

Easter 4
7/5/2017

Mark the Evangelist

1 Peter 2:19-25
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10

In the presence of our enemies

Today we have for our text the most popular of all the psalms. It seems to speak to us in ways as deep as the still water it describes, and so we are very willing to pray and to sing it.

We noted last week that one thing about the psalms is that they speak a range of experiences which far exceed the actual experience of most of us. As such, the Psalms constitute something strange to us if we take the collection as a whole. One of our tasks this morning, then, will be to see in what way this most familiar and loved of the psalms might also be strange to us, or make us strange to ourselves.

We also noted last week that, if the psalms capture the breadth of human experience of the world and of God, then the one who sings them is ultimately Christ himself, who presents to us one instance of that breadth of experience (an insight which goes back at least to Augustine). The psalms are both our prayers and, in a way, come to us as a gift of Jesus himself.

Our approach to the psalms *as Christians*, then, is peculiar. We do not jump over the person of Jesus to access these prayers directly, without reference to him. Jesus “colours” our reception of the psalms. The still waters are the waters by which Jesus was given to rest; the “dark vale of death” was one through which Jesus walked, the “all the days of my life” where Jesus’ own days.

At the same time, Jesus gives us other things, which also impinge on our reading of this psalm. We’ve heard today from John’s gospel that Jesus himself is the shepherd. In this light, the Psalm turns us specifically to him and his benefits as the key to our singing the psalm. It is Jesus who leads us to safe pastures, whose rod and staff comfort us.

But there is one particular thing I’d like to present today as a focus for reflection – something which strikes me as very important although I don’t quite have a *completed* thought about it to offer you. Last Sunday I contrived a link between the Psalm 116 and our practice of the Eucharist on the basis of the reference in that psalm to a “cup of salvation”. The same is possible today although it is perhaps slightly less contrived! If we have moved from the Psalm as the occasional prayer of one of us to a prayer of *Jesus himself*, and from there to it being a prayer *about* Jesus as the Shepherd who leads and gives, as in the psalm, then another link to the Eucharist appears here:

He spreads a table before me in the presence of my enemies; he anoints my head with oil, my cup overflows.

We gather here, today, around a table. It is the table which this Lord, this Shepherd, spreads before us. It is not difficult to imagine that the table of the psalm is this table of the Lord. But if that is the case, the psalm invites us into an experience of the Lord’s table which, to me at least, is quite new.

The new thing is indicated in the line, “in the presence of my enemies.”

In what sense is our gathering around *this* table today a gathering “in the midst of enemies”? Or we can put the question differently by noting that this line about the table sits in *opposition* with the previous line in the psalm; that is, it says the same thing differently. So “the darkest valley” *is* being in the midst of our enemies; the comforting rod and staff *are* the table spread before us with the anointing oil and the overflowing cup.

In what sense is our gathering around *this* table today a gathering “in the midst of enemies”? In what sense is this table today set in “death’s dark vale”?

If we play with these images, and allow that they might inform our understanding of the meaning of the Lord’s table, then the Eucharist becomes something of a *safe haven*, or even a *fortress*. *That* is a new thought to me and, I imagine, also to many of you. I am not entirely sure what to make of it, but I suspect that we must make – and take – something from it.

Not least surprising here is the implicit suggestion that we *do* have enemies. The language of “enemy” is uncomfortable in modern society, perhaps only natural on the lips of our more belligerent political leaders. Enmity is “uncivilised”. If enmity appears at all in our understanding of the Eucharist it would normally be expressed along the lines of being *in the company* of enemies rather than *in the midst* of enemies. That is, we tend to speak of “communion” not only with God but with each other – a sharing around a common table by people who otherwise might even be enemies. The passing of the peace which precedes the communion is a kind of laying down of arms, an act of reconciliation, as is the sharing of the one bread and one cup.

Yet this is not the image of table of the psalm, which is more one of being encircled by external foes – gathering at table in the darkening shadow of death, enemies at the door.

Is this right? Is this table a fortress, a rod-and-staff *weapon* God wields on behalf of his people? This is strong language and is almost shocking to suggest; but I don’t think we can dismiss the thought too quickly. Note that here, as in the psalms, the weapon is held by God, and not by us. We are but sheep, God is the shepherd; the rod and staff are his to use to protect, not ours to strike those who we imagine stand against us. Vengeance – another strong and troubling theme in the psalms – is the Lord’s and not ours.

But even then this really only makes sense if indeed the people of God do have enemies. Do they? Do *we*? It *is* an unappealing, uncivilised thought. We seek to be a peaceable people and imagine ourselves to live in a largely peaceable community. Perhaps that is part of our malaise as a church culture – everything is too peaceable, there is nothing really worth dying for.

But the point cannot be that we need to whip up a bit of controversy, to pick a fight. Enmity for enmity’s sake is self-interested troublemaking. The question is whether the kingdom of this king, the shepherding of this shepherd, the humanity of this God, are sufficiently confronting to the usual way of things to make us strange to ourselves and strange to each other – strange enough even to create strangers of the dangerous kind: enemies.

If indeed we have no real enemies, then good for us.

But if we have blinded ourselves to what is going on around us, to what it is which the gospel names in us as enmity even as it calls us into love and peace, then we have need of having our eyes opened. I don't intend today to try to list precisely where those battle lines might be; perhaps our looking further into the psalms in the next few weeks might furnish more thought about that.

But we can say that there is something about the nature of the reconciliation which the gospel proposes that is, finally, offensive and creates enemies. What *right* do we have to green pastures and still waters, to protection and anointing? Presumably, in the eyes of our enemies, no right at all. And yet we claim it, or claim that it has been given to us nonetheless, that our lives are lived in the house of the Lord, whatever might seem to be the case to others.

Though we pray our psalms in the quiet of our hearts, and celebrate our sacraments out of the sight of most of the world, those prayers and sacraments are social and political things and not private devotions. They speak of unexpected, even undeserved, reconciliations among ourselves and with God. We cannot expect that they will not give offence.

And so we will need, all the more, to pray just these prayers, and seek defence in just these sacraments. For they are God's way with us, that we might finally find our way into God.
