that, as we descend into the valley of the shadow, not only has Jesus Himself been there but He has broken the powers of Hell and He accompanies in the hours of deepest darkness and aloneness defending us on every side so that we have nothing to fear.

'Thou hast prepared a table before me.....Thou hast anointed my head with oil.'

Again the psalmist returns to the banquet but this time the banquet is no longer in the mystic signs of bread and wine where the earthly material offerings are transformed into the heavenly banquet but this time we are beyond that veil and truly, post mortem, in the eternal presence as

prefigured in Exodus (24 v 9) where the elders sit on the sapphire pavement before the face of God and eat and drink.

The entry to that sublime destination opens in response to the recognition of our anointing. The sacrament which marks us out as 'anointed ones' – followers of the Christ, The Anointed, - seals our baptism, strengthens us by the Holy Spirit in Confirmation and marks our last journey, with the Viaticum, into the arms of God. Chrismation marks every step of our journey.

'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.'

As we are led by Christ, the Good Shepherd, in the paths of righteousness – an Eastern shepherd leads his flock, not chivvying it from the rear with dogs – so we should leave a trail of goodness and mercy, a hint of the beautiful fragrance of Christ. Our aim, our ambition, our eternal destiny is to be, at the end of the mountain of the ascent, to enter the Heavenly Jerusalem and dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

Christ the Good Shepherd was the earliest inspiration of the Christian community, the example and vocation that is given to the apostolic office of Peter and the simple call to every priest and pastor who administers the sacraments to the pilgrim church, who seeks out the lost and leads his flock Heavenward.