

## The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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The King of love my shepherd is,  
whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his,  
and he is mine for ever.

Where streams of living water flow,  
my ransomed soul he leadeth,  
and where the verdant pastures grow,  
with food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,  
but yet in love He sought me,  
and on his shoulder gently laid,  
and home, rejoicing, brought me.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill  
with thee, dear Lord, beside me;  
thy rod and staff my comfort still,  
thy cross before to guide me.

Thou spread'st a table in my sight;  
thy unction grace bestoweth;  
and O what transport of delight  
from thy pure chalice floweth!

And so through all the length of days  
thy goodness faileth never:  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise  
within thy house for ever.

Today's offertory hymn (the one we will sing after the sermon) is both extremely familiar and a little bit unexpected for those of us who usually see the Bible in the form of the translation ordered by King James. This is a verse rendering of the 23rd Psalm from the middle of the 19th century. It was clearly produced in order to be set to music and, therefore, available for singing in Christian worship. This is an example of the liturgical use of the Psalter that is worth a little consideration by us this morning.

The Psalter, as we have it in the Bible now, is actually a collection of earlier collections of Psalms that were used in Jewish worship in the ancient period. Some of them were clearly written for use in the Temple, some of them were clearly written for use by pilgrims on their way to visit the Temple in Jerusalem and some of them seem to have been designed for personal devotion. Psalm 23, the one we are about to sing, is one of those designed for personal devotion.

Because the Psalms were collected over quite a long period of time, they can be sorted, at least partially, according to their language and word choice. (Hebrew changed as time passed, just as all human languages do.) There are scholars who spend their time trying to distinguish between Northern and Southern Psalms, between Psalms produced in Palestine and Psalms produced in the Diaspora and, whenever possible, to try to get an idea of who might have written them. Psalm 23, which is marked as “a Psalm of David” is usually considered to be an earlier one and even, by some scholars, considered to be, possibly, the work of King David himself, which would put it quite close to the beginning of the production of Psalms that survive to our day. (King David is usually considered to have begun his reign of the united Kingdom of Israel quite close to the year 1000 BC.)

As the Jews spread throughout the world, there began to be more and more need for opportunities for worship apart from the Temple. Even for those Jews who could make the yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the major festivals, almost all of their life would have been spent away from their ancestral land, without the possibility of organized Jewish worship. This is the period during which Jews began to gather together into “synagogues”, which is a Greek word meaning the same thing as the Latin word “congregation”. The fact that the overwhelmingly most common name for “synagogues” comes in the Greek language shows that a very large part of the Jews had spread into parts of the world beyond the Middle East and that their culture and daily life had begun to be carried on in languages other than their native Hebrew. When their synagogues began to worship in languages other than Hebrew, the Scriptures needed to be translated into whatever the local language was, and the Psalms, particularly, needed to be made available for daily use. (Private prayer would, naturally, move into the local, daily language more quickly than the corporate worship would.) This was the beginning of the process that continues still in our time of translating Psalms into local languages and forms so that they can be made use of in local worship. Our offertory hymn is a part of that same tradition of preparing Scripture for use in new places and cultures.

English poetry tends to be metrical and Western music reflects that tendency. Our hymns are almost always written in verses so that collections of words with the same number of syllables and the same patterns of stress can be used with the repeating musical accompaniment. Because of this cultural expectation, metrical Psalters were an early development, especially among Protestants, in order to make it possible for Christians to sing the Psalms as they knew their ancient Jewish brethren had, but according to their own English pattern of singing.

The Psalms were the part of traditional Christian worship that Protestants took hold of with the greatest fervor. A number of widely used metrical translations of the Psalms were printed and it was the custom, for many centuries, for the English Bible to be printed with the Psalter included, but with one or two or sometimes more

other translations of the Psalter found at the end of the New Testament for use in home prayers and group worship. (I brought a facsimile of the 1599 Geneva Bible, which has an additional Psalter, with music, included at the end. You can see it downstairs after service.) The Church of Scotland still makes common use of the Psalter in its worship, perhaps more than any other large Christian denomination.

We tend to think of singing in church as coming, inescapably, from our hymnal but, as a matter of fact, until the middle of the 19th century Anglican churches commonly used the Psalter as their hymnal rather than any separate book of hymns. It was the nonconforming churches that produced the overwhelming riches of hymnody in the English language. Only later did Anglicans take these into their worship services, beginning with the most evangelical wings of Anglicanism and working their way across the spectrum to the Anglo-Catholics. The Protestant character of the catholic tradition in Anglicanism is shown very clearly in the fact that worship services without hymns, in any branch of our Church, are difficult to imagine. Just as our most Protestant brethren use a translation of the traditional Latin Mass for their Service of Communion, so do our spikiest brothers sing hymns like the Baptists!

So, when we sing the offertory hymn today, we are doing something that is 3000 years old and has come into full force only in the 20th century. We are doing something that is entirely Jewish and, yet, is an expression of the English speaking world's response to the human urge to worship. It is both an Old Testament action (since it comes, perhaps, from the pen of King David) and a New Testament one, since it contains in its final stanza a reference to Jesus as the good Shepherd. It is a Protestant thing to do since it is only possible for us to do this because the Reformation has allowed us to worship in our own language, but it is a Catholic thing to do since we do it as a part of the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. In one action, we will sum up the history of our worshiping community, the history of the application of Scripture to living religious lives in the world and the history of the English-speaking worlds response to the presence of the Gospel in its midst. Think of how many things it is that we are able to do at once because of the great riches that the Psalter and our hymnal tradition offer us! We are so accustomed to these riches that we do not even notice them! Today, at least, we should sing this hymn in a full awareness of what it is we are doing, not only giving thanks to God for being the Good Shepherd Who takes care of us but also giving thanks to our brothers and sisters from earlier ages in the life of the Church and of God's chosen people, Israel, who have passed down to us treasures of inestimable beauty and power.