

## Wednesday February 24 Psalm 23 – comfortable words

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,

3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Even 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 prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

In the first week of Lent we were thinking about LAMENT. In this second week, let's move on to another theme: FEAR. There are days during this pandemic when the news seems worse than usual. It might be a day when the number of people who died is particularly shocking; then it's news of another even more contagious form of the virus; then it's TV pictures showing exhausted staff in an overstretched intensive care unit. On days like that the situation seems particularly threatening; feeling fearful is hardly surprising. Your imagination takes over, and you start picturing all sorts of frightful futures. "Fear is sharp-sighted, and can see things underground, and much more in the skies" – that's a writer called Miguel de Cervantes.

People often think the bible is full of 'don'ts', all designed to stop you from having a good time. Well, yes, there *are* some 'don'ts', but not as many as you might think. But there's one command that crops up far more often than all the others – dozens of times, in fact. It's this one: 'don't be afraid'. Easy enough to say, far more easily said than done. But when you read the bible and you come across a "don't be afraid" there will always be a reason why you don't need to be afraid.

One hundred thousand people have died of Covid in the United Kingdom this past year, How many times, I wonder, has the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm been recited in the one hundred thousand funerals that followed? And in the middle of it, these words:

*"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ..."*

There it is again: 'don't be afraid'. But listen out for what follows: "... I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." What makes the difference is the Lord's presence. In the opening verses of Psalm 23, he's a shepherd, going in front of you; then he's a companion, walking alongside. And he's armed with a rod and a staff. The rod was a kind of cudgel, worn at the belt, instantly available if needed. The Lord walks with His people *through* the valley of the shadow of death, as an armed guard. Then think back to last year's Christmas carol services, and the story of the angel visiting Joseph to prepare him for the birth of the baby Jesus. "And they will call him Immanuel", the angel said, a name that means 'God with us'. Or, as Captain Sir Tom said: "You'll never walk alone."

So whenever the day seems particularly dark and threatening, one thing you can do is to read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. You could print it out, or at least that bit about the valley of the shadow of death. Then frame it and put it on a wall somewhere; just make sure it's somewhere you can't fail to see it.