

Lamb and Shepherd

By [Austin Shelley](#)

April 14, 2016

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"You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd." So begins "Christus Paradox," a hymn penned by Sylvia Dunstan more than three decades ago. According to notes on the hymn text, Dunstan first scribbled down the lyrics--rich with paradoxical, tension-laden images of Jesus--while she rode the bus home after a difficult day of prison chaplaincy.

It's fitting that the hymn was born out of Dunstan's struggle as she persevered in prison ministry despite its challenges. Its opening line alludes to this week's reading from Revelation, which offers hope to those whose experience of hardship compels them to stand firm in the faith:

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;
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.

Here in Revelation 7, those who remain faithful witnesses to Christ, despite persecution, ultimately find reward and comfort in the presence of the one who is both Lamb and Shepherd. The "great ordeal" recedes into the past; countless people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" emerge, praising

God with songs and palm branches raised.

As idyllic as this scene is, we must not forget that immense earthly suffering is its prequel. A heavenly vision of all nations joining in unbridled worship of God takes center stage, but this second act comes at the cost of the first.

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us western Christians will acknowledge that we are not persecuted for our faith. But we need look no farther than the news to find brothers and sisters who bear the cross of great suffering and seek shelter for the healing of their wounds.

“Who are these...and where have they come from?” asks the elder. Though John of Patmos replies with appropriate humility, “Sir, you are the one that knows,” we might in our day and time respond, “Sir, they are more than four million refugees from Syria. They are the brothers and sisters starving in camps cut off from humanitarian aid, the mothers and fathers risking their own lives and the lives of their beloved children in order to flee certain death in a war-ravaged home. They are the toddlers slipping from the desperate grips of their families when overcrowded inflatable rafts capsize in the turbulent Mediterranean; they are the elderly being turned away from border crossings and toward despair. Sir, you are the one that knows.”

The photographs and stories that chronicle the Syrian refugee crisis are oftentimes ones I would rather not see or hear. They force me to put a human face on the violence and unspeakable suffering I would prefer to think do not exist. Yet as with John’s vivid revelation, the images in particular cut to the heart. When I look into the eyes of a young Syrian mother cradling her curly-haired, dehydrated infant, I meet there both the unmistakable gaze of the Lamb being led to slaughter and the Shepherd urging me to be his hands and feet in the world--the Christ who bids me do more than simply pray for this mother’s provision. Her welfare is wrapped up in mine and mine in hers.

With each new heartbreaking scene, I beg the Good Shepherd to intervene to bring about an end to the violence. I also bear the weight of the Lamb’s indictment that my actions are not always as fervent as my prayers. As the crisis goes on, and as the photographs continue to flood both the newspapers and my mind, I cling to the tension inherent in the person of Jesus the Christ, who surely is, as a weary Sylvia Dunstan once wrote on her evening journey home, the one “whom we both scorn

and crave.”