

Reflections for the 4th Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday

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Acts 2.42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Psalm 23

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.*

*He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

*I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

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

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

1 Peter 2.19-25

For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

John 10.1-10

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

In her book *Landmarks*, also published under the title *The Inner Compass*, Margaret Silf remembers a walk she took one day along the Trent and Mersey canal. She came to a lock and spent some time watching the canal boats pass through it, marvelling at how the still, peaceful water could take on the power to raise those boats. But she also reflected on the experience of being in the lock, in words which may resonate with our current experience of living in lockdown:

I realised that I myself feel rather like a narrow boat in the lock chamber with the lock gates firmly closed on me. ... the lock chamber seems to be all there is. ... It often feels as though I am here in a deep dark prison, facing brick walls on every side, and with no way out that my mind can guess at or imagine. This is a pointless and daunting place to be. If I think about my condition at all, I start to examine every brick or stone in that lock chamber, as if it were the whole arena of my being, in the hope that a minute examination of its walls might reveal some meaning in it or some way of dealing with it.¹

However, as Margaret Silf points out, the process of examining the lock walls is "ultimately ... futile":

¹ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to an Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola 1999), 55.

The lock chamber makes no sense at all unless you know about the canal. Without the canal, the boat is truly just a prisoner in a pointless place. But when the reality of the canal is felt and embraced, then the transformation happens. Then the lock chamber is seen to be the place ... where God's grace might be flowing in to raise me to the place where I must be.²

That is, there is a canal that has brought us to this particular lock – this place of lockdown – and “which will, in some mysterious way, take [us] further.”³ We cannot see that at present, but the conviction that this may help us to bear the current situation, and may help us to see it as a space into which God's grace can flow, filling the lock to take us to the place where we are meant to be. Or perhaps we are experiencing our lives at present as a place out of which something is flowing, as an emptying lock. That emptying also taking us somewhere: a lock as it empties moves the boat down into the dank claustrophobia of the lock chamber so that the lock gates can open onto the next stretch of canal. Change can come about through emptying as well as filling.

To recognise that there must be a wider perspective is not to romanticise the situation. The lock is still damp, dark, and sometimes claustrophobic. The pain of Good Friday is put into perspective by the transforming joy of Easter Sunday, but pain it remains. Sheila Cassidy writes: “Stripping, whether by violence, illness or bereavement” – and we might add, or by the exigencies of lockdown – “is a messy business. We look at the heroes, the brave survivors and are deceived by their outer serenity. Ignorant of their tears and rage, we forget that there is no shortcut to freedom.”⁴ Sheila Cassidy quotes T. S. Eliot:

In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.⁵

The question which ultimately always faces us all, but currently brought into high relief by our present circumstances, is this: how do we come through? How can we be not broken by the times when there is no ecstasy, by experiences which are characterised rather by ignorance and dispossession?

The author of 1 Peter writes, “For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.” Later he will write: “Who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?”⁶ Nick King writes that 1 Peter is written “to Christians who (like Christians ever since) are enduring suffering, and they need to find some landmarks in the storm.”⁷ For Paul J. Achtemeier, 1 Peter draws a “parallelism between Christ's past and the Christians' present,” which is suffering, “and Christ's present and the Christians' future,”

² Ibid., 55-56.

³ Ibid., 55.

⁴ Sheila Cassidy, *The Good Friday People* (London: DLT 1991), 91.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” *Four Quartets*.

⁶ 1 Peter 3:13.

⁷ *The Bible*, translated by Nick King (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew 2013), 2335.

which is resurrection hope.⁸ That is, Christians “should both expect and desire to share Christ’s experiences,” which means that in times of suffering, we can and should know “that Christ has been there before us” (an idea which Nick King finds, and I agree with him, “undeniably helpful”).⁹ For the author of 1 Peter the way to endure the pain of suffering and to enter into Christ’s present resurrected reality is, as Nick King’s translation has it, to “become ardent for what is good,” to “have an eager love for one another, because ‘love covers a multitude of sins’.”¹⁰

The new Christians in the book of Acts also find a way together in love. In the time after Pentecost, as this new community was finding its way of being, which must have been a period of disorientation, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” We are not able to break bread together at the moment except in our own homes. Praying may also seem hard. We may be feeling isolated from God as well as from other people. This resonates with what Rowan Williams has described as the “ray of darkness”: “If you want God, you must be prepared to let go of all, absolutely all, emotional satisfactions, intellectual and emotional. ... If you genuinely desire union with the unspeakable love of God, then you must be prepared to have your ‘religious’ world shattered.”¹¹ Lockdown has in many ways brought a shattering of our religious world, and we may well find, as Rowan Williams writes, that “This brings on a kind of vertigo; it may make me a stranger to my self, to everything that I have ever taken for granted.”¹² William Johnston describes such experiences as times “of death and resurrection”: “The framework that upheld one’s life collapses leaving one adrift on a sea of insecurity. But in the midst of this turmoil comes a call ... One is called to something new.”¹³

For Ivan Mann this call encourages us to enter into “the depth of pain and love” and allow it to become “the place of insight, growth and transformation.”¹⁴ He warns that “in finding a breakthrough we may experience a seeming breakdown.”¹⁵ That sense of disorientation and isolation does not mean that God is absent. Psalm 23 speaks into this experience, with its promise of hope and help in times of distress and trouble: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.” We may find more familiar the words of the Authorized Version: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” Psalm 23 affirms that even in times of darkness and isolation, we are not alone. God is with us and God will comfort us. Remember too the original meaning of “comfort”: it derives from “con forte”, with strength. God will be with us; God will give us strength.

⁸ Christoph Stenschke, “Review of Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (1996),” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), 384-386, at 385.

⁹ *The Bible*, translated by Nick King, 2334, 2335.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 3:13, 4:8.

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: DLT 1994), 97.

¹² Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1994, p. 119.

¹³ William Johnston, *Being in Love* (London: Fount 1988), 89.

¹⁴ Ivan Mann, *Breathing I Pray* (London: DLT 2005), 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

Psalm 23 reminds us also that however daunting, challenging or uncomfortable they may seem, these are “right paths” which we follow for “his name’s sake.” And Sheila Cassidy believes that even when we feel trapped, isolated and inadequate, we are still able to respond to God’s call: “We are all frail, earthen vessels who may, should the potter choose, be fashioned in his image and for his own mysterious purposes. He chooses the weak and makes them strong in bearing witness. ... All we have to do is remember that his love is better than life itself and say YES.”¹⁶

All this is to say that Christ’s promise, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” speaks to us here and now, even in the restrictions and disorientation of lockdown. To affirm this is not to discount or ignore what we are going through: it does not mean that we do not feel the pain of these challenging times, and particularly the pain of those who are suffering, those who have died, and those who are bereaved. In all of this, through all this, Christ is with us:

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.

¹⁶ Cassidy, *Good Friday People*, 188.