**The Sunday Bread, 22nd March 2020: Laetare Sunday**

Readings:

*1 Samuel 16:1,6-7,10-13;*

*Psalm 22(23);*

*Ephesians 5:8-14;*

*John 9:1,6-9,13-17,34-38*

“If I should walk in the valley of darkness, no evil would I fear.” Why? For “you are there with your crook and your staff; with these you give me comfort.” Who is this “you”? “The Lord is my shepherd.” How does he give me comfort?

1. *He gives me repose in fresh and green pastures*. Repose is not the look on a hungry man’s face; but restlessness and anxiety. When you have eaten well, you can rest well. What is true of the hunger of the body is truer still of the hunger of the soul, of the heart, of the very “I” or “who” of your being. St. Augustine identified the fresh and green pastures of this psalm as being the Word of God. We are quite wrong if we see the bible as a lifeless collection of old and irrelevant stories, of interest perhaps to historians and to professionals of matters ancient. The bible is the Word of God and is therefore “alive and active”, always fresh, always life-giving, always throwing God’s light on our problems, our choices and our whole lives. It is like fresh bread and fresh green vegetables, nourishing our minds and hearts with the truth. Embedded deep in the Word is the Life of the Spirit. Imperceptibly, gently yet powerfully he imparts that Life into us. He calms and consoles, cleanses and renews, strengthens and renders agile our innermost self.
2. *He leads me near restful waters to revive my drooping spirit*. We have seen a lot of raging waters lately in the Clyde. They are chaotic, threatening, disruptive and unpredictable. Not a bad description of the coronavirus. Nor a bad description of what the virus of sin does to our souls. Just as we can’t control the raging waters of the Clyde, we so often find ourselves controlled by the storms of sin. We easily lose our confidence, our spirit droops, sometimes very low. What makes these waters calm and restful again so that our spirit can be revived? The voice of the Shepherd! As when, in the Gospel, he commands the wind to be calm and the waters to be still. As it was at first for the apostles, Jesus seems to be asleep in the boat as the storm rages, but our prayers will awaken him and he will dispel our fears and doubts, our sense of abandonment and discouragement. He will forgive our sins and give peace.
3. *He guides me along the right path, he is true to his name*. The coronavirus is not the right path for humanity. Our Good Shepherd, however, will lead us through it and beyond it in the right way. What is the right way? He himself says, “I am the way.” Hence, we will come through and beyond this wrong path of disease by staying united with Jesus. “Remain in me, as I in you and you will bear fruit in plenty.” United to Jesus in deep faith, hope and love, we will not only come through this catastrophe but we will actually “bear fruit”, the fruit that comes from trusting wholeheartedly in Him and from living out as fully as we can his commandment of love. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. But he will never ever separate himself from us because he is “true to his name”, that is, he is faithful. He is the great “I Am” which means “I-Am-here-with-and-for-you.” Rooted in his “I Am”, our little “I am” will never die eternally, even if it dies for a short time in the eyes of this world. Even should it therefore seem the “wrong path” that we are on, it will in the end always be the “right path” if we stay in Him.
4. *He prepares a banquet for me in the sight of my foes*. From the raids on the supermarkets, we can tell that many are not waiting for the Lord to prepare their banquet! They’re doing it themselves! Still, we cannot judge. How often have we “stuffed ourselves” with food, drink, pleasure, self-righteousness and so many other things! Gluttony is not only of the throat. And yet, for all the stuffing, we can remain so ravenously hungry for God, for his grace, for the hope and joy His promises provide so lavishly. In Jesus, we find the food that lasts, because of which we will never hunger again. “I am the bread of life. My flesh is real food, my blood real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood will live for ever.” And whatever foe gloats over me, be it the coronavirus or the spawn of Satan, to see me starved of grace and life and hope, the Lord defiantly mocks them as He feeds me with himself. It is true that, at this time, our enemy is impeding access for most even to the Eucharist, but all he is doing is making us hunger and long all the more for it so that, when the moment, comes our satisfaction and joy will be all the greater. As our Shepherd himself fasted 40 days and 40 nights, we will fast with him and in him. We will let him purify us and prepare us, just as he has prepared for us the banquet of the Mass, the pledge of the eternal banquet of the Lamb in the Wedding Feast of the Kingdom.
5. *He anoints my head with oil and makes my cup to overflow*. The imagery of the psalm is of abundance. The oil of gladness, the oil of chrism is poured as if from a large pitcher over our head. To be anointed interiorly, with the “head” symbolizing the most noble part of our spirit, is to be filled with the Holy Spirit and consecrated for God. At our baptism and confirmation, or when we are anointed in sickness, or again when someone is anointed priest or bishop, we are in different ways and degrees and intensities filled and refilled and fulfilled in God. What can any foe even imagine he can achieve when we are thus fortified within? Even if our body lies in death, it is the property of God and he will bring it again to life because of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our spirits. What joy this bestows! What hope! What utter certainty of final redemption and resurrection! No wonder He makes my cup to overflow with the new wine of the Kingdom! The Shepherd wishes to, and will, inebriate us with the joy of God himself. With Him on our side, who can be against us?
6. *He pursues me with goodness and kindness all the days of my life*. We are currently being pursued by an invisible enemy. It is after our flesh. Another invisible enemy is after our soul and has been pursuing us for much longer than the coronavirus. And when the virus is gone, the enemy of our soul will continue to pursue us until our Shepherd puts us beyond his reach. It’s not as if the enemy of our soul is the only one pursuing us. The Hound of Heaven pursues us much more, with goodness and kindness, with mercy and meekness, with grace and power. Our enemy can only inflict wounds if we are foolish enough to shirk off all these gifts of our Shepherd-Hound. Christ’s desire to save us far surpasses and outstrips anything our enemy can do destroy us. Christ never tires, never flags, never gives up: he pursues all the days of our life and especially on the day of our death. With the trophy of his Cross in one hand, and the other stretched out towards us as we die, he greets us with peace and leads us triumphantly to the Father.
7. *He makes me at home in his own House for ever and ever.* And, indeed, here is the goal. “In my Father’s House there are many mansions.” This is not just poetic talk, and even less wishful thinking. Our home on this earth is where we belong, where we are and can be who we are, where being loved and loving, giving and finding peace are all rolled into one and radically define our identity. But the virus of mortality constantly threatens and ultimately always destroys even the happiest of homes. For it is not the coronavirus or any other illness which ails us most, but our mortality. What good and happy homes do here and now is to point us towards our final, happy home in the there and then of the Father’s House. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, mortality is no longer so much the death of home but the “bursting forth” of that home-seed into the full blossoming of our eternal home. We cannot cure our mortality. Only Christ makes it possible for us to transform our mortality into the doorway of immortality. For that “possible” to become “real and actual” hinges on our free will to surrender our entire selves to Christ. The whole journey of this psalm is filled with the many graces which the Lord wants to give us as we make our journey of self-surrender to him. Its unfailing ending is to behold Him face to face and to be filled with his glory “for ever and ever”, as the psalm concludes.

So, on this “Laetare” (“Rejoice”) Sunday, even as we are in the midst of Lent and in the midst of the coronavirus and in the midst of all the trials and tribulations associated with it and not associated with it, we can not merely be “cheered up” by Psalm 22, but can allow its unutterable joy take root and blossom forth in our hearts, minds, souls and bodies. For the Lord is our Shepherd. There is nothing we can ever want. And no enemy of whatever description can ever change that.