

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
Vespers | April 21, 2024
The Readings and Homily

Psalm 23

23 *Dominus regit me*

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those
who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days
of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

John 10:1-10

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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The Homily

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Tonight's homily might be one of the shortest ever delivered in this venerable worship space.

Unlike many of you, I am at a disadvantage in approaching one of these Vespers homilies. I have not participated in the Education for Ministry program, have never attended a regular series of Bible studies in any of the Episcopal churches where I have been a member, and do not read deeply in theological books or articles. So when confronted by passages such as Psalm 23, probably the most familiar of all of the psalms, or this parable in John about Jesus as the gatekeeper, I tend to look not for a theological interpretation but for something else that attracts my attention.

In these two texts, it was verse 7 in John: "So again Jesus said to them...." The writer of this Gospel is making a point here. Jesus first tells the parable to the people, and the writer notes that "they did not understand what he was saying to them." So Jesus told the parable again, but using less opaque language this time.

What's happening here? Forget the sheep, and the gate, and the thieves and the bandits. Look at the structure.

Jesus tells a parable.

The people do not understand.

So Jesus tells the parable again in a way that they will understand.

Here is what attracted my attention – Jesus was interested in people understanding what he was saying. The writer of this text wanted to make that clear by citing an instance in which he deliberately simplified a lesson so that people would understand. He did not chastise the people for not getting it at first. He did not just walk away, muttering something like "no one did their assigned reading." He was a teacher, and like any good teacher, he taught and re-taught the lesson until his students got it.

But there is another passage in John 3: 3-10 where Jesus did chastise someone for not understanding right away:

³ *Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'*^[b] ⁴ *Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'* ⁵ *Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.'* ⁶ *What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.*^[c] ⁷ *Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above."*^[e] ⁸ *The wind*^[f] *blows where it*

chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’⁹ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’¹⁰ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Why did the writer of John show Jesus reacting differently in these two passages? In the second, Nicodemus was a “teacher of Israel” and therefore was expected to know what the lesson meant. In the passage from John 10, the people were just like me, and maybe you – students, not teachers, of the Word, and were not expected to understand right away. But notice that in both passages Jesus does not walk away. Instead, he continues to explain in sufficient detail for anyone – for Nicodemus the experienced teacher, and even for you and me – to understand. And the writer of John wanted to make that very clear to any reader, to any student who might not get it the first time.

Seeing him as a teacher is comforting. If we enroll in one of his classes, we should have confidence that when the time for final exams comes around, we will understand enough to receive a passing grade.

Or as the other reading for this evening phrases it:

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

In His Holy Name.

Julius Ariail