

The Good Shepherd

Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

What is it about Psalm 23, echoed in the 'I am the Good Shepherd' saying of Jesus in John's Gospel, that still captures the contemporary imagination? What is it about an image of shepherding from over two millennia ago that has latched on to the souls of believers and non-believers and still speaks to both? What is it about the human psyche, and I cannot think of a time when this doesn't speak truth, that needs the comfort, reality, promise of the everlasting arms of a loving God holding on to us, some of the time, all of the time, speaking of a love and care we miss in our lives, our never had in our lives, that calms us, stills us, blesses us.

Even for those of us not particularly into hugs and cuddles there is a recognition that this kind of pure, gentle, person-to-person contact doesn't *make* us human but reminds us that we *are* human. That touch, fleeting or sustained, reconnecting us to those around us, to ourselves, and to Jesus.

Psalm 23 is profoundly personal and intimate. So many of the psalms speak to the wider world, and to the bigger issues in life. This is the psalm that sits up with the believer in the challenges of sleepless nights and uncertain days. This is the psalm that tells us about God's presence and provision with us and for us. This is the psalm that people with sometimes the most tenuous of links to faith and the church turn to at funerals because its words somehow still touch that raw wound of grief because it still puts words to something that mean something.ⁱ

The scene may be rural and slow-paced in our urbanised fast world, but it reaches out from another time and another way of life into our time and our way of life. It speaks to us of the shepherd, the Good Shepherd Who knows and calls, and cares and protects and provides. Still.

Not only is it sung at funerals it is sometimes sung at weddings. Its popularity at weddings is partly due to the metrical text of 1650 and was sung at the weddings of the late Queen, and the late Queen Mother. On both occasions it was sung to the tune Crimond, the composition of which is ascribed to the daughter of a Presbyterian minister and her boyfriend, an Aberdeen tobacconist. The Psalm has very reassuring pastoral imagery regarding water, rest, and comfort. It deals with the positives in life while also acknowledging the reality of its shadow side, a valley of deep darkness. It has a very positive image of a caring God. It is totally personal and suggests life is a journey that moves from pastures to water, through the dark valley and, ultimately, to being permanently in God's presence (and with a place at God's table where we are fed and looked after). There is a lovely poetic balance between the God Who leads the individual and the goodness and love that follow behind. You can see almost every verse in your mind's eye.ⁱⁱ

It is a Psalm of confidence. It tells us that God's companionship will transform every situation. It is the vitality of that relationship that will transform us. The Lord is *my* shepherd. Psalm 23 knows that there is evil and sadness and unfairness and pain and suffering in the world. But it is not feared. We are called by the voice of God to have confidence in a new orientation to our living.ⁱⁱⁱ

But the Lord is also *our* shepherd. Having fed and watered and protected and guided through the valley of the shadow of death, God, Jesus, the Good Shepherd brings us to a table. A table that God, Jesus, the Good Shepherd has prepared for us. But not only us. It is a table at which we will sit with family and friends, that's assumed. But also our enemies.

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

All those people we find hard to love. All those people who are awkward for us because of who they are, or what they have said, or what they believe, or what they don't believe. All those people who have hurt us, embarrassed us, shamed us, got under our skin. All those people we hate. And

all those people who hate us. Perhaps worst of all, those times when we really hate ourselves, because despite our brave words, or our false protestations, or our slippery self-justifications, or our barely hidden panic, the last person we want to sit down at table with, our greatest enemy of all, is ourselves. He/she is their own worst enemy.

Is this really what it takes to be a Christian? Is this really what God wants and expects? Blooming Jesus and His, "You have heard that it was said, '*You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.*' But I say to you, *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...*"^{iv}

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

"I am the good shepherd...And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd."

Yes, this is what it takes to be a Christian, and it always has. To love our enemies: the ones on the outside; and the one on the inside. Because Jesus loves them. Jesus loves us. Jesus loves you. Jesus loves me.

There's a good reason why Psalm 23 sits together with John 10, our Old and New Testament readings. They both speak about comfort and welcome and protection and inclusion, about the Good Shepherd Who cares for us and knows us and looks out for us. But both of these Bible passages have a much wider, much grander, and much more challenging message. The love of God, which we do not control but which we are invited to accept, catches up more than just the good and the faithful and the people like us (at our best). It catches up everyone.

That is what makes both of these Bible passages enormously comforting, and deeply subversive. We are cosseted and confronted by the radical hospitality and forgiveness of God, of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

You don't have to go too far down the headlines to see how enormously important and enormously difficult such a message is in our world today.

What kind of table, what kind of sheepfold, would there need to be to make a place for Israeli and Palestinian; or Israeli and Iranian, today?

What kind of table, what kind of sheepfold, would there need to be to make a place for legally implicated Conservative and Scottish Nationalist and Labour and other political individuals today?

What kind of table, what kind of sheepfold, would there need to be to make a place for egregiously wronged sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses and their families, and the senior staff and lawyers and others who caused those wrongs?

What kind of table, what kind of sheepfold, would there need to be to make a place for those people in your life, past and present, and you, to sit down and eat, and talk and find the place of comfort and protection that each human being needs, the good, the bad, and the indifferent?

How on earth is this going to be possible? Fortunately for us this is God's business. This is the business of the Lord Who is our Shepherd, Who makes it His business to arrange the hard things that we could not possibly manage. Even if you don't want Him to manage it, He's going to manage it. Jesus in love but with firmness is saying to all of us: "Get over yourselves; and let Me deal with Your guilt, anger, pride, shame, fear. It's probably fear." This is the business of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, Who has laid His life down for you. No one took His life from Him; He laid it down of His own accord. To lay it down, and, through the mystery and grace of resurrection, to take it up again.

Our world will surely perish if its inhabitants continue to pursue narrow forms of self-definition, identities based on nation, class, race, gender, politics, religion. The voice of Jesus calls out to all the 'others', as well as to us. It makes us look, uneasily, at what might be our attitudes, practices

and behaviours that keep us safe from the concerns and needs of Christ's other sheep, Christ's other table guests. What is it going to mean for us, as sheep amongst sheep, all in need of new life and community, to surrender ourselves to the care and the wisdom of the Good Shepherd? One flock. One table. One sheep-fold. One Good Shepherd. For us. For all of us.

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

Amen

ⁱ Gary V Simpson, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2*, p436

ⁱⁱ John Bell, *Living with the Psalms*, p21

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, pps 154-156

^{iv} Matthew 5:43