

SOLITUDE - 5



The Good Shepherd, circa 250, Capella Greca, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome

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A lengthy bus journey away from the historic centre of Rome and, quite literally, off the tourist map you may arrive at the Catacomb of Priscilla. Back in Roman times this was a disused quarry and from the second century onwards was adopted as a Christian burial site. Most visitors, best described as pilgrims, for this in no tourist tick-box location, come to see the "Greek Chapel" (Capella Greca), a square chamber with an arched ceiling which contains 3rd century frescoes interpreted as Christian, although the imagery is perhaps deliberately enigmatic.

At a time when Christians were persecuted for their faith painted imagery was risky. So it was that believers devised means of self-identification by way of sign and symbol – the fish being perhaps the best known (an image which is loaded with layers of meaning, some scriptural, such as the Feeding of the Five Thousand, or the Miraculous Draft of Fish; others sacramental – think only of the saving water of baptism, the font taking the name piscina, or 'fish bowl').

On the vault of the chapel we find a representation of the Good Shepherd and here the painter is talking the language of metaphor. For believers such an image called to mind both the consoling verses of Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want") and the comforting words of Christ ("I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep" – John 10:14), yet the imagery remained ambiguous: clearly understood by the faithful, but less than obvious for those outside the faith (fishermen and shepherds were a staple of Roman pagan decoration).

Although the stories of Christians hiding out in the catacombs have no reliable foundation it is generally understood that the early faith communities gathered in the vaults of their dead,

worshipped there and shared meals. To us this seems odd and rather uncomfortable, but for them much less so, for they clearly foresaw a Kingdom that truly broke through death and offered new life.

So, imagine, leaving the place you call home, some cell or garret in the overcrowded centre of the city, making your way beyond the urban sprawl, along roads filthy with the stench of decay; finding your way to the abandoned quarry, re-clothed now in scrubland and the discarded detritus of city living. You make your way to the tomb entrance, then through the familiar darkness towards this small chamber, lit by cheap terracotta lamps, fuelled with pungent olive oil. Then joining with others who have gathered, sharing bread and wine, looking up to 'see' Christ, a young and beardless man, dressed in the short tunic of the Roman labourer, a worker's basket, satchel-like, by his side. Birds sing in the trees, two sheep look towards him, another he carries, and you take heart: you are not alone is the message, when your strength or your courage fails you I will carry you; I am the Shepherd who won't, ever, let you go.

We live in a world of siren voices, with a cacophony of noise, the static of our electronic age. We too must travel to a place of quietness, to discover an inward stillness, make our own sacramental space and find with inner sight our Shepherd, who still leads, carries and brings safe home.

Where is that place for you?