The Pasture

December 5th, 2021

O Lord, teach us peace.

The wilderness can be enchanting, a place of contemplation and relaxation. The wilderness can also be the least peaceful place to be. Nature can be quite severe—there are storms, avalanches, and wild animals that prey on other animals. It is *wild,* after all. The wilderness was also a place well-known to Biblical shepherds and prophets; it figures prominently in Messianic literature. John the Baptist spoke of how the wilderness would be transformed: “‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’ (Luke 3:4-6). Drawing on the prophets and ancient proclamations regarding imperial visits, John the Baptist speaks of the coming Messiah. The Advent means that the landscape is changing! Not geographically, but spiritually. Every obstacle is going to be removed. Impassable mountains and dangerous valleys are cleared. All of the rough terrain is going to vanish. A straight path in scripture indicates a peaceful path—a way forward—a way out of the aimless wandering of sin and sorrow, of violence and fear. As we read in our beloved Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths his for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me” (Psalm 23:1-4). The straight path of the Messiah leads us to into landscapes of good pasture—into the coming of peace.

Our poem today speaks in just this kind of pastoral vein. It is the poem “Christmas II” by George Herbert (1593-1633):

Christmas (II)

The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?

My God, no hymn for Thee?

My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds

Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.

The pasture is Thy word: the streams, Thy grace

Enriching all the place.

Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers

Outsing the daylight hours.

Then will we chide the sun for letting night

Take up his place and right:

We sing one common Lord; wherefore he should

Himself the candle hold.

I will go searching, till I find a sun

Shall stay, till we have done;

A willing shiner, that shall shine as gladly,

As frost-nipped suns look sadly.

Then will we sing, and shine all our own day,

And one another pay:

His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine,

Till ev'n His beams sing, and my music shine.

The soul is also a shepherd. Some of you may remember a quote from Alberto Caeiro I shared some years ago: “I’m a keeper of sheep. The sheep are my thoughts…” (Alberto Caeiro, IX, “The Keeper of Sheep” in *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems* by Fernando Pessoa. Translated by Richard Zenith. London: Penguin, 2006. 23). And today, George Herbert likewise tells us that our souls are shepherds: “My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds…Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.” This is a great paradox that Herbert, a theologically gifted poet, invites. The scriptures tend to speak of us as sheep (Psalm 23, Matthew 18:10-14, John 10) needing the Good Shepherd. And yet, we are also shepherds in a way. The prophet Ezekiel spoke of the leaders of Israel as being shepherds: “Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them...” (Ezekiel 34:2-6). It is a very sad picture. The shepherds were not properly shepherding themselves because they were not letting themselves be shepherded by the Lord. And thus, they preyed upon the sheep. When we are not shepherded by the Lord, we fall into a great disquiet and create a great disquiet around us. Sometimes this disquiet is just ennui, melancholy, anxiety—but sometimes this disquiet becomes abuse and violence—towards ourselves and our neighbours—or worse, it becomes public policy and corrupts the earth. There is no harmony in us because of the darkness within us. In rejoicing over the coming Saviour, Herbert says: “Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers/Outsing the daylight hours./Then we shall chide the sun for letting night. Take up his place and right:/ We sing one common Lord: wherefore he should/ Himself the candle hold.” Without the candle of our common Lord, our Good Shepherd, we would not unite, we would not sing, we would not rejoice in peace. Advent is essentially waiting upon this common Lord, the one who is the light of the world, the one who brings us together.

Though it may be clear to us that Jesus is the Prince of Peace and the one who teaches us to be peacemakers (Isaiah 9:6, Matthew 5:9), sometimes we are not always sure why the world is not at peace, or why we ourselves cannot find peace. The psalms say that peace is related to righteousness: “Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14). Moreover, in the psalms we read that public peace is a result of our relationship to God: “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase” (Psalm 85:8-12). Peace is thus a disposition of a soul as well as relationships that begin in a proper relationship with God. A disturbance in our relationship with God is the primary cause of our disturbance between ourselves—whether it is amongst family members, neighbours, social groups or countries. As James says: “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:1-3). In our own age, our unchecked greed, envy, fear and fantasy have made us very vulnerable to division, acrimony, and even war. The more we live according to our wants, the more other people become less than people—they become mere obstacles to what we want—even if we disguise our wants in the highest, noblest terms of justice, safety, enlightenment, progress or the appearance of virtue. War comes from asking wrongly. Peace comes from asking God for what is right, from seeking what is true. In order to be able to do that, however, we must understand our relationship to God.

