

St George's Anglican Church, Travancore



Sermon - 4th Sunday of Easter (Year C), Sunday May 8, 2022

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

“Do not be afraid.” These comforting words come into the bible story time after time; from the angel, to Mary, and to Joseph, and to Zechariah, from the Angel host to the shepherds. As we heard in last week’s Gospel reading, the risen Jesus twice greeted the assembled, fearful disciples with the same reassuring words.

In a news report during the week, I heard an account of a mother who had just been freed from 60 days underground in the factory in Mariupol who told a reporter that she had spent much of her time telling her children, *“Do not be afraid, everything will be alright”*. She did not really believe it, but for the sake of her children she had to say it. That’s what mothers of very young, very frightened children do; they put aside their own terrors and fears to comfort their children. That’s what this mother had been doing and, although they are not out of the woods yet, she and her children are in a much better place than they have been. On this Mother’s Day. I believe that this is moving story from Ukraine is worthy of our attention and that mother is worthy of our honour and our prayers.

In the refrain of his setting of Psalm 27, Fr Chris Wilcock writes *“Do not be afraid, I am with you;/ I have called you by your name,/ you are mine.”* So, where is the comfort? Where in our Scriptures today is the *“Do not be afraid”*?

Two of our readings today pick up this theme; the Psalm and the reading from John’s Gospel.

Psalm 23 is one of the best known of all biblical passages In this Psalm we hear that, even at the most extreme moment of our lives, at the moment of death, confronted with our earthly mortality, we can indeed be comforted:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:

How can we be afraid with the comfort of the assurance of God with us at the most fearful time of our lives?

I think I have told the people of St George’s how one of the more pompous of my uncles used to say, *“The 23rd Psalm only takes three-quarters of a minute to read and yet it distils the wisdom of the world in this brief time.”* I think he meant to say that we should aim for brevity in our speaking, but the point was rather lost on me as he went on at considerable length to explain this need for brevity by giving several detailed examples which I cannot remember today because I stopped listening after about three quarters of a minute! However, he had a

point – there is considerable wisdom distilled into this brief, but wonderful, psalm. Consider the opening, *“The Lord is my shepherd: therefore can I lack nothing.”* Although the words *“can I lack nothing”* convey completeness and comprehensiveness in God’s care for us, I think that the NRSV words, *“I shall not want”* speak more clearly, and perhaps more eloquently, to an age in which the fulfilment of our wants has subtly, or perhaps not so subtly, taken the place of meeting our needs. So, there is a hint that God’s extravagant care for us goes beyond meeting our needs to the extent that even our wants are met by God’s loving care. In light of the truth of these lines, the psalmist contemplates his oil-anointed head and the overflowing cup. He can assert that he will surely dwell in the house of the Lord, not just for a time, but forever?

So in this most familiar, most comforting, psalm we hear of the care of God the Shepherd and, in his Gospel, John also addresses this most comforting, yet challenging image of the shepherd.

John’s Shepherd image reflects the Hebrew Bible’s Shepherd image, especially when the prophets want to chastise the leaders of the people of Israel for their neglect; contrasting their shepherding with that of God.

Having reported Jesus’ words, *“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand,”* John also reflects the Hebrew Bible prophets’ context as Jesus challenges the leaders of the Jewish people, *“I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.”* These leaders are insistent that Jesus give them answers and signs which will enable them to decide whether or not he is in fact the Messiah. Not surprisingly, Jesus does not do their bidding; his *“Son of Man”* is not their *“Son of Man.”* They cannot tick their boxes and cannot understand that this is because they simply haven’t got it right. [Perhaps that should be a sobering thought for those who dare, or aspire to lead, in the Church]. The leaders had all the tests at their finger tips, they knew the criteria for Messiahship and that was why they were perplexed. As Mark Twain is purported to have said, *“it isn’t what you don’t know that’s the problem, it’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”* The Jewish leaders *knew for sure* that they had the criteria for Messiahship and they knew (for sure) that Jesus did not meet those criteria.

I now want to redirect your attention to my question; “where is the comfort? Where in our reading from John’s Gospel is the *“Do not be afraid”*”? I believe that it is in Jesus’ words, *“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”* Not only is Jesus our shepherd, not only does God provide, in the person of Jesus, for our needs and promise eternal life, but the Father and Jesus are one, in company with the Spirit, and it is this Trinitarian truth which allows us to read Jesus’ promise in John’s Gospel as encompassing all that the 23rd Psalm tells us about our Lord the Shepherd, who meets our wants, not just our needs; who promises that we will be comforted, even at the most fearful time of our lives.

With such a promise, with such a loving shepherd surely we can take God at God’s word and *not be afraid*, whatever may come our way.

As you continue to observe this Easter season, do not be afraid, the Lord will be with you.

Richard Murray – May 6-7, 2022