

Psalms 23(22)



Entrusting oneself to God who is good



The Lord is my shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures
where he gives me repose.
Near restful waters he leads me,
to revive my drooping spirit.

He guides me along the right path;
he is true to his name.
If I should walk in the valley of darkness
no evil would I fear.
You are there with your crook and your staff;
with these you give me comfort.

You have prepared a banquet for me
in the sight of my foes.
My head you have anointed with oil;
my cup is overflowing.

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me
all the days of my life.
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell
for ever and ever.



Turning to the Lord in prayer implies a radical act of trust, in the awareness that one is entrusting oneself to God who is good, “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6-7; Ps 86[85]:15; cf. Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2; Ps 103 [102]:8; 145[144]:8; Neh 9:17). For this reason I would like to reflect with you today on a Psalm that is totally imbued with trust, in which the Psalmist expresses his serene certainty that he is guided and protected, safe from every danger, because the Lord is his Shepherd. It is Psalm 23 [22, according to the Greco-Latin numbering], a text familiar to all and loved by all.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”: the beautiful prayer begins with these words, evoking the nomadic environment of sheep-farming and the experience of familiarity between the shepherd and the sheep that make up his little flock. The image calls to mind an atmosphere of trust, intimacy and tenderness: the shepherd knows each one of his sheep and calls them by name; and they follow him because they

recognize him and trust in him (cf. Jn 10:2-4).

He tends them, looks after them as precious possessions, ready to defend them, to guarantee their well-being and enable them to live a peaceful life. They can lack nothing as long as the shepherd is with them. The Psalmist refers to this experience by calling God his shepherd and letting God lead him to safe pastures: “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Ps 23[22]:2-3).

The vision that unfolds before our eyes is that of green pastures and springs of clear water, oases of peace to which the shepherd leads his flock, symbols of the places of life towards which the Lord leads the Psalmist, who feels like the sheep lying on the grass beside a stream, resting rather than in a state of tension or alarm, peaceful and trusting, because it is a safe place, the water is fresh and the shepherd is watching over them.



And let us not forget here that the scene elicited by the Psalm is set in a land that is largely desert, on which the scorching sun beats down, where the Middle-Eastern semi-nomad shepherd lives with his flock in the parched steppes that surround the villages. Nevertheless the shepherd knows where to find grass and fresh water, essential to life, he can lead the way to oases in which the soul is “restored” and where it is possible to recover strength and new energy to start out afresh on the journey.



As the Psalmist says, God guides him to “green pastures” and “still waters”, where everything is superabundant, everything is given in plenty. If the Lord is the Shepherd, even in the desert, a desolate place of death, the certainty of a radical presence of life is not absent, so that he is able to say “I shall not want”. Indeed, the shepherd has at heart the good of his flock, he

adapts his own pace and needs to those of his sheep, he walks and lives with them, leading them on paths “of righteousness”, that is, suitable for them, paying attention to their needs and not to his own. The safety of his sheep is a priority for him and he complies with this in leading his flock.

Dear brothers and sisters, if we follow the “Good Shepherd” — no matter how difficult, tortuous or long the pathways of our life may seem, even through spiritual deserts without water and under the scorching sun of rationalism — with the guidance of Christ the Good Shepherd, we too, like the Psalmist, may be sure that we are walking on “paths of righteousness” and that the Lord is leading us, is ever close to us and that we “shall lack nothing”. For this reason the Psalmist can declare his calm assurance without doubt or fear: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me” (v. 4).

Those who walk with the Lord even in the dark valleys of suffering, doubt and all the human problems, feel safe. You are with me: this is our certainty, this is what supports us. The darkness of the night frightens us with its shifting shadows, with the difficulty of distinguishing dangers, with its silence taut with strange sounds. If the flock moves after sunset when visibility fades, it is normal for the sheep to be restless, there is the risk of stumbling or even of straying and getting lost, and there is also the fear of possible assailants lurking in the darkness.

To speak of the “dark” valley, the Psalmist uses a Hebrew phrase that calls to mind the shadows of death, which is why the valley to be passed through is a place of anguish, terrible threats, the danger of death. Yet the person praying walks on in safety undaunted since he knows that the Lord is with him. “You are with me” is a proclamation of steadfast faith and sums up the radical experience of faith; God’s closeness transforms the reality, the dark valley loses all danger, it is emptied of every threat. Now the flock can walk in tranquillity, accompanied by the familiar rhythmical beat of the staff on the ground, marking the shepherd’s reassuring presence. This comforting image ends the first part of the Psalm, and gives way to a different scene. We are still in the

desert, where the shepherd lives with his flock, but we are now set before his tent which opens to offer us hospitality. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows” (v. 5).



The Lord is now presented as the One who welcomes the person praying with signs of generous hospitality, full of attention. The divine host lays the food on the “table”, a term which in Hebrew means, in its primitive sense, the animal skin that was spread out on the ground and on which the food for the common meal was set out. It is a gesture of sharing, not only of food but also of life in an offering of communion and friendship that create bonds and express solidarity. Then there is the munificent gift of scented oil poured on the head, which with its fragrance brings relief from the scorching of the desert sun, refreshes and calms the skin and gladdens the spirit.

