

## Week Sixteen Ordinary Time 2021

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ps 22; Eph 2:13 -18; Mark 6:30-34

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Earlier in the week, I was walking down by the canal in the cool of the early morning. It is not so busy then with cyclists and dog walkers, and it is kinder on my dog who likes to accompany me but does not like the heat. Or other dogs. The water was almost motionless: it had not rained for a few days you could see some fish just below the surface. That quiet and stillness made me think of recent funerals and the souls I was praying for. In my funereal musings was that fact that the most popular Psalm on such occasions is the one we have just prayed together, Psalm 22. It begins with that familiar line: *'The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.'* It is probably chosen 80% of the time, perhaps even more often than that. It is popular with those who attend church frequently, as well as with those who dip into church only occasionally, such as at a funeral. I have wondered why. Maybe because it is heard so often at funerals it is familiar even with those who are not regular church goers, so it is something comfortable and known. It also has words that we associate with death and with hope.

*'Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose'.*

Although the words are 'gives me repose' in our minds we probably transpose that onto the deceased and his or her rest, give them repose. Maybe when we say those words *'Fresh and green are the pastures'* we are also acknowledging the possibility that the deceased did not always live an easy life, perhaps he had a tough time growing up or maybe she was seriously ill in her declining years. We like to hope that they are going to a better place.

It does not take too much to align to those words *'If I should walk in the valley of darkness, no evil would I fear'* with death. Darkness falls over the eyes of the one who has died, and there may also be darkness in our own eyes as we grieve. Then the psalm ends *'In the Lord's own house shall I dwell for ever and ever'*. Again, although the words are *'In the Lord's own house shall I dwell'*, we may be intending this hope to be for the deceased who lies in the coffin, perhaps even keeping at arms length my own inevitable encounter with death.

All of this is understandable. And yet, it is not sufficient. The Psalm offers us much more than consolation for the loss of a loved one. If we understand our faith's Jewish roots then we remember that when the Psalm was written an idea of life with God after death was not really formed in the faith community. God was for the living, not the dead. This Psalm was not written for the dead, but the living. It sings of God accompanying his people and their being present before Him, not in the land in which eyes which are forever closed, but in the land in which eyes are fully open. Listen:

*'Near restful waters he leads me, to revive my drooping spirit'.*

These words are for now, with God beside you even in grief. The *'valley of darkness'* should not be associated primarily with death, but with this life here seemingly distant from God. *'You have prepared a banquet for me'* here and now if I keep God's company, so that I may recognise the good things he offers me. And then, certainly words that do not resonate with connotations of death, *'Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life.'*

Now as Christians what we do with this Psalm what is entirely correct: we reinterpret it as Church's encounter with Christ. Taking this Psalm of with its motif of life we fill our understanding of it with Christian

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hope, because we know that this life is only a point of departure for heaven. It is because of Christ that our life bridges over death and that we can take this Psalm, which celebrates our faith in the God who accompanies us in this life, and extend it through and past death. The images which present themselves to us overlap and interweave, not contradictory but complimentary. The '*restful waters*' are the waters we walk by in the now, but also the heavenly ones where I will finally walk. The '*valley of darkness*' is not just the environs of the dead, but also current dangers and fears. The '*goodness and kindness that follow me all the days of my life*', is Christ beside and before and behind me now, and in my future life in the heavenly Jerusalem. And finally, I can interchange the 'me' and 'I' in the psalm with the 'he' or 'she' in the coffin at a funeral because the psalm it is for all of us, the communion of Saints, as we are formed for our part of Christ's redemption of the world.

*'The Lord is my shepherd;*

*There is nothing I shall want.*

The next time you hear this psalm it is quite likely that it will be at a funeral. May you pray it in a new way.