

Easter 4, Year C

How do you judge the importance of any piece of information? One measuring tool is to see how many people know that piece of information. The greater number of people who know it suggests that something is perceived as being important.

In writing, when something is considered general knowledge it doesn't even require a footnote because everyone knows it. The sun rises in the east, there are 365 days to a year, the law of gravity...the list could go on and on.

With that thought in mind, let me ask you a question: "What is the most important passage in the Bible?" Well if we measure passages by how many people know them, then I think that one possible answer to our question is found in our readings for today: the 23rd Psalm.

By a show of hands, how many of you think you know the 23rd Psalm, pretty much by heart? Let's try it, and we'll say the King James Version.

"The Lord is my Shepherd;
I shall not want
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul;
He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his Name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of
Mine enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil;
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days
Of my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

I can say as a priest that, when I am praying with people, the 2 most common requests from the Bible are the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer, which tells me something about what people like you think is important. By contrast, most people cannot recite the 10 Commandments or the Beatitudes, as important as they are.

So why is the 23 Psalm so beloved? What has made it a passage of scripture that almost everyone knows? I think it's because it is simple, it is memorable and has a basic point, which we need to hear over and over again.

By simple I not only mean that it is short, but like all great literature, it has a beginning, a middle and an end. Part 1 tells us about how God cares for us during normal times. God provides for us, provides green pastures, water and restoration. Part 2 tells us about how God cares for us during the hard times. God will guide us through the dark valley and will keep us strong in the presence of our enemies. And Part 3 tells us how God will care for us eternally, with goodness and mercy in the house of the Lord forever. The 23rd Psalm is greatly loved because it expresses simple truths, and does it so beautifully.

Second, the 23 Psalm is memorable. The poem traditionally dates back to King David, himself a shepherd as a boy, and for as long as scripture has been with us, the 23 Psalm has been one of the most often used passages of scripture, particularly in times of need. We have all heard it all our lives, and because of this it has seeped into our memories like the rising of the sun and the days of the year.

And third, it has a basic point, that we need to hear over and over again. God means us well and cares for us in ways that we do not even perceive. Therefore we are not in charge, we only need to trust and follow.

Did you get that? The sheep don't know what the shepherd is doing for them most of the time and similarly, God is caring for us in ways we do not perceive, therefore our role is to trust and follow.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". Just hearing those words relaxes me, and tells me that everything is going to be all right.

Simple, memorable, and with a truth we all need to hear. That is why the 23 Psalm is one of the most important passages in the Bible.

If you didn't have it quite memorized, work on that this week so it will be there when you need it. But more importantly, get the point. God means you well, and is caring for you in ways you do not even realize. Amen