

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**18<sup>th</sup> July 2021**

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“Sheep can safely graze where a good shepherd watches over them.” (*Salomon Franck, from the libretto of the cantata BWV 208 by J S Bach*)

Through the centuries, many a ruler has taken pride in being called a shepherd of their people. We had here the testimony of a cantata Bach composed for the birthday of the duke of Sachsen Weissenfels – actually, the duke was more of a hunter than a shepherd, and certainly a particularly improvident ruler, one of those whom the prophet Jeremiah had vituperated.

In the ancient world, the shepherd was a common metaphor for leadership, whether human or divine. The epilogue of the law code of Hammurabi, king of Babylon eighteen centuries before Christ, has the monarch state: “I made the people lie down in safe pastures, I did not allow anyone to frighten them.” An appropriate metaphor. After all, aren’t shepherds responsible for protecting and providing sustenance for their flocks, keeping peace within the flock, defending it against attackers, searching for sheep who have gone astray, and rescuing those who are in danger?

I suspect we are, nowadays, a little uncomfortable with this metaphor (and that our political leaders would reject it altogether): we are not sure we want to be led as a shepherd would lead his flock, as we are suspicious of authority that cannot be contested. And, honestly, are any of us flattered to be thought of as sheep? In our “me first” culture, we want to be acknowledged for our individuality, for our uniqueness, not as anonymous members of a flock.

How many of us are, actually, familiar with shepherding? While shepherding is still widespread in many parts of the world, for us it is only a very remote reality, an old-fashioned picture on a post card or in a book with yellowed pages. A

somehow superficial reading of Psalm 23 might have contributed to our largely idyllic image of the shepherd.

Nonetheless, for many of us, this is the most cherished psalm. It delivers some of the most beautiful and deeply comforting images in the whole Bible. At its heart lie hope and reassurance. Green pastures, still waters and the very thought of “dwelling in the house of the Lord for ever” – here is strength and peace and delight and promise of eternal life.

But linger a little with the Psalm, and you will see that it speaks far more of journeying than of abiding in solitude, of enduring trials rather than escaping them, of life rather than afterlife, and of finding a place where one is welcomed to rest and be refreshed.

At the very centre of the Psalm, the psalmist acknowledges God’s presence at the heart of his life: “you are with me”. Up to this point God is spoken of in the third person, a remote presence: “The Lord is my shepherd, he leads me, he restores my soul”. From now on, God is addressed directly: “you are with me, you spread a table, you have anointed my head ...” The conversation begins, the relationship flourishes. “You are with me” is the turning point of the Psalm, and from here a new life with God begins, in the knowledge that “I will lack nothing”. The immeasurable grace of God, the Shepherd, opens the door to the dwelling where one can come, all by oneself, to rest, to be transformed and to gain wholeness: “I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” In the words of the poet T. S. Eliot:

“The end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.” (*Little Gidding*)

This year, as we read our way through Mark’s Gospel – arguably, the fastest-paced of the four Gospels – we might feel breathless and plead for a little rest. Things happen fast in Mark’s story, one event quickly follows another, time is short. The Greek word *eutheos*, translated “immediately” or “at once”, occurs over 40 times in this Gospel. Mark creates a sense of hurry, of rush, of busyness. We encounter an efficient Messiah and a whirlwind of miracles, parables and life-changing conversations.

The sixth chapter of the Gospel is no exception: Jesus sends the twelve disciples on a mission; John the Baptist is killed; Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks

on water – all major events in the Gospel, so much so, that the two passages we read today seem a touch anticlimactic.

It is a striking shift to hear Jesus tell his disciples, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” The apostles have just returned to Jesus, bringing, no doubt, stories both of great blessing and of difficulties, if not of failures – there is an urgency, even an excitement, to share them with him, and Jesus calls them to a time and place of rest. He invites them to leave their troubles behind, to dwell in a place where they can pay attention to their hearts, to attend to the movements of their bodies, to have again a sense of themselves, and to anchor their lives in his presence: not doing but being. His compassion – this is what designates Jesus as Shepherd. A compassion that is not merely a human feeling, but God’s deep tenderness made flesh.

In this place of rest, the Shepherd begins to form the disciples into a new flock, a new community, a new humanity – one of compassion, reconciliation and justice, one that is called to witness to God’s Kingdom here, on earth, that is, to his reign of mercy and peace.

“Come away and rest a while” – there is both wisdom and love in these words. Nevertheless, honouring God’s call to rest is no small feat for us, 21<sup>st</sup> century people. Our culture is one of being workaholic, of efficiency, of striving, of anxiety about wasting time, of perfectionism. Many wear their burnout as a badge of honour.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century French catholic priest Vincent de Paul, founder of the Lazarists, knew of the risk of this destructive drive: “It is a trick of the devil, which he employs to deceive good souls, to incite them to do more than they are able, in order that they may no longer be able to do anything.”

Jesus can probe below the surface of our busyness and touch our longing, our hunger that we do not dare to name: a longing for time, solitude, rest, reflection, refreshment ... To all those who cannot stop, who will not stop to ponder, to wonder, to meditate, to take a deep breath ... Jesus says “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

One of the many joys of hiking I’m looking forward to this summer is that of coming across signs that people, who have longed to rest with God and in God, have left in my path: a prayer, a meditation or a blessing written on a rock or on the frontispiece of a house, the simplest cross on a mountain top, a tiny chapel...

Wherever you are called to leave what burdens you carry behind and take a rest, be it at home, or in a garden, in a church or on a beach, do not decline this precious opportunity for closeness to God, knowing that, in his presence, we can lack nothing.

Amen.