

The Lord is my shepherd: therefore can I lack nothing.

(Psalm 23.1)



The opening words of Psalm 23 are among the most familiar of all of the words in the whole Bible. They express deep confidence that all of our most fundamental needs are answered not in the human *ego* nor in 'the world', but in the *abundance of God*. It is the guiding and sustaining hand of God which is our hope and our strength in the face of the world's uncertainties, and in the face of the human will in its unpredictable responses to them. This is what 'Biblical faith' is all about.

Learning to see and interpret our lives as they appear from *God's point of view* – instead of from the blind-spots of our own limited perspective – is the heart of the Biblical vision, and this *reorientation* of our own point of view, this opening of our hearts and our minds and our souls to the 'vision of God', is what it means to become a *disciple* – that is, someone who *learns*. We learn not only an understanding of *how things are*, but also a *pattern of life*, which is why the moral and spiritual teaching of Jesus is as much about *character* and how we behave, what we do, who we really are, as it is about what we *believe*. It is why Jesus tells his disciples that they will be known by their *love for one another* (John 13.35), and not simply because they *speak the truth*. Truth is important – of course it is – but so is *integrity*, what Psalm 23 calls '*goodness and loving mercy*' (verse 6). *These* are the qualities which the true disciple nurtures and values; these are the qualities which distinguish the true disciple from one who is false.

In Psalm 23 the image which describes this relationship between the disciple and the teacher is that of a shepherd with his sheep. It is an image taken up in the Gospels, and especially in the Gospel of John, where Jesus describes himself as '*the good shepherd*' who '*lays down his life for the sheep*' (John 10.11). It is a relationship of tenderness and familiarity: '*I know my own and my own know me*' (John 10.14) – what Jesus will later describe

as a kind of *friendship* (John 15.15); it is marked by comfort and safety and goodwill. In Psalm 23 these values are represented by *green pastures* and *still waters* which bring *refreshment* and which *lift all fear*, not least in ‘*the valley of the shadow of death*’ (verses 2-4): it is especially in the place and time of anxiety and risk that the good shepherd proves his worth.

This is why, from the beginning, the early Christians understood the image of a ‘good shepherd’ not only as a sign of the kindness and mercy of God, but also, specifically, of God’s presence in and through the *Passion*, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The *Good Shepherd* is a *Paschal image* – a symbol not only of the character of Christian faith, but of the Presence of God in and through what is broken and incomplete, restoring it, and drawing it back into the heart of God. This is why we are invited to reflect on it especially *now*, in this season of Easter. The Good Shepherd – as one who has been willing to ‘*lay down his life for the sheep*’ – symbolizes not only the *values* of Christian *life*, but also the content of Christian *faith*. He represents both *what we believe* and also *how we aspire to live*, both the *theory* and *practice* of Christian discipleship. An image of the Good Shepherd, more than almost any other, combines these two things in a subtle but powerful way, especially when we think also of Jesus as ‘*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*’ (John 1.29).

It is unsurprising, therefore, that it is *this* image – not an image of the birth of Jesus, not an image of the crucifixion – which became the first to be widely copied in Christian art, alongside abstract symbols like a *cross* or a *fish* (the Greek word for ‘fish’ is an acronym of the motto ‘*Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour*’). The early Christians recognised how the image of the Good Shepherd exemplifies the *whole meaning* of Christian faith, what we believe *and* how we seek to live; it echoes texts like Psalm 23 which are part of our deepest memory of the Scriptures as a whole, as well as Jesus’ own parables, of *lost sheep*, of *sheep and goats*, of *sheep and sheepfolds*, of *protection* in the face of danger, and *safety* during the times of risk: it depicts what it means for Jesus to come among us to face the perils and see off the threats, to carry us back to God’s heart. In its classic form, the ancient depiction of the Good Shepherd shows him doing exactly that – lifting one of us, his sheep, onto his shoulders, and bearing us back home. In *this* Easter, especially, let us be comforted and inspired anew by this beautiful but sophisticated image of what our whole faith really means.

The picture shows a c3rd image of the Good Shepherd in the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome.