

It could be because I'm a *priest*. After all, I have officiated at *hundreds* of funeral services during my ministry--and each one important and personal and poignant. And very many of those have included the reading of Psalm 23. So maybe it is because I'm a priest that I tend to associate Psalm 23 with *death and funerals*? *I wonder what your experience has been with Psalm 23?*

And so I have assumed that the reason Psalm 23 is so well known among Christians is because of *funerals*. And I have imagined hundreds of generations of people gathered at gravesides imprinting Psalm 23 on their memories for ever. So, I was rather shocked to discover this week that I've been *wrong*. The association of Psalm 23 with funerals is only about *a hundred years old*, and previous to that, *Psalm 23 was rarely ever read at funerals!* So, for example, I discovered that the *1662 English prayer book* of the Church of England--which is still the official prayer book there--does *not* include Psalm 23 in the burial rite. And in the *Roman Catholic Masses for the Dead*, Psalm 23 is an available reading but *optional*. And in the *American prayer books* of the Episcopal Church, it was not until the *1928 prayer book* that Psalm 23 entered into the burial rite, where we currently find it in our prayer book today.

So that means that while Psalm 23 is certainly appropriate for addressing our experiences of the "shadows of death", *for most of the history of the church, the Christian experience of Psalm 23 has been memorable for reasons quite different than funerals*. And I think this fact may challenge us to read Psalm 23 with new eyes and to wonder afresh just what it is about this short Psalm that it has become so memorable and so cherished.

And perhaps the reason is that Psalm 23 has so much to do with *life*. Psalm 23 definitely names the *troubles* of life (want, shadows, death, evil, enemies)...but the point is then to repeatedly name the surprising possibility of *trusting God* in the midst of all that. *It seems like Psalm 23 invites us to live our lives with a different set of eyes than we could normally bring to it*. And in that sense, Psalm 23 is a *revelation*, potentially opening our eyes to the reality of a *gracious God*...when what we might otherwise tend to focus on are all the troubles. There is a powerful, almost visceral, sense in Psalm 23 of being *known* by God...being *guided* by God...and being *accompanied* by God—even in the troubles.

This is a deeply *spiritual* revelation and it can be a very *interior* spiritual reality which we can experience in our own private solitude. But, when you think about the image of a *shepherd* or a *host at table*—these are not just solitary images at all. Shepherds have *many* sheep and hosts at table like a *full table of guests*. *And so I wonder if part of the power of Psalm 23 is also that it invites us to form spiritual communities where that kind of vision of God can be experienced together*.

So, what would a "Psalm 23 Church" be like? Well, to tell you the truth, some churches can be a witness *against themselves*. And I dare say that probably every one of us has had experiences where the sense of want, of foreboding shadows, and even enemies has been from *within* the church. That would be a Psalm 23 church in the *negative sense*. And that can be quite a destructive experience—but it is not the whole story at all—because God is greater than the troubles!

And because...a Psalm 23 church—in the way that God intends--is a place and a people where we can become *known*...and *welcomed*...*accompanied*...*guided*...and *renewed*. That kind of experience is something we never forget...and once we've tasted it, we understandably want more of it. *When such a church experience happens it is itself the vision of Psalm 23*.

And it makes it possible to imagine that, beyond our wildest dreams, *goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever*.