

Shadow

Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14

In one of the ironies of the readings picked many months ago for today's sermon, Psalm 23 appears. "The Lord is my Shepherd", those familiar words that roll out at weddings and funerals, this 3,000 year-old song, attributed to the Shepherd King David, speaks its words of comfort, reassurance, protection and hope.

The Lord is **my** Shepherd. He has us, still, in the firm clasp of His hand.

We shall not want. God will find ways to provide for us.

He leads us; He restores us. God has not let go and will continue to guide, and when we are fragile, or broken, God will continue to heal and nurture.

But perhaps it is this verse that will speak to us this day, as we face the challenge of the Coronavirus that has fragmented our communities, brought the country and the world to its knees, putting businesses, organisations, charities, and the Church itself at risk.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and staff, they comfort me."

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has written:

"The most frequent command in the Bible is, 'Do not be afraid!' God isn't saying, 'everything's fine, there is nothing to be afraid of', when He commands us not to fear. He is acknowledging that life is scary, and sometimes we are rightly afraid when we are confronted by such existential issues. But God is beside us, working with us in our communities and our churches, in our politics and our governments, and He will not leave us to face our fears alone."

It's a tough time now. None of us will have experienced anything like it. The fragility of our community, economically, socially, dare I say even spiritually, has been exposed. No one will remain untouched by what is going on, and some will bear a heavy burden. People who have worked hard all their lives seeing their business crumble away; people who rely on getting out and about and going where they choose will find their cherished homes become a place of confinement; young people looking forward to finish school and college and university and moving

on into life find themselves cast adrift with the future far from certain; the vulnerable, young and old, isolated before, and even more so now. When the social cohesion that comes from touch and nearness and interaction is blighted, we wonder where in all of this fearfulness and anger and uncertainty we might find hope. When we see the activity of the selfish and the hoarders, and the 'I'm all right Jack' groups we wonder, 'Is this what lies not so far beneath the surface of our privileged society? The days are lengthening, but we live in a world of economic, societal, moral, and spiritual shadow.

In the midst of Lent, here comes Psalm 23. The good shepherd walks with you in the midst of your troubles. The darkness may not be changed, but you are changed because in the shadow, we find we are not alone. How powerful is that? With talk of social isolation and social distancing becoming key phrases; when we, as Christians, used to communion and sharing, and being together, find ourselves fragmented individually, and splintered communally, by this virus, here is the good shepherd telling us, "I am with you." Even in the dark valley, with deathly things all around, 'Thou art with me.'

We've all seen a lot of bad things in the last seven days. But I have been privileged to see so much that is good. WhatsApp groups springing up in places where neighbours saw each other but never spoke to each other; volunteers not know what they can do but desperate to do something; people looking far beyond themselves so that vulnerable people can get a fairer chance; charities, supermarkets, the Police, students, unemployed hospitality and entertainment workers going far and beyond what could have been expected because people, after all, still care. And the NHS and other emergency and caring groups only at the beginning of this grim time showing us what selflessness looks like, as if we needed to be reminded.

Perhaps we do need to be reminded. Not the hoarders, and the grasping, and the people who have stolen, and who refuse to self-isolate because 'no-one tells me what to do', but the countless thousands, maybe millions, who are all determined to do their bit, big or small, to help. Rishi Sunak, Chancellor of the Exchequer, said in his Friday press conference, "Now more than at any time in our history, we will be judged by our capacity for compassion. When this is over, and it will

be over, we want to look back on this moment and remember the many small acts of kindness, done by us, and to us.”

In the valley of the shadow of death, in the valley of extreme darkness, in the place of our deepest troubles and fears, the place where we think no one will ever accompany us, the shepherd is there. Not to lead us away from that place, but to walk us right through it. “We face the darkness, but it holds no power over us because we are in the presence of the Lord.”ⁱⁱ “Psalm 23 knows that there is evil in the world, but it is not feared. Confidence in God is the new orientation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I cannot pretend that these are not dark, shadow times. But God is with us, orienting us through the darkness, through the shadow, in a future where there is something more, something different, something better.

A few years ago I led a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho we went off track into the desert and were driven to a ravine. All around us was rock, and dust, and not much sign of life. Standing on the edge of the ravine we saw that it was, in fact, a valley. A dark valley. But looking down, we began to see that there was greenery in the valley, and a stream running through it. There was St George’s monastery, carved into the rock face just above the floor of the valley, and its cool still stream. It was a valley David would have known, in its shadow. It was an area where the prophet Elijah, fleeing for his life, found refuge and comfort and food. It was the setting, I believe, of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, where a vulnerable victim was left for dead in the shadow place, but unexpected help came, and rescue and restoration happened.

In the valley of the shadow, safety and sustenance, encouragement and kindness from strangers, and the unshakeable presence of God.

It is going to be a long time to get through this Coronavirus situation. People will become more worried, more fractious, more isolated, more frustrated, more impatient. But through this valley of shadow we do not walk alone. God is with us. God in the good neighbour. God in the friendly phone call. God in the shopping left at the door. God in the medicine delivered. God in the rediscovering of priorities and what really matters, what has always mattered in life.

It may be dark, but the light will return. In fact, it is already here.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Justin Welby, *Saying Yes to Life: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book 2020*

ⁱⁱ Robert W Fisher, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol 2, p106*

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms, p156*