

Easter 4, 2022 – The Kingdom of God – now and then

(Acts 11:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7: 9-17; John 10; 22-30)

The readings set for each Sunday of the year have a theme, sometimes it is obvious sometimes not so easy to discern. We have just heard the lessons read and we each have a copy of the lessons, so what is the theme for today's readings?

One theme that struck me is that together they are about a journey: a journey through life and death and into life again and how these are tied into the nature of the Kingdom of God and I thought we might wrestle with what the readings say about this today.

While I was reflecting on the readings I realised that the thread underlying the journey was the concept of relationships. From life here and now to the great unity of life in the kingdom, it is about relationships, between people, between Jesus and those who follow him, between Jesus and his Father in Heaven, in the great concourse of heaven with all the faithful joined in one heart and voice with Christ in the ultimate worship of God.

First up, let us begin with the psalm. I think we all have experienced the power of this psalm at funerals, but what does it say about how we should live here and now in the present world? Let us start with the first couple of verses: *'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.'* In the imagery used by the psalmist, there is a well of deep trust between the sheep and the shepherd that underpins their lives. Similarly this same trust, this relationship and its outworking in our lives, is to be potentially found in our trusting relationship with Christ; our Good Shepherd.

Unfortunately we live in a world trying to draw us away from this simplicity, by convincing us that we live in an exclusively material world and what we really need is ever more material things. The psalm however reminds us that, fundamentally, life isn't about things. There are other more important things to living a fulfilling life than more stuff!

We are reminded of this especially at funerals where relationships are laid bare, and we see how fundamental these to our real lives. We are confronted with the essentials of what makes for a rich life, and this is found in a different framework, a different kind of life than that based on getting more things. A framework that is asking us to live lives based on the things we really need if we are to live in a way that meets our material and spiritual needs.

So, back to what kind of life the psalm offers. It starts by saying: *'The Lord is my Shepherd,'* and *'He makes me lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside still waters'* – he shows where and how we should go, as shepherds do. There is a quietness of soul isn't there when we manage to do this. We have this relationship with a shepherd that we trust and for that moment we can rest in calm confidence of our ultimate safety, and existence and meaning. They are all in this relationship.

In his imagination the psalmist's envisages how a sheep would feel as it lies down in green pastures beside still waters. Just resting and being. He finds that a similar sense of wellbeing is true for him as a consequence of his relationship with God.

The psalmist then returns to his own reality and experience that follows such a time – *'he restores my soul'*. Have you had these times in your life especially after a hard time? I hope so. They come from that quiet trusting relationship that is available to us as we grow in experience of God's presence in our lives; as our relationship of trust grows and deepens

The psalmist's experience of the reality of this world is shown further in the next verse: *'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 comfort me.'* His experience has shown him that his relationship with God is so pervasive and effective that even immanent death cannot break it.

Let us move on to the Gospel reading. Jesus is walking in the temple at the time of the Feast of the Dedication. This celebration was a memorial to a very important event in Jewish history. Several hundred years previously, the Maccabee brothers had led a revolt that threw the then oppressor of Judah out of the country and established Judah as a free nation. As Jesus walked in the Temple and spoke to the crowd at the feast, this event would have been uppermost in everybody's mind. Was Jesus going to do the same to the Romans? Hence the question they ask him: "Are you the Messiah?"

It seems strange on first reading this, that he won't simply answer their question. Further consideration shows there are several reasons for this. The first and obvious answer is political. What happens if he says he is? If he does say 'yes I am', then one of two things will happen. Firstly, the agents of the Jewish authorities who were there would immediately have grounds for him to be arrested and charged with blasphemy. Secondly, the mob, with the Maccabees in mind, is eagerly awaiting the coming of the kind of warrior Messiah they are hoping for. That is, a warrior king sent by God to re-establish the Kingdom of David to its rightful place in the world. They are eager and ready to rebel and throw the oppressors out of Judea,. The Messiah was here and the Feast of Dedication was the perfect time to start a revolution. Jesus does not give this group any encouragement either.

The problem is they have completely misunderstood Jesus' purpose, and this after several years of careful teaching. You can almost hear his frustration. *'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.'* Is there any sign of a militaristic call to arms in his behaviour? No, it is about love and caring and walking with God. So he tries to explain it yet again. It is about relationships he says, not about wars and military victories. It is about quiet, working interactions. He says: *'My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand.'* Clearly he sees their lives in this world and the next to be a continuity – a continuation of our relationship with him, that moves us from this world to the next without fuss. This relationship he says is like that between himself and the Father. *'I and the Father are one.'* Heaven is simply the continuity of our relationship with Christ. Live in this and heaven is the consequence.

So, having looked a little at living the faith now, and in our deaths, what does Revelation have to tell us about the then, about the next stage in our lives? We find something of the fundamental realities of this continuing life envisaged in the reading from Revelation.

Firstly there are lots of us. The author says there will be a great crowd, so great that none could count their number; and they come from every time and place.

Secondly, their pasts are behind them. They are wearing white robes. White robes are worn as a sign of victory – a Roman general wore white robes when he celebrated his triumph. They are carrying palms, so did the crowds when the Maccabees freed Jerusalem. They have come through the tests of this world and victory is theirs.

Thirdly, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Now I have always had trouble with this imagery, I have trouble with its logic. If you have ever had any dealings with animal slaughter and butchery you will know that white will definitely not be the colour of your cloths afterwards. However, while reading about this I discovered that I have had a cultural problem. In the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, it was believed that the life of an animal or person was carried in their blood. When an animal bleeds out it dies because its life essence has been lost not that it no longer has blood pressure or oxygen. So when they say blood, it literally meant for them, life. Secondly of course, all this talk about the Lamb, is shorthand for Christ. So, 'Washed in the blood of the Lamb', to a hearer or reader of the time would have simply meant 'made clean in the life of Christ'. So, we discover that this is saying that our relationship with Christ deals with the trials and tribulations, the sins and shortcomings of our past lives. They are subsumed in our life with Christ.

Fourthly, this great crowd of people who are now made perfect in this relationship, with all the damage of life grown through, can wholeheartedly worship God with heart and voice. With all our soul and mind and strength as we say in the summary of the law. And this worship includes not only humankind but all the others that make up the hosts of heaven.

So we see there is a continuity of life between now and then. Time is irrelevant, Our worship here today is not something done and forgotten. It is part of that great act of worship of all those who live in God in all times and places. Those who prepared our prayer book know this. As part of the great thanksgiving prayer, we respond to the priest's words firstly by saying '*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are filled with glory!*'. And a little later: '*Blessing and honour and glory and power are yours for ever and ever.*' Both of these are taken from the Book of Revelation and are the words of praise used by the great crowd of witnesses in heaven we have been hearing about. When we say them, we are part of that great crowd that could not be numbered. Our relationship to God in Christ has now become the perfect response in love and awe to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Finally and to finish, we need to reflect on this marvellous relationship as we look to the future of our parish. As we have seen, our faith is one about relationships. No matter our age or condition, young or old, frail or hearty, we all have relationships, they are a perfectly natural part of being human. As our relationship with Christ leads us to into the life of the Kingdom, so our relationships as individuals or as a parish with others outside our number can lead others into them to the heart of Christ. We simply need to live the relationships we are called to.