

I think it is providentially that today we are celebrating the 4th Sunday of Easter, which is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, on the same day that our Shepherd is gathering us together for mass for the first time in over a month. In our Gospel, Jesus gives us a beautiful image of a shepherd who goes into the sheepfold and calls out his sheep by name to lead them out to verdant pastures. Jesus makes it clear that He is at the same time both the gate and the shepherd. As He says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out to find pasture... I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”

In this teaching from Jesus, the sheepfold is the world. The sheep are those who recognize the voice of Jesus and follow Him. The gate is the salvific Death and Resurrection of Our Lord through which Jesus leads us out of this world into the verdant pastures which are eternal life of heaven. This teaching of Jesus becomes the lens that helps us to delve more deeply into the spiritual riches contained in another of today’s readings that also came from a shepherd. The reading which I am referring to is Psalm 23 which was written by King David who long before his kingship was a simple shepherd tending sheep.

This psalm opens with the beautiful and poignant words, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” These are powerful words of trust in God’s providence, trust that God will be like a good shepherd who watches over his sheep and provides all that they need so that they might be healthy and safe. In these days of turmoil, do we have the same trust that God is our Good Shepherd who will provide for all that we need?

The psalm goes on to say “in verdant pastures he gives me repose; beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul.” Obviously, on one level David is saying that we shall not want for food or drink. And yet, this is about more than simply earthly food and drink for David goes on to say, “he refreshes my soul.” The

verdant pastures and still waters which our good Shepherd desires to lead us are not truly of this world, but of the world to come where our soul can be at peace.

“He guides me in right paths for his name’s sake.” Throughout the history of Israel, they continued to fail in their promises to the Lord but the Lord never failed in His promises to them. David experienced this first hand for even when he fell away from God due to sin, God never abandoned Him. In Paul’s 2nd Letter to Timothy we hear, “If we are unfaithful he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.” Our God is the Good Shepherd who will never abandon us. Even if we are led astray due to sin, He will always come to find those who are lost for He cannot cease loving us without denying Himself.

“Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage.” Some Scripture scholars say that David is referring to a specific valley that exists on the road to Jerusalem, the same valley that Jesus speaks of in His parable of the Good Samaritan. This valley is surrounded by steep walls that leave it always in shadows, making it a favorite place for bandits to waylay travelers.

David is saying that even in passing through this dark valley where danger threatens, he has no fear for the Lord protects him with His rod and staff. The rod and staff refers to the traditional tool of the shepherd, a staff with a hooked end that can be used to pull sheep to safety and protect them from enemies. Our God does not passively guide us through danger, rather He goes before us clearing out our obstacles and enemies, trying to pull us back to safety whenever we start to go astray.

“You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes.” A good shepherd would go through the pasture and clear out any weeds or plants that would make the sheep sick if it was eaten. As we already saw, the good shepherd would then keep a careful eye on his sheep and protect them from their enemies so that they could eat

in peace. Even though we might pass through dark times in our lives, God desires to stand by our side and protect us from them, so that we might eat the spiritual banquet which He spreads before us in peace.

“You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” In the time of David, the shepherd didn’t have a veterinarian to turn to when his flock was sick or wounded. He had a flask of oil which he used to tend to his animals’ wounds and bring them back to health. At the same time, this oil alludes to the anointings received by prophets and kings. Just as David was once anointed king, we too have been anointed by our Good Shepherd at our baptism, promising us great blessings for following Him through the hardships of life as well as healing for our wounds when we are injured or go astray.

“Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.” Whenever we choose to allow God to become our Good Shepherd, we are not promised that all of our problems will magically disappear. What we are promised is that God will protect us and provide for us, leading us through dangers that we may not even see so that we can be preserved for Heaven. He will fill our hearts with goodness and kindness until our cups overflow and we cannot help but leave goodness and kindness with everyone we meet. In so doing, we too shall one day receive the reward of dwelling in the House of the Lord for years to come.