Christ came to be the model sheep and model shepherd because we do not know how to be shepherds or sheep. As Ezekiel says: “For 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). Isaiah speaks of the Messiah as the humblest sheep who was silent before its shearers (Isaiah 53:7). We do not know how to be sheep or shepherds. Almost everything in nature knows how to be what it is. The lamb knows how to be a lamb; the lion knows how to be a lion. Isaiah begins his great book with oxen and donkeys: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” (Isaiah 1:3). Jesus teaches us how to be sheep and shepherds, how to be oxen and donkeys. Jesus teaches *how to be.* Christ came to teach us how to be human beings. It may sound idealistic and simplistic, but consider it for a moment. When we speak of violence, atrocities, cruelty or injustice, we speak of such behaviour as *inhumane.* Some part of us knows that animosity, cruelty and violence dehumanizes us. Conflict is the opposite of right relationship, and we are losing something of our humanity when we fight and divide with no desire for reconciliation. Human beings were created for relationship—Aelred of Rievaulx would go so far as to say we were created for friendship (Aelread of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*); and Aristotle said that being a good citizen was basically being a good friend (*Nicomachean Ethics,* VIII). When we look into the world, do we see it as a place where we wish to grow friendship? Or do we see it as a place where we wish to compete with others, to control others, to have power over others, or to silence others? What kind of friendship do we bring to the stranger, to the enemy, to the neighbour, to the friend, to the brother or to the sister? There is no peace without friendship, as simple as it sounds.

The sheep need pasture to be at peace—we need green pastures; we need still waters; it is there that we can find peace. Peace is not some idealistic dream, even if it is not always achievable. It is as necessary as good air, food, water and shelter. In war, very often it is precisely our food, water and shelter that get threatened. Peace is also necessary for our mental and moral health—without peace, we make poor judgments and engage in bad actions that damage ourselves and others. Throughout my life, I have met many people traumatized by war—people who survived combat, genocidal attacks, shipwrecks, atomic bombs, incendiary bombing, clandestine operations, civil strife, street fighting, gang war, stabbings. I have met these people face to face and heard their stories and seen the scars. Being peaceful does not leave those kinds of scars. Sometimes the peacemaker, however, is encircled by people who do not love peace, but even there, God continues to provide and show us how to be people of peace: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5). I have heard wonderful survival stories of people striving to be peaceable and keeping the faith in the very dark nights of war. In the midst of terror, they found a spiritual landscape, a place of pasture.

Advent invites us to seek that pasture, to always seek it. Herbert says: “The pasture is Thy word: the streams, Thy grace/ Enriching all the place”. Isaiah also returns to the images of pasture, of oxen and donkeys and sheep when he speaks of the coming Spirit: “until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. And it will hail when the forest falls down, and the city will be utterly laid low. Happy are you who sow beside all waters, who let the feet of the ox and the donkey range free” (Isaiah 32:15-20). And it was to give the Spirit that Christ came for us. And it is the giving of the Spirit that teaches us the divine friendship. Jesus said: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27); “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). In walking with Jesus, in following Jesus, we see what everything that Jesus has heard from the Father, and we are able to live a befriending life in the way that God befriended us through Jesus. Friendship is not just about being around people you like, people with whom you agree, people with whom you share a political stance. The moment we think that, we have made the path crooked; we have raised an impassable mountain or dug a valley through the path. Friendship is about being who we are meant to be, about being how we are meant to be—and we are meant to be filled with the Spirit, filled with the love of God, ready to be the sheep led by the Good Shepherd. Without this, we can befriend nobody, not even ourselves. Only through the Spirit will we shepherd our thoughts, beliefs and desires in holiness; then and only then will we lack nothing and find the good pasture, where even the lion and the lamb can lie down together in peace. Grace comes through Jesus Christ, and through Jesus, may we learn to be good sheep, may we know peace, may we see the landscape changed into lush, calming pasture.