

MORNING PRAYER
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER
04.14.24

The twenty-third Psalm is among the most widely-known and best-loved literature in the western world. Most of us learned it in the King James version, but in any translation it is simple, it is beautiful, and it is profound.

I would like to invite you this morning to open your prayer book and look in some depth at this ancient hymn. It is on page 368.

Let's begin in the middle: Verse 5. "Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them that trouble me." Doesn't that strike you as strange? I mean, if the Lord is going to feed us, why doesn't He do it in some comfortable place where we can relax and enjoy it? Why prepare a meal in the presence of people who want to harm us? How can we enjoy our food when we are feeling threatened?

I don't really know the answer to that question, but I do know this. In the Bible the great scenes in which God feeds His people usually take place in hostile environments. God supplied the manna and the quails in the harshest part of the desert when the people emigrated from Egypt. He fed the prophet Elijah in the wilderness during a drought. Jesus fed the 5000 people in a remote and desolate place. The Last Supper took place in an atmosphere of anxiety and foreboding with the cross, the shadow of death, looming in the background. It is almost as if God wants us to go to unfriendly places to be nourished in the presence of threatening circumstances.

That is certainly true in a spiritual sense. Our souls are not usually nourished in pleasant and secure surroundings. Our souls are nourished in the harsh and hostile places where faith is tested.

It has been suggested that the 23rd Psalm describes an actual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, perhaps from Galilee. In the early stages, the journey is easy. The first three Verses talk about a reliable guide who leads the way through green pastures where there are plenty of springs and streams.

But when we get to Verse 4, we encounter evil and death and hostile people. This is a dangerous leg of the journey and the pilgrims have to pass through it in order to reach the Holy City. They do so with courage and faith, protected and disciplined by God's rod and staff. When they finally arrive at the temple, they are refreshed with oil and wine. They want to stay there forever and not have to go back home.

The pattern of this pilgrimage may fit the geography of the Holy Land but it is also the pattern of the spiritual journey of faith. That journey begins for most of us in childhood, where the grass is green, the water is calm, and a powerful figure protects us and supplies all our needs. The faith of childhood is simple, optimistic, and trusting. It's a wonderful kind of faith to have. But as you grow older, you need and develop a more robust kind of faith.

Maturity brings awareness of evil and death. Innocence gives way before the harsh realities of life. Discipline emerges as a weapon and a tool. The rod and the staff become essential to our comfort and our survival. It is here in the valley of darkness that faith is challenged and ultimately strengthened.

At this point in the psalm the metaphor changes from the shepherd and his sheep to the host and his dinner guest. Here in the presence of people who don't like us we learn to depend upon God to nourish us, and we learn that he does that in the most difficult circumstances. We learn to be patient. We learn about duty and loyalty and companionship, and betrayal.

We learn to distinguish between what is essential and what is merely of passing value in life.

As we pass through the valley of the shadow of death we begin to develop the character of Christ, which is what God intends for us. We develop courage by facing up to our fears. We learn our strengths and our weaknesses and what God can do with both of them when we offer them to him. This is the critical phase of the journey of faith. It is a time of formation and transformation in the image of Christ. Finally we reach the end of our journey of faith when we enter into glory: “Thou hast anointed my head with oil. My cup runneth over.”

Moses anointed Aaron’s head with oil when he designated him high priest of Israel. Samuel anointed David with oil when he named him King of Israel to succeed Saul. The phrase “The Lord’s Anointed” came to refer to the Messiah, and you will recall that Jesus, before He went to the cross, was anointed with oil by a woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee. It is an oft-repeated theme that those who share the trials of Christ also share His victory and the honor that goes with it.

Anointing with oil served another purpose as well in ancient times and is still used for that purpose today in religious circles. Every year at Synod, the bishop blesses oil for anointing the sick as part of the healing process. So the final phase of the journey of faith brings healing as well as status. Our cups overflow with celebratory wine as we become permanent residents in God’s own household.

At that point we can look back and see that goodness and mercy were following us all along, even though at the time we did not see them. They were there in our youthful naïveté. They were there in the valley of darkness.

They will be there at our reception into heaven. But we cannot see them when we look ahead because they always follow us. We see them in retrospect.

For me, and for the Church in general, we are somewhere in the middle of this pilgrimage. There was a time in the past when the world was friendly to Christians and the Church was respected. The grass was green. The water was calm. The paths were well defined. That is not where we are today.

Conclusion: Today the Church is in the valley of darkness being fed by the Lord among people who do not like us. We are in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to Christians. It's not just in other countries where Moslems are killing our brothers and sisters, but it's also here in our own country where secular forces seek to drive us along with our symbols out of the public arena into the privacy of our homes and churches. This hostility we must endure before we come to the glory and joy that surely awaits us.

Wherever you may be on your personal journey of faith, whether at the beginning, or near the end, or somewhere in the middle, there is something in this psalm for you. No wonder it is so well-known and so much loved among people of faith.

“The Lord is my Shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.”

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