

Psalm 23 & John 10:1-18 Lullingstone 6 August 2018

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer. Amen

We continue this morning with our Summer series of sermons on Bible passages to learn and live by. And this week I have chosen both the Old and New Testament readings, which are clearly linked by the imagery of the Shepherd.

Psalm 23 – ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ – must surely be one of the most famous passages of the Bible. Past generations would have committed it to memory; and we often sing versions of Psalm 23 as hymns, like ‘The God of love my shepherd is’ and ‘Loving shepherd of thy sheep’. One of my favourite versions of this psalm was made popular as the theme tune of the TV series, ‘The Vicar of Dibley.’

Psalm 23 comes from the Old Testament and may well have been composed by King David himself, in about 1000 BC. David became the greatest king to sit on the throne of Jerusalem, but he started out as a simple shepherd boy guarding his father’s sheep out on the hills around Bethlehem. This wasn’t always the quiet life that we might imagine. In the First Book of Samuel, David tells King Saul how he would risk his own life for his sheep. He said:

‘Whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth.’ (1 Samuel 17: 34-35. A.V.)

And our New Testament passage speaks of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laying down his life for the sheep – in contrast to hired workers who would simply run away.

Like many shepherds, David would have whiled away the hours making music – probably at first with a home-made pipe. But by the time he joined King Saul’s army as a young man, we know that David was an accomplished musician who played the lyre for the king. In tradition, the whole Book of Psalms is attributed to him. And certainly this makes sense when we come to Psalm 23. David knew from his own background how important the shepherd was to the safety and welfare of his flock, and he was able to apply this to God

himself, as he composed songs like Psalm 23, 'The LORD is my shepherd', - speaking of God's care for us all. The end of the psalm also makes sense if it is King David speaking, as he was anointed with oil as king; and God gave him supremacy over his enemies, so that David's reign was the Golden Age for the Children of Israel.

It's perhaps surprising that a song composed over 3000 years ago, in a pastoral community, on the other side of the world, should still resonate with us today. And yet it does. We are lucky enough to have sheep out on the fields in and around Otford, but even people living in big cities who have never seen a flock of sheep in real life, still respond to this psalm. So let us see what it has to say to us today.

It opens with a statement of complete trust in God's provision for our lives:

'The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul.'

Yet it's often when we're in green pastures, in other words when things are going well in life, that we can so easily forget God because we seem to be doing alright on our own. It's surprising how quickly a tragedy will bring people to their knees, people who see no need of God at other times. Yet thanksgiving is an important part of prayer, and we all have so much to thank God for as we look back over our lives. But, to make it more immediate, a practice that we used to encourage in Church Schools was to have two large bowls: one filled with pebbles and one empty. Children were encouraged to take a pebble from the bowl, to hold it in their hand as they said 'Thank you' to God for something, and then to put the pebble in the other bowl. It was surprising how quickly one bowl emptied and the other got filled up. At the end of each day, we could thank God for all his many blessings, thinking about how God has been at work in our lives during the last 24 hours. With thoughtfulness and thankfulness, it wouldn't take long to fill your imaginary bowl of pebbles, because we are so blessed in so many ways.

Psalm 23 continues:

‘He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.’

Just as Eastern shepherds lead the way in front of their sheep, so we can trust that God will lead us in the right paths, if we follow him. I know there are some people here who love their mazes(!), but at times I think we live in a ‘moral maze’, which can be extremely confusing. Moral issues are rarely a matter of black and white – or, as my granddaughter has been taught at nursery, a green choice or a red choice. With big moral and social issues, there are always arguments on both sides. So how do we go forward without simply giving way to our prejudices? Well, we can bring these too to God in prayer, asking for his guidance, and turning to the Bible to try to find out ‘What would Jesus do?’ in this situation.

Finally, Psalm 23 is nothing if not realistic. The poet recognises that life isn’t all quiet waters and green pastures. Life can be a real struggle sometimes. Dangers and suffering are an inevitable part of life; and how we cope with these situations help to make us the people that we are. Yet once again we find that the psalmist has an unshakable trust in God’s goodness and help in times of trouble. God is portrayed as the strong and fearless shepherd, protecting his sheep. This psalm reassures us that God is there with us in our times of trial, as we struggle with all that life can throw at us. Try not to shut God out when you need him most:

‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;

for thou art with me; thy rod and they staff, they comfort me.’

This beautiful, memorable psalm reminds us that God is always there for us, watching over us, loving us and wanting what is best for us. All we have to do is put our trust in him and follow him, like sheep following their shepherd.

And so we turn to our New Testament reading from John chapter 10 and Jesus' claim 'I am the good shepherd', made twice, in verses 11 and 14. This is one of seven great 'I am' claims in John's Gospel, which are highly significant in understanding Jesus' divinity, and to emphasise their importance, they are often introduced by the phrase 'Verily, verily, I say unto you.' In this chapter we actually have two of these claims: 'I am the Good Shepherd' and 'I am the door of the sheep.' I'm sure you can think of some of the others – like, 'I am the bread of life' in chapter 6; 'I am the light of the world' chapter 8; 'I am the resurrection and the life' chapter 11, and 'I am the way, the truth and the life' chapter 14, and 'I am the true vine' chapter 15.

It wasn't just God who was portrayed in the Old Testament as a shepherd, but all of the leaders of God's people. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel denounced the bad shepherds for only thinking of themselves; and Jesus too, in John's Gospel, contrasts himself with hired shepherds who run away when danger threatens, when the good shepherd makes a conscious decision to lay down his life for his sheep. The prophets looked forward to a time when the Lord God himself would shepherd his people once again (see Ezekiel 34. 15-16) and in claiming 'I am the Good Shepherd', Jesus was fulfilling these prophecies. He gathered in the scattered sheep, welcoming sinners and outcasts, preaching that God rejoices over the salvation of one lost sheep. Jesus also saw his mission as eventually going beyond the Jews to the 'other sheep... not of this fold' (10.16), referring to the spread of the Church from Jerusalem into the Gentile Roman world. And in this way, we are privileged to belong to God's Chosen People.

There is something very comforting about the image of God that we see in Jesus, the Good Shepherd. A loving, caring God who has given his own life for us – not because of anything we have done to deserve it, but simply because we belong to him and he knows each of us by name.

Shepherds would gather their sheep in at night to keep them safe and lay down to sleep across the entrance. That is why, earlier in our reading, Jesus said that he was the door to the sheepfold. In the morning the shepherds would call their own sheep out of the fold by name, and the sheep would follow their own shepherd because they knew his voice. The Greek word for 'church' is 'ecclesia' (from which our word 'ecclesiastical' comes). ...

'Ecclesia' literally means 'to call out'. So, while we can rest in the comfort of knowing God as a good shepherd: who provides for us – and cares for us – and protects us and keeps us safe; we need to remember also that God calls each one of us by name, calls us out of our safety zone out into the world. He leads us on in life to pastures new – new places and people and experiences – challenging us to trust him enough to follow him wherever he leads us.

LET US PRAY

'Loving shepherd of thy sheep, keep thy lamb in safety keep;

Nothing can thy pow'r withstand, none can pluck me from thy hand.

...

Loving shepherd, ever near, teach thy lamb thy voice to hear;

Suffer not my steps to stray from the straight and narrow way.'

Amen

(Hymns Old and New No 325)