

## *Footprints*

Homily for May 8, 2022  
Easter 4

This is the message of Christ's Passion: Jesus is not a God who stays aloof from our suffering. He comes down into the valley of darkness, takes our hand, and saves us through our suffering.

One of the most well-known modern Christian poems that expresses God's closeness in the midst of suffering with memorable beauty and simplicity is called Footprints. It was written in 1936 by a girl named Mary Stevenson. Mary had lost her mother at age six. She grew up in poverty and hardship as her father struggled to raise eight children during the Great Depression. One cold winter's night when she was 14-years-old she wrote "Footprints" on a scrap of paper. Think about young Mary Stevenson struggling to survive, sitting in the cold, and writing this. And think about what Jesus, the good shepherd, was thinking as he watched over her that night.

*One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. / Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. / In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. / Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there were one set of footprints. / This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints. / So I said to the Lord, "You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. / But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there have only been one set of footprints in the sand. / why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?" / The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints in the sand, is when I carried you."*

I did not know until preparing this homily that these words were penned by 14 year old Mary Stevenson. It makes the poem the more poignant to know the age of the teenager who wrote it and circumstances behind its composition. This Sunday is called Good Shepherd Sunday when, like Mary Stevenson, we are invited to ponder how the shepherd Jesus is with us through the rough terrain of life in this world.

Like Mary, the Good Shepherd invites us to hear his voice, to affirm that he knows us and that we can never be snatched out of the Father's hand.

What is remarkable about Mary's poem is how she could affirm hearing the shepherd's voice in the midst of such trials. She was able to hear the voice of the loving shepherd while engulfed in an environment that was so frightening and threatening. This is the first thing we all want to remember, Palestinian shepherds extended their pastoral care in an environment where predators were prowling and thieves were always nearby to snatch the sheep from their true fold.

Such is life in this world where there are those frightening forces that can make us feel like very vulnerable sheep. But Jesus is with us, and he speaks to us through his word, through the saints of the Church, by the consoling presence of our Lady and as he comes to us in each other and through the care of the bishops, pastors and deacons of the Church. How he wants us to hear his

consoling and loving voice amidst the howls of those voices that would say, there is no help in the shepherd, you are alone in this world, with no one to care for you and protect you.

But Jesus the shepherd is here and not only does he guide us with his voice, he nourishes us with the Eucharist, the food of eternal life. Listen to how he states it in today's Gospel:

***I give them eternal life, and they will never perish!***<sup>1</sup>

The story is told of St Therese of Lisieux, who was born in 1873 and died in 1897. As she prepared for her first Holy Communion she looked forward to it with excitement. And the day finally came. This is how she described the first time she received Jesus.

***“I felt that I was loved, and I said to Jesus, ‘I love you and I give myself to you forever...’“It was a fusion: Jesus and I were no longer two, I had vanished in him as a drop of water vanishes in the ocean. Jesus alone remained.” She ended her description of her first communion by recalling the joy she felt that day – and the joy she experienced every time she received Christ in the Eucharist.***

Here is the union Jesus speaks of and something Therese knew for much of her short life. 18 months before her death she was able to write:

***At this time I was enjoying such a living faith, such a clear faith, that the thought of heaven made up all my happiness, and I was unable to believe there were really impious people who had no faith.***

But then she contracted tuberculosis and the 23 year old suffered severely. Listen to what she then wrote from the heart of her suffering:

***He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment. This trial was to last not a few days or a few weeks, it was not to be extinguished until the hour set by God Himself and this hour has not yet come. The darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: “You are dreaming about the light, about a fatherland embalmed in the sweetest perfumes; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog that surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.”***<sup>2</sup>

Remarkably even though St. Therese experienced what she perceived as the absence of the Shepherd's presence because of the howling of the devil, like Mary Stevenson she knew that the

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#) (Jn 10:28). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, Ralph. *The Fulfillment of All Desire: A Guidebook to God Based on the Wisdom of the Saints* (p. 421). Emmaus Road Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Good Shepherd was carrying her through these most tortuous months. She knew the promise of Jesus in the midst of the suffering that Satan could not snatch her from the Father's hand.

St Therese died on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1897 at 7:20 in the evening. Her last minutes were recorded by the community:

*Her head fell back on the pillow and was turned toward the right. The Prioress had the infirmary bell rung, and the sisters quickly returned. . . . Hardly had the community knelt at her bedside when Thérèse pronounced very distinctly, while gazing at her crucifix: "Oh! I love Him!" And a moment later: "My God, I love you!"*

*Suddenly her eyes came to life and were fixed on a spot just a little above the statue of the Blessed Virgin. Her face took on the appearance it had when Thérèse enjoyed good health. She seemed to be in ecstasy. This look lasted for the space of a "Credo." Then she closed her eyes and expired. It was 7:20 in the evening. . . . A mysterious smile was on her lips. She appeared very beautiful.<sup>3</sup>*

Beloved brothers and sisters, these two young people had a profound knowing. Although the wolves are howling and the thieves will do everything to deter us from trusting Jesus the Good Shepherd and listening to his voice, we are not alone. We belong to a community of faith that not only has people with names like Mary Stevenson and St Therese of Lisieux, but that multitude depicted in the Revelation of St. John. Remember they are described as those who have come out of the great ordeal of this trying and difficult world. Of them we read:

*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat;  
<sup>17</sup> for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."<sup>4</sup>*

It was this hope that inspired the words I have shared with you of these young people who suffered so much in this world, and it is the same hope that can inspire us to trust in the Good Shepherd and see his footprints in the sand carrying us when we are overwhelmed and accompanying us when we can walk the rough and rocky terrain of this present ordeal so one day we will lie down in the green pastures of eternity and drink from the springs of the water of life.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin, Ralph. *The Fulfillment of All Desire: A Guidebook to God Based on the Wisdom of the Saints* (p. 430). Emmaus Road Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (Re 7:16–17). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.