



Psalm 23 (NRSV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and staff - they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow
me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Psalm 23 is probably the Bible's most well known and loved psalm and has brought comfort and solace to people throughout the ages. During the season of Lent, (the weeks leading up to Easter) we follow Jesus as he travels the road through the '*darkest valley*' or the '*valley of the shadow of death*' as it is described in some versions.

Of course '*the valley of the shadow*' does not only refer to the end of a person's life. During the course of our lives we experience many deaths. Some are huge, shattering, life changing events, from which we struggle to recover. Others we seem to be able to take in our stride, to accept as an expected part of living. Some are personal, experienced only by ourselves, while others are part of a much bigger picture, the ripples of loss being felt in ever-widening circles of grief. Then there are the shadows which cling to us, memories from which we often find it hard to break free.

At present, as we are faced with the challenges and limitations of living in a world faced with a pandemic which has affected us all in some way, we might feel as though we are indeed walking through a dark valley. Life as we knew it has changed and each day brings new concerns and regulations. For now, it seems as though we are all waiting, not knowing what each day will bring. Yet maybe we cannot avoid entering into the valley of the shadow, where there are fears to be faced, discoveries to be made, new ways to live and even new freedoms to be embraced.

The valley of the shadow might seem a sombre place in which to dwell but it is a necessary place for us all to experience, not one we can avoid forever. Sooner or later our lives will include time in this place. To try to circumvent or deny grief can lead to illness, anxiety, and depression. Nor can we *Fast Forward* and skip through too quickly. If we try that the chances are we will find ourselves back where we don't want to be. So how can we find, in the shadows of our lives, nourishment, hope, comfort, strength, even richness, growth and creativity?

Maybe the beginning of Psalm 23 might hold a clue. In this time when we are limited in what we can do and where we can go, might we be able to find time and space to *lie down in green pastures and rest beside still waters*? We might ask ourselves such questions as:

- * Where can I rest or take time out, in order to be replenished, nourished and restored in spirit?
- * What things could I do that are life-giving for me which I normally don't make time for?
- * Is there someone I know of who is doing it tough and needs some encouragement to slow down, in effect to lead beside still waters so that they can be renewed?
- * How can I turn this into precious time for reflection and reassessing my priorities. What might I need to pick up and what can I let go?
- * How can I find, in the shadows of my life, hope, comfort, strength, even richness, growth and creativity?
- * How can I celebrate, even in a shadow time, that which is gift and grace?

1. In this darkness
do not ask to walk by light;
but to feel the touch of your hand
and understand that sight is not seeing.
2. In this silence
I do not ask to hear your voice;
but to sense your Spirit breathe;
and so bequeath my care to your keeping.
3. In unknowing
do not ask for fearless space;
but for grace to comprehend
that neither you nor I are diminished.
4. In this death
I do not ask to forfeit pain,
but to gain the strength to love
through loss, and cross the bridge of waiting.

I will not sing alone, P46 Iona Community