

25th April 2021

Easter 4

Opening Prayer

Loving God you are our Good Shepherd, but we often wander from your care. Some of us are battered and bruised by life and we need your strength to restore our souls. Heal us and strengthen us and give us courage to follow you faithfully day by day, we pray in Jesus' name.

We say together the prayer that Jesus taught his followers: Our Father

Bible Reading Psalm 23

The Lord's my shepherd; I have everything I need.

He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.

He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name.

Even when I walk through the dark valley of death,

I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.

You welcome me as a guest, anointing my head with oil.

My cup overflows with blessings.

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord for ever.

Reflection

This past week we have heard news of different leaders in our society. We watched Prince Philip's funeral, remembering one who was a strong and faithful support to the Queen. We have also heard of those in government, displaying questionable behaviour, using personal contacts to lobby for preferential contracts and funding. We have heard of Football owners trying to form an elite league. Unfortunately, human leaders may be honourable, but may also be suspect. Sadly, over the years there has been sufficient abuse of power by those in positions of leadership that people have lost respect for all institutions in society, including the Church. For people to follow those in power they need to have trust and assurance that they will use their wealth and position for good. Thankfully, unlike fallible human beings, God is always true and just.

Psalm 23 has comforted people of God's for centuries. It gives the promises of the presence and protection of God throughout life in all its ups and downs. The opening verse is the key to the whole. The subsequent verses unpack the meaning of "I shall not want"—provision and refreshment, inner peace, guidance, protection and, at the end, safe homecoming.

We are informed that God is in our midst throughout all the phases of our lives – ever present, refreshing, leading, and guiding. The Lord stays with us when we face the stress of changes and new challenges. In these times the shepherd leads us to green pastures and quiet waters.

At other times we may face testing and difficulty, unfamiliar dangers. The psalm also refers to a landscape that is harsh and at times hostile. How easy it is to want to run away or to be paralysed by fear. We have all experienced times when our only protection is in the grace of God. There are enemies. Evil is a reality, and fear in its presence is a natural and not unreasonable response. Security is found in trusting the Good Shepherd who remains with us always.

Finally, there is a longed-for destination and fellowship found around a banquet table. We may at times have a sense a yearning, a longing for something not yet realised, but which we believe will be. The God who has been with us in the ordinary times and the unusual times, is there also at the end of our lives: the host with outstretched arms, ready to welcome us home.

Acts 3. 1 – 9; 4.5 – 12

Peter and John went to the Temple on afternoon to take part in a prayer service. As they approached a man lame from birth was being carried in. Each day he was put beside the Temple gate . . . so he could beg from the people going into the Temple. Peter said, 'I don't have any silver or gold for you, but I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, get up and walk!' . . . He jumped up, stood on his feet and began to walk! Then, walking, leaping and praising God he went into the Temple with them. All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded! . . .

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, they were confronted by the priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees. These leaders were very disturbed that Peter and John were teaching the people that through Jesus there is resurrection of the dead. They arrested them and put them in jail until morning. But many of the people who heard their message believed it, so the number of believers now totalled about 5,000 men, not counting women and children.

Reflection

After the Resurrection, the early Church grew and spread despite facing opposition by the corrupt, self-serving leaders of the Temple in Jerusalem. Those in power in the Temple court were the rulers, elders, and teachers of the law, led by Annas, the former High Priest, supported by the current High Priest, Caiaphas, and others of the High Priest's family. Accused before them were Peter and John, lacking formal education, but filled with the Holy Spirit. Their crime was to speak of the resurrection of Jesus, whose death the Temple rulers, the Sanhedrin, had authorised. The Temple court had their reputation to protect and so wanted to silence these rabble rousers. The numbers of followers of Jesus were growing rapidly and the Temple leaders needed to stop them from growing any further. The Sadducees did not believe in any resurrection, let alone that of the recently crucified Jesus. And they did

not want breaches of public order which might arouse Roman retribution and threaten the amount of power that they did have under occupation.

With their titles, robes and ritual, the Temple leaders could claim authority for what they did. They accused the apostles of being out of order and speaking out of turn. Peter boldly spoke out in his and John's defence. He argued that his preaching was a response to the work of God, who healed the lame beggar at the Temple Gate. This healing was a confirmation of the power of the Name of Jesus whom the leaders had crucified. In effect, God had reversed their verdict, declaring innocent whom they had pronounced guilty and raised the one whom they had pronounced as dead. The focus of Peter was neither on the miracle nor on John and himself, but on Jesus as the living Lord. He was determined to keep Jesus to the fore, arguing that he had no peers, no rivals, and no successors. He is the true leader, with kindness and integrity, one who uses power for good. The Temple leaders were amazed at their boldness and couldn't deny that the lame man was healed and so finally let them go, fearful that the people would have caused a riot.

Not only are we to trust that the Risen Christ is present with us, the Good Shepherd who watches over us and cares for us, we are also to follow him by participating in God's mission to bring justice and healing for our world. Jesus' shepherding ministry is to be a model for our own, for the risen Lord says to us just as he did Peter, "Do you love me?" Then "tend my sheep."

Caring for others and offering hospitality, like tending and feeding Jesus' sheep, is a relational practice that creates opportunities in we can talk about God's goodness and mercy. As we share common interests and common struggles with others, and gather together at a table prepared for us even in the midst of all that threatens us, we can rebuild trust and respect and perhaps encourage people to think about the Christian faith, even if they would not necessarily attend church on a Sunday morning.

Questions to ponder this week:

1. What is your experience of God as the Good Shepherd who supplies our needs by leading us beside still waters and into green pastures?
2. How have you experienced the shepherd's presence with you in the midst of dark valleys of your life?
3. What are some ways that we can relate to our surrounding community? One thing we are doing is linking with the St Ives Eco Action Group who currently meet on-line, sharing a concern for the environment with others in this town. Supporting Tookey's, Just Sharing shop. Fenstanton has Jean selling plants and books to neighbours. What are some other ways we can show to people in our community, in words and actions that God is with us in all the different times of life?