

If you ever need words of comfort you can find them in Psalm 23. In fact, you probably have found them in this popular psalm time and again. We sang it today: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” All the images bring comfort and peace. The pastures are verdant. The waters are restful. The soul is refreshed. It sounds as though God has prepared a picnic for us on a leisurely spring afternoon. This magnetic vision attracts us because we never get enough days like this. Our pastures have billboards. Our streams are polluted. Our soul is distressed. We yearn for something else. Perhaps you’ve prayed, “O God, I’d give anything to have even one day like the sheep in Psalm 23.” “Would you really?” you can almost hear God ask – because it requires something of us, not just of God.

We sing Psalm 23 today because of shepherds in the gospel and first reading, but they are not quite like the one we ponder in the psalm. The shepherd in the gospel is separating sheep from goats, redeeming one group and condemning the other. In Ezekiel God says, “I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats.” Yes, that shepherd will rescue the scattered flock and seek out the lost, bind up the injured, and heal the sick, but God also says, “the sleek and the strong I will destroy, shepherding them rightly.” Not a completely comforting shepherd in those readings. Even Psalm 23 isn’t as comforting as you might think. One way to translate its first line is not, “The Lord is my shepherd,” but “the Lord shepherds me,” or even, “the Lord rules me.” When you’re a sheep, you’re not in charge of the shepherd. You’re not the one telling the shepherd how to bring you comfort. You trust that the shepherd will bring you the comfort you need. Sometimes when we place ourselves in another’s care, we are not happy with the care we get. In this case, we trust that God will provide the direction we need, though we are not always willing to accept it.

The opening prayer for mass next weekend refers back to today’s gospel. We will begin using a new translation of the words for the mass next weekend. This pertains not only to the parts that you say, but even more to the parts the priest says. For example, for the past 40 years on the First Sunday of Advent, you may have heard the priest include these words in the opening prayer: “that Christ may . . . call us to his side in the kingdom of heaven.” But the revised text, which translates more of the original prayer, asks that, “gathered at [God’s] right hand, [the faithful] may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.” It imagines us as the faithful sheep on the right side of the shepherd, who hear the words, “Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” The original Latin of this prayer dates to the seventh century, and it was assigned to the First Sunday of Advent after Vatican II. The revised translation will clarify why.

This morning we celebrate the solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ the King. It closes the liturgical year, and today it closes our use of many words that have served us for 40 years. At any significant juncture in our lives we may feel like a sheep in the hands of a shepherd. You trust the shepherd has your best interests at heart, but a sheep who is lost, frightened, or hurt has to wonder if the shepherd is friend or foe. Still, we have learned from experience that our best companion in times of transition is trust in the one who redeems us: Jesus Christ the King.