



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

Date 3rd March, 2023

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, ... you are with me..."
Psalm 23:4

Last weekend thinking of Lent, we considered Christ's Gethsemane plea: "...*watch with me...*". This weekend we consider his continual watching over us.

Psalm 23 must be the best known and, for some, the favourite Psalm, often requested for weddings or funerals, or the one the pastor reads on the home or hospital visit. I always feel a bit concerned with verse 4, "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...*", hoping that the hearer doesn't think their final hour has come! The alternative translation has "...*the darkest valley...*" and that may bring us nearer the truth of the matter.

There are many 'dark valleys' through which we walk on life's journeys, not of them being "*the shadow of death*". It might be a helpful Lenten devotional exercise to consider other words to complete the phrase according to our own 'valleys'. We might write: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of.....* unemployment or poverty, illness or depression, relationship breakdown or concern for a loved one, loneliness or loss... or any other 'dark valley' during which we need the presence and protection of the Shepherd.

"...*I will fear no evil...*" -not that the Shepherd 'immunises' us against hurtful experience, but that we need not fear defeat by the 'evil one' because of it. Why? Because my Shepherd is with me; His "...*rod and staff, they comfort me.*" The rod and staff, -as for an earthly shepherd, are only used as necessary, -to guide, to correct, to rescue.... to *comfort*. And '*com-fort*' means 'with strength'; there is One alongside who is my strength when I have none (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As we look upon the Son of God made flesh we find in Him all our human experience, except that of sin. So the hymn has it: "*Yea all I need in Thee to find, O Lamb of God, I come.*"; the Lamb becomes the Shepherd and brings his understanding of our condition. He is Friend and Brother, Saviour and... *Shepherd*. The Shepherd goes on ahead; He has trodden our path before us; we know His voice and respond to that voice alone (John 10). The sense and sound of His presence are all around us, even if it is a way of darkness and tears, a valley of the shadow of our struggles, whatever they may be.

Can you take a moment this weekend prayerfully to ask yourself, -what is it that I am going through right now? Can I sense my Shepherd's presence and write with the Psalmist, "*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of [.....] I will not fear the 'evil one', for you (Jesus, my Lord, my Shepherd) are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me (and will guide, rescue, correct and protect me).*" This is the goodness and mercy of God which will surely follow us all the days of our lives, wherever our journeys take us.

May the Good Shepherd accompany, protect and bless His beloved lambs to the very end of their journey. May He help *you* feel His presence today, and very clearly bless you in your walk with Him.