

Hope in the Valley

Elvis sung,

There will be peace in the valley for me, some day

There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray

There'll be no sadness, no sorrow

No trouble, trouble I see

There will be peace in the valley for me, for me

Well the bear will be gentle

And the wolves will be tame

And the lion shall lay down by the lamb, oh yes

And the beasts from the wild

Shall be led by a child

And I'll be changed, changed from this creature that I am, oh yes

There will be peace in the valley for me, some day

There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray

There'll be no sadness, no sorrow

No trouble, trouble I see.

There will be peace in the valley for me, for me.

Psalm 23 speaks of all the different ups and downs of what it is to be a human being. Times when we enjoy still waters and green pastures, that is the good times, times of rest and recreation. These are to be enjoyed and treasured.

But what Psalm 23 also teaches, is that there will be times of dark valleys. They are inescapable, from the least to the greatest of us, we all face our fair share of dark valleys.

Now, I don't want to be depressive or morbid today, but sometimes we need to face reality and the Christian faith permits us to do that. Many of the writings of the Bible are lamentations, times of reflecting and grieving. Times of being in the valley. The Bible makes room for such times.

These literally can be called dark valley and your dark valley will undoubtedly be different from your neighbour's and if I were to ask each one of you about your dark valley, you would have a story to tell me.

Dark valleys are frightening places. They are low points, for a valley is situated between two steep mountains, and so little light finds its way into the valley.

Valleys are lonely places, for not many people want to walk in them and admit that they do, and many forces drive us into dark valleys. Depression can be such a valley, often outwith our control, when the world becomes a dark place and we struggle to find any light and we ask *is there peace in the valley?*

Death is certainly a dark valley, not for the deceased who pass through the valley to the other side but certainly for the grieving, who are left to find their way through and they may ask, *is there peace in the valley?*

Illness is a dark valley, when we think that there is no way out and all exits seemed blocked. *Is there peace in the valley?*

Separation and relationship breakdowns are most certainly a dark valley and suddenly we are left alone to make it through. *Is there peace in this valley?*

As I said, for everyone they have their own valley to walk.

But, for the Christian, there is peace in the valley, for we have help in the valley.

This is good news.

For we are told that we are not alone in our valley. How good is this? There is someone significantly wiser than us in the valley. Someone stronger, and more importantly someone who is on our side, who walked the valley before us.

The psalmist calls him the Lord who to him is his Shepherd.

Now remember who wrote this psalm, it was of course the shepherd boy David, who became a great King of Israel, and David himself experienced many dark valleys in his life.

He reached the pinnacle of leadership in Israel – adored as a King, but his life was to fall apart when he lost sight of his calling to be God's leader, and this led him to a tragic and crazy set of decisions that was to bring his life down to the lowest point. Yes, David, a man after God's own heart, had messed up morally, spiritually and even physically. He created his own lonely valley.

He must have asked often, *is there peace in the valley Lord?*

So when David writes this psalm, he writes from a place of experience, because in the valley he experienced the love and mercy of God. A God who was with him and a God who brought him through the dark valley.

This God was to David like a Shepherd. David knew what it was to care for sheep. As a boy he would sacrifice his life for the sake of the sheep. We are told that he would fight bears and wolves with his bare hands, he was expert with the sling, and he protected all those sheep in the valley. For he knew, as he walked the valley with his sheep, he was putting himself in immense danger from bandits and wild animals, and yet it was here that he was to discover the presence of someone who would hold his hand and lead him through.

Is there peace in your valley? Can we find peace in our valley?

There is, and can we discover the Good Shepherd, who will walk with us in the valley. The Good Shepherd is Jesus and he comes to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. He comes to bring us peace in the valley. To be our companion and friend.

In our baptismal hymn today, we sang the words, “Lord as I drift on the waters, be the resting place of my restless heart, my life's companion, my friend and refuge.”

If you are going through a dark valley today, make these words your own. Trust in the Shepherd who is God. Look to him for strength, call on his name, be assured that he is with you. This we know because of Jesus, who is the Good Shepherd and who laid down his life for us, so that he can walk in our dark valley with us.

Let us sing hymn number 355, Lord you are both lamb and shepherd.

Hope in our world

Over these last few years, anxiety has increased. Climate change and impending disaster has dominated our headlines, the pandemic has been at the front of people's minds and many other issues have dominated our headlines.

In our Gospel passage, the end of the world is described here by Jesus. It is a cataclysmic end. He saw the end. The end that he saw was also the beginning of a new world, a world where the Kingdom of God would come upon us.

He encourages his followers, to look forward in faith because God has it all in hand, and trust in Him that even if Heaven and Earth pass away, the words of Jesus will not.

Yes, the scenes that he describes are terrifying, and he says people will faint from terror, the heavenly bodies will be shaken but he also gives a message of hope.

Over the last month, we have heard much about climate change, and possible destruction of our planet if we are not careful and if we do not change our ways. What we have heard and the things reported are not a million miles away from what Jesus was predicting 2000 years ago. So, yes, we are part of this anxious, often crazy world, and it is an anxious world at this critical time.

But I'm not here today to frighten us this morning or to be a messenger of doom. Because Jesus tells when these things begin to happen, "Stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near". As Christians we have the ultimate hope for our world.

In other words, even in the worst possible scenario our future is secure because of Christ.

I was speaking to the Prof, who gave the recent talk at the Men's Club about Ancient Egypt. He himself is a Christian and a regular church goer and he was lamenting on the lack of interest in the church in these days, and he said, "Don't people realise that they are not going to live for ever?"

In our reading, Jesus is describing that there is a day of reckoning coming, a day when the Son of Man returns.

Yes, we should do everything to save this beautiful planet, but we should also remember that Jesus teaches us not to allow ourselves to be weighed down with the things of this world, he describes them as carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life.

Rather, as followers of Christ, look forward, look up, be ready for his return.

He says, "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourself and know the summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the Kingdom of God is near."

What are you seeing today? What is the fig tree of our generation telling us today?

On this first Sunday of Advent, as we look forward to Christmas, and so celebrate the coming of Christ into this world, 2000 years ago, we also look forward to the return of Christ, which he has promised.

So, let us take Jesus' advice and look forward to his return. Look forward to that day when heaven and earth become one. Look forward to that day when wars will cease

And the wolves will be tame

And the lion shall lay down by the lamb, oh yes

And the beasts from the wild

Shall be led by a child

And in the words of the song, I'll be changed, changed from this creature that I am, oh yes

On that day when everything is reconciled, and we are all in God's perfect shalom – his wholeness, his peace, we will experience the fullness of the love of the Good Shepherd.

Let us sing together – hymn number 448, "Lord the light of your love is shining..."