

# Psalm 23

## Lacking nothing

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd;  
therefore can I lack nothing.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures  
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He shall refresh my soul  
and guide me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me  
in the presence of those who trouble me;  
you have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.
- 6 Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

## Reflection

Psalm 23 is one of the best-loved texts of the Bible. It is beautifully clear and simple. It speaks of the all-encompassing care of God in the face of everything that may threaten a person. From beginning to end it conveys serene trust. There is no doubt or struggle. This may be part of its secret and why it is so often the first choice for a funeral. When people are in grief and facing loss, what they want is a Psalm where faith is unambiguously triumphant. This Psalm breathes comfort and consolation when the world is falling apart. But the secret of its popularity raises the question, how real is it? Can faith ever be as serene and assured as this? Much of the appeal of the Psalms is that in their struggles and difficulties we hear our own. How then to approach a Psalm that seems to know no difficulties, where faith seems so untroubled?

Though it is a condensed idealized text, we can see this Psalm as a high point of what faith *can* mean. It offers glimpses of what sometimes we do know, even if between these peak moments there are times when the faith of which this Psalm speaks seems more like a mirage. But that does not make the experience conveyed here any less real. This Psalm is part of the varied mosaic of light and dark that *is* the psalter - a collection which includes Psalm 88 as well as Psalm 23.

So let us explore the faith that it speaks of.

### *The Lord is my shepherd.*

This first phrase is the heart of it. Those who first heard this Psalm would have been familiar with the shepherd of ancient Israel - a rugged semi-nomadic figure wandering with his animals as they grazed over large distances. He would lead his flock into the hills beyond the margins of settled areas where crops grew. He would travel with them for days and nights as they searched for pasture. He would be constantly on the move because pasture was so thin. He would protect them from wild animals. He would nurse them when they were sick or wounded. He would search for them if they were lost. He would protect them at night, often sleeping beside them. He was always with them. He would risk his life for them.

How can this image connect with us, and become part of us? This Psalm invites us to be contemplatives.

Silently repeat this first phrase in your mind: 'The Lord is my shepherd'. Don't 'think' about these words, don't analyse their meaning. Just let them, like a deep pulse, become part of you.

The mystery of the divine life, is, says the psalmist, like that shepherd - knowing you better than you know yourself, loving you more than you love yourself, travelling with you always. As you learn to pause in the midst of the pressures of your life, and attend . . . listen . . . the promise is that the way will be shown, sometimes the right words will even be given. You are not on your own.

***The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing.***

Even more demanding. 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want' is the old translation. The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila echoed these words when at the end of her prayer 'nada te turbe' - 'let nothing disturb you', she wrote, 'Whoever has God lacks nothing'. The sculpture 'The Ecstasy of St Teresa' completed in 1652 by the Italian baroque artist Bernini, portraying Teresa at the height of one of her most intense raptures, vividly conveys that God was indeed her everything. In her appreciative biography of Teresa, Shirley Du Boulay comments that the statue's 'total preoccupation with the erotic dimension of the experience at the expense of the mystical says more about Bernini than it does about Teresa'. But whether erotic or mystical - and surely they are related - this sixteenth-century saint truly knew what these words meant. *She lacked nothing*. In God she had everything. (Her biography is worth reading to discover in fact how earthed her fascinating and practical life was, often far from such mystical heights.)

Such heights of this 'everything' may seem far indeed from us. Yet we can glimpse something of the meaning of it. In tight corners, at demanding moments, in difficult relationships, at times of stress and grief and loss - as we stop and pause and attend -- resources are strangely given. Compassion, insight, humour, a composed heart, love. The deepest things we need.

The Shepherd travels with his flock into every narrow gorge, every dangerous ravine, every life-threatening place.

***He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.***

As confidence in such shepherding grows, tempering and reducing the pull of anxieties - and that can be a long healing process - what follows is a more spacious and open heart, and a sense of being deeply nourished - 'green pastures' would have been rare in that rocky terrain. And the capacity, perhaps at last after much agitation, to be still.

***He shall refresh my soul and guide me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.***

One reason why the politics in Britain seem so tired, with disillusionment widespread, is that a compelling vision for a just and sustainable world in which all can belong, and which is more than mere consumption, seems to elude us. In his remarkable book *Ill Fares the Land* the historian and philosopher Tony Judt calls for 'A new moral narrative' that will capture public imagination. What and where are the 'paths of righteousness'? Perhaps more disparate and hidden than we can see. But in both religious and secular groups where care for the earth, care for human beings in their vulnerability, and care for the common good of all are the guiding principles, they are being explored. The promise of this Psalm is that they *will* appear. The shepherding presence is not for individuals alone, but for persons-in-community seeking the integrity of his whole creation.

The Psalm then moves to the path that we all must walk, the consciousness of which can overshadow all life.

***Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.***

This 'valley' cannot be avoided. You may have already walked it or be walking it, as best you can, with someone else. Because it is the end, where relationships sever, the 'shadow' can be deep. But 'you are with me' says the psalmist, 'your rod and staff they comfort me.' The rod and staff were weapons that the shepherd would carry to beat off wild animals. In this valley the greatest threat is not death itself, but the fear of it, the fear of the loss and the grief. So we hide from death, we deny it.

In families which slip into denial, the silences and the pretence can leave people alone at their moment of greatest vulnerability, starved of intimacy and ill-equipped to face their grief and share it with the grief of those whom they will soon leave. Fear steals from them the time and space they need to reckon with the meaning of their life and celebrate their loves.

'You are with me.' Death may be denied, but with the courage of the shepherding presence, it can be faced - even embraced and greeted. St Francis called her 'sister death'. Then its power is thwarted.

The Psalm then moves on to disarm other death-dealing powers that may afflict us in life. Here he deploys another familiar biblical image less stark and austere than the watchful shepherd on the bare mountainside.

***You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;  
you have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.***

The psalmist describes a sumptuous celebration for a free human being. A great table of rich fare spread 'in the presence of those who trouble me'. Occasionally we glimpse what this means. Freedom from the persistent patterns of our anxieties that can plague us all our lives. These old troublemakers that we know well may still be there, but they are powerless watchers at the great feast of our freedom. In Christian theology this verse suggests the Eucharist and the final heavenly banquet, with the anointing suggesting baptism and the Holy Spirit. But the important thing is the freedom, which leads to the first word of the final verse: *Surely*. This psalmist - despite all doubts - now knows God's goodness beyond doubt.

***Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.***

Through praying this Psalm, through inhabiting the first line particularly, a well-spring of 'goodness and loving mercy' will flow, which follows on behind. Instead of leaving a trail of agitation in our wake, what follows us is a scent of the kindness of life that we have unwittingly passed on because it has become our deepest truth. In the words of one of Robert Louis Stevenson's memorable prayers, we shall be people who carry with us 'the infection of good courage', and are 'diffusers of life' - meeting 'all ills and cross accidents with gallant and high-hearted happiness'.

The serenely hopeful message of this Psalm may initially provoke scepticism. But deeply praying it can teach us much, and brings its own reward. If you have time reflect on the questions it raises. Here are three.

Of the several images in this Psalm, which speaks to you most clearly, and why?

What do you think it means 'to lack nothing'?

What 'paths of righteousness' can you detect? How might we walk them?

As you go out into your day, quietly repeat again words from the last verse:

***Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.***