

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Christian apologist C. S. Lewis lost his mother when he was nine years old. As an adult, he wrote this about the experience: "With my mother's death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis." Many of us experience some unhappiness that disturbs our security. It could be an injury, a broken trust, an argument or the death of someone we relied upon. After that we sustain a fear that at any moment something else could go wrong. That awareness keeps us from constant contentment.

We can only be envious of whoever wrote Psalm 23, one of the most popular prayers in Jewish and Christian worship. We sang it today as our responsorial because of the gospel and the first reading. At the end of the gospel, Jesus assessed the crowd as sheep without a shepherd. The problem in the first reading is not that the people have no shepherd, but that the shepherds they have are misleading the flock. Between these hapless circumstances shines Psalm 23 like the rising sun. It opens with the familiar words of greatest contentment, "The Lord is my shepherd." End of problem.

Among shepherds, the problem is sometimes the sheep. The sheep wander away, not paying attention to the path they should take. They get themselves into trouble. Even a good shepherd sometimes lacks good sheep. Good sheep can say the first line of Psalm 23 because they believe the second line. You can say, "The Lord is my shepherd" only if you can also say "there is nothing shall I want." The Lord gives what is sufficient: green pastures, restful waters, and a soul revived, but many of us want a list of other priorities, starting with better electronics. If there are things we still want, is the Lord really our shepherd?

This psalm is not just about how sheep should behave, but what the Lord provides. He carries crook and staff to fight off danger. He prepares a table to satisfy our belly. He pours out oil to anoint our head. The psalm includes one brief moment when the sheep walk "in the valley of the shadow of death," but even in that scene of solitude, there is no fear. "You are with me," the psalm says with confidence. Even when there is reason for worry, there really is not.

Early church commentary regarded this psalm as a prophecy for the sacraments of initiation - the restful waters prefigure baptism, the oil looks forward to confirmation, and the meal anticipates the eucharist. But it has also provided comfort at funerals especially because of its final verse: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. In the Lord's own house shall I dwell for length of days unending."

We each have long days when we cannot sense the Lord's goodness and mercy. But even in the valley of the shadow of death, the shepherd is always at our side. To pray Psalm 23 does not ignore the dangers that surround us or the losses that have saddened us. But it does give us reason to find comfort in light and in shade, in feast and famine, in the sight of friends or foes. Our shepherd is not food or toys, pleasures or lusts. The Lord is our shepherd. Truly, there is nothing more we shall want.

Sunday, July 22, 2018