

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, 2026

Today's Responsorial Psalm is Psalm 23, "The Lord is My Shepherd". I have never forgiven the New American Bible for replacing the traditional "Valley of the Shadow of Death" in the Psalm with "Dark Valley." "Dark Valley" sounds like an 80's fantasy show based on "Dungeons and Dragons", while "Valley of the Shadow of Death" gets right to the heart of what the Easter Season is about. We fear death, but there is One Who has conquered death. We dread to pass through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but the Lord Jesus has passed through it before us, and, if we belong to Him, He will take us through it.

Psalm 23 is the most beloved of the Psalms, and generations of Christians have prayed it in the face of mortal danger and in the face of death itself. I remember vividly the shock, during my sophomore year of high school, of one of the really cool seniors (how I envied his arms!) dying in a totally unnecessary traffic accident. I had an older Bible with me when I went to his funeral, and I was struck by the difference between the traditional "Valley of the Shadow of Death" and the, well, "lame" as we said in those days, newer rendition "Dark Valley." This started me thinking for the first time that newer and better are not always, or even usually, identical, a thought reinforced the very next year by an astonishingly bad "renovation" inflicted on old St. Mary's in Cheyenne.

No. We are not children, afraid of the dark. It is no mere darkness that we fear, but the very shadow of death. It comes for all of us, that grim reaper. During the Easter Season, we recall that Death came even for the Lord Jesus Christ. He, however, did not stay reaped. I remember an old illustrated book of Greek mythology tales from childhood. In one scene, a burly Herakles grabbed Thanatos/Death by the throat, driving him away from a maiden. In Gospel, truth, Jesus Christ has grabbed Death by the throat, and taunted that weaker power, "Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" By Faith in the Risen One, we make that taunt our own. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?

The Risen One comes to us through His Word first of all, and then, even more powerfully, through the greatest of His Sacraments, the most Holy Eucharist. In Psalm 23, we pray, "You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes." In the Holy Eucharist, we come to the Table of the Lord, the Table where He is Himself both the host and the food. He sets the Table, and He feeds with Himself. As we come to this Table, the Lord makes the power of His Sacrifice present for us, and then makes His risen Life present for us. At this Table we participate in the Sacrifice of Christ, and are fed with Christ Himself, the Resurrection and the Life. Jesus is the Resurrection, and Jesus is the food of the Eucharist. In the holy Eucharist, therefore, we are fed with the Resurrection.

At a time of considerable political anxiety, there are naturally some who would like me to say more about current events. I find this difficult, because, quite frankly, they seem so insignificant to me compared to the cosmic drama of the victory of Life over death, and our participation in this victory through the most Holy Eucharist. Do you think that the strange war in the Arabian/Persian Gulf (take your pick of monikers) is the most important thing going on? I don't. Some day not too far away kids in school will be bored as their teacher tries to say something about it, the teacher himself not too clearly recalling what went on or what it was all about. If they are blessed by Faith, the teacher and the students will on Sunday have the opportunity to come to the Holy Eucharist, the same awesome reality then that it is today, and

that it was in World War II. Wars and governments come and go, but the Word of the Lord, and His Table of Life, endure forever.

Still, I cannot say that wars and governments don't matter at all. Pope Innocent III once explained to King Philip II of France that he does not claim any jurisdiction over France except "ratione peccati", that is, as a matter of moral teaching. Politics necessarily has a moral dimension, and therefore the Church has something to say about politics. Yet, we preachers must say it carefully. There are some morally black and some morally white patches in politics, but there are also many and confusing shades of moral grey. I wrote my college senior thesis on that same Pontiff's intervention in the disputed imperial election of 1198. All I will say now about that is that Innocent III felt that he had both the right and the duty to intervene, and that his intervention did not go particularly well. Except where there is clear moral black and white, Church leaders are well advised to state the basic moral principles, and leave specific application of those moral principles to public officials and citizens.

The deliberate killing of innocent human beings is always morally black, and must always be clearly and strongly condemned by the Church. Elective abortion is inherently evil. There is no room here for prudential judgement. To deliberately kill an innocent human being is always morally wrong, unjustifiable by any circumstance.

The matter of self defense, and the graver matter of military defense of international order and security, necessarily include judgement calls, which people can honestly and honorably get wrong. If it looks like someone is going to hit me, I don't have to wait until after he's broken my nose until I take action, but it might happen that, in a tense situation, I misinterpret some body motion of his as the start of an attack, and I charge into him, attacking first. On the other hand, I wouldn't want to sit there, hoping for the best while he calmly smashes a fist into my face. I most definitely want to do something to keep his fist from meeting my face. Turning now to international affairs, it seems to me that public authorities and citizens have to analyze what information they possess and then use their best judgement, with different people legitimately reaching different conclusions. The essential moral principle is that one may only resort to force, especially lethal force, when circumstances leave one with no other realistic alternative. It is not enough for the use of lethal force to seem likely to be successful. There must be no truly realistic alternative. The decision to use lethal force is morally grave, and those who make that decision will have to explain themselves before their people, and before God, Who alone knows the mind and probes the heart.

Will there ever be peace on earth? My own opinion, to paraphrase the diplomatic historian A.J.P. Taylor, is that wars are rather like traffic accidents. There are measures that can and should be taken to make driving safer, but as long as people are driving there will be mistakes, and therefore traffic accidents. There are measures that can and should be taken to make international politics more peaceful, but as long as regimes are competing there will be mistakes, and therefore wars. We will sometimes find ourselves walking together in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Still, we fear no evil, for the Lord is at our side, with His rod and His staff that give us courage. As we receive Him at the Table He has prepared, we receive also the promise of His Kingdom, where "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not raise sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." (Isaiah 2:4)