Lastly, the cup overflowing with its exquisite wine, shared with superabundant generosity, adds a note of festivity. Food, oil and wine are gifts that bring life and give joy, because they go beyond what is strictly necessary and express the free giving and abundance of love. Psalm 104[103] proclaims: “You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to glad-

den the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart" (vv. 14-15).

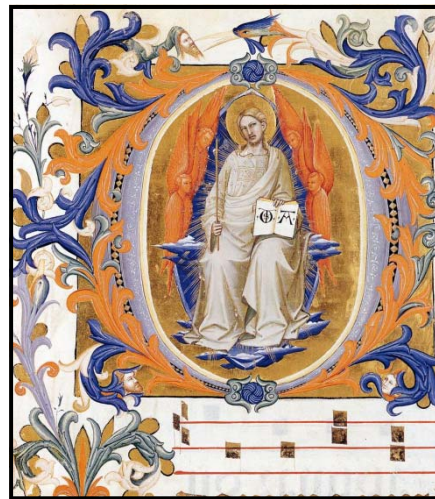
The Psalmist becomes the object of much attention for which reason he sees himself as a wayfarer who finds shelter in a hospitable tent, whereas his enemies have to stop and watch, unable to intervene, since the one whom they considered their prey has been led to safety and has become a sacred guest who cannot be touched. And the Psalmist is us, if we truly are believers in communion with Christ. When God opens his tent to us to receive us, nothing can harm us. Then when the traveller sets out afresh, the divine protection is extended and accompanies him on his journey: "Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" (Ps 23[22]:6).

The goodness and faithfulness of God continue to escort the Psalmist who comes out of the tent and resumes his journey. But it is a journey that acquires new meaning and becomes a pilgrimage to the Temple of the Lord, the holy place in which the praying person wants to "dwell" for ever and to which he also wants to "return". The Hebrew verb used here has the meaning of "to return" but with a small vowel change can be understood as "to dwell". Moreover, this is how it is rendered by the ancient versions and by the majority of the modern translations. Both meanings may be retained: to return and dwell in the Temple as every Israelite desires, and to dwell near God, close to him and to goodness. This is what every believer yearns and longs for: truly to be able to live where God is, close to him. Following the Shepherd leads to God's house, this is the destination of every journey, the longed for oasis in the desert, the tent of shelter in escaping from enemies, a place of peace where God's kindness and faithful love may be felt, day after day, in the serene joy of time without end.

With their richness and depth the images of this Psalm have accompanied the whole of the history and religious experience of the People of Israel and accompany Christians. The figure of the shepherd, in particular, calls to mind the original time of the Exodus, the long journey through the desert, as a flock under the guidance of the divine Shepherd (cf. Is 63:11-14; Ps 77: 20-21; 78:52-54). And in the Promised Land, the king had the task of tending the Lord's flock, like David, the shepherd chosen by God and a figure of the Messiah (cf. 2 Sam 5:1-2; 7:8 Ps 78[77]:70-72).

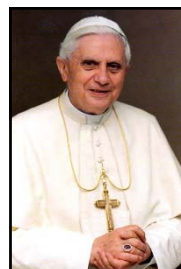
Then after the Babylonian Exile, as it were in a new Exodus (cf. Is 40:3-5, 9-11; 43:16-21), Israel was brought back to its homeland like a lost sheep found and led by God to luxuriant pastures and resting places (cf. Ezek

34:11-16, 23-31). However, it is in the Lord Jesus that all the evocative power of our Psalm reaches completeness, finds the fullness of its meaning: Jesus is the "Good Shepherd" who goes in search of lost sheep, who knows his sheep and lays down his life for them (cf. Mt 18:12-14; Lk 15:4-7; Jn 10:2-4, 11-18). He is the way, the right path that leads us to life (cf. Jn 14:6), the light that illuminates the dark valley and overcomes all our fears (cf. Jn 1:9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46).



He is the generous host who welcomes us and rescues us from our enemies, preparing for us the table of his body and his blood (cf. Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25); Lk 22:19-20) and the definitive table of the messianic banquet in Heaven (cf. Lk 14:15ff; Rev 3:20; 19:9). He is the Royal Shepherd, king in docility and in forgiveness, enthroned on the glorious wood of the cross (cf. Jn 3:13-15; 12:32; 17:4-5).

Dear brothers and sisters, Psalm 23 invites us to renew our trust in God, abandoning ourselves totally in his hands. Let us therefore ask with faith that the Lord also grant us on the difficult ways of our time that we always walk on his paths as a docile and obedient flock, and that he welcome us to his house, to his table, and lead us to "still waters" so that, in accepting the gift of his Spirit, we may quench our thirst at his sources, springs of the living water "welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14; cf. 7:37-39). Many thanks.



Pope Benedict XVI
5 October 2011
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20111005_en.html