

Easter 4 RCLa (30 April 2023)

The image of the shepherd is central to our faith as Christians, & its origins in the Old Testament are expressed most concisely in our psalm appointed for the day.

I know some of you learnt Psalm 23 in grade school — & most of us probably has at least parts of the psalm by heart.

I never memorized it in school, as I did the Lord's Prayer, but I remember hearing it at times throughout my childhood.

Even without any lessons in religion, it was impossible to avoid it entirely, & the assertion that “The Lord is my shepherd” was early graved in my mind.

Knowing nothing about shepherds, & being quite opposite to sheepish by nature, I had trouble making sense of the psalm — but, as I heard it repeated over the years — most especially at funerals — the psalm grew in power over me. Its words had the power to comfort me.

I remember back when I was twenty one, reading the psalm at a funeral for a friend —

*Ye though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,*

I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me.

While capturing the mystery of death, these words lent me strength — the promise that God is with us, & God's sheep live under his protection.

This was years before I was aware of God's presence in my life — years before I had faith in Christ. But these words alone stirred in me a sense of the Holy Spirit. I share this with you because I hope these words comfort & strengthen you in faith. As members of Christ's body, there's absolutely nothing for us to fear.

I say this to you because — until Christ comes again — death will remain a part of our lives. And we naturally fear death — which is a hideous, awful thing. But we have been baptised into the promise of something so much greater than that sad old story:

We do not live under Satan's old death sentence: we live in the hope of Christ's resurrection — the light of the Son whose life can never be snuffed out. He is the only shepherd who can lead us to pastures ever green.

Now, what Jesus mean when he says of himself in today's gospel: “the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers”?

Looking to the lives of the disciples — & remembering all the trouble they had actually heeding Jesus' voice — in many ways this sounds like wishful thinking on the part of our Lord. To take only the most extreme example, when Jesus tells Simon Peter, “Get behind me, Satan” — clearly Jesus' sheep go astray sometimes, following not the One

True Shepherd who *leads us to God* but rather the voice of the one who *seeks to keep us estranged from God...*

This obvious fact helps me see that Jesus is not referring to our perfect obedience as disciples but is rather describing *our ultimate end* as sheep of his fold. None of us will follow our Shepherd perfectly, & many of us will spend the rest of our lives learning to hear his voice & struggling to heed it.

But again & again, even when we stray from the Lord, the Lord will seek us out. He will not abandon us to destruction.

And this is the main point to remember: it is not our own perfection, but Christ's perfection, that prevents us from ever being forsaken.

We may not hear his voice every step of the way, but we will hear it when it matters — & we will follow our Lord into everlasting life.

This is the confidence we have as sheep of Christ's pasture. It's not at all what we would describe as *sheepish* behaviour.

But while it befits us as baptised believers to have such confidence, it is entirely appropriate that we do our part in growing in our knowledge of God — developing ears to hear the sound of his voice — & hearts to follow him. And, towards this end, I want to end today by identifying four obvious ways for us to develop as Christians.

The first way is by keeping regular prayers.

A lot of people have trouble praying, but it is worth all the trouble it takes gaining fluency talking to God.

Don't let anything block you from this life-giving practice. It may be inevitable that we fall back on God's grace, but the more we pray, the more confidently we can let go of our own pettiness — to the glory of God.

The second way to grow in recognizing God's voice is by reading Scripture. Again, a lot of people complain that the Bible is too long & complicated for them to understand. But I have met very simple people who didn't let that get in their way, & their lives take shape around the Risen One — & they abound in confidence.

The third way is through our faith communities — in our families, in our parish, & in the Church more generally. Checking in with other people of faith, who are being formed through prayer & Scripture reading — this adds to our confidence in discerning God.

Finally, we will hear God through our own expressions of Christ's sacrificial love. Set someone else's needs in the front of your mind for a while — & you will see Christ's face laid bare. This last point is particularly appropriate for this, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, traditionally known as Vocations Sunday — when we pray for the various members of Christ's Church — both lay & ordained — to hear God's calling on us, & to respond in service that is perfect freedom. May we all grow in God's grace as our years increase.

In the name of the Father, & of the Son, & of the Holy Spirit. Amen.