

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (A)

### *Rediscovering the Shepherd*

#### Psalm 23 & John 10: 1-10

I doubt if there's a more familiar passage of Scripture than Psalm 23. It's such a clear expression of confidence and trust in God's care for us. Maybe that's why we so often turn to it at tough times.

We probably read Psalm 23 with John 10 in the back of our minds. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, leading us, caring for us, guarding and protecting us, giving us comfort. But the psalm isn't a Christian composition. Like all the psalms, it's a gift from our Hebrew forebears. So, when we read or sing them, it's helpful to remember the stories that lie behind these poems.

What I like about the psalms is that they embrace all dimensions of human experience and the different facets of our relationship with God. They contain power and passion, misery and joy, lamentation and celebration, anger and tenderness, despair and hope. The psalms encompass the full range of emotion and response to God.

Our journey with God never takes a smooth course, and so it was for the Jewish people. They wrestled with their relationship with God. They longed to live with God as sheep live with a shepherd, but their life was hard. They struggled to believe that this Shepherd was leading them to green pastures, or that goodness and mercy would always follow them. It often seemed that God had deserted them, and they walked away from God. They rushed down what they thought were more promising paths toward more attractive gods, which always led them into trouble. Then they would return to the Lord their God and discover that the One who had called them, hadn't left them, but had remained faithful, even when they were unfaithful. That's why so many of the psalms describe the churning, disruptive experience of being lost and found, judged and forgiven, sent away and brought back. It's all a part of the pathos of people who get scared and lose their way, and of the high drama of God, searching to find the lost sheep. Remembering this, leads me to read Psalm 23 from a different slant.

Here's a picture of our humanity. Of course, we're drawn to the images of green pastures, still waters, and an overflowing cup, because this is what we desire. But like the Hebrews, in all their struggles, our lives are often not like this. 'He makes me lie down in green pastures...' Sheep may be rather brainless creatures, but they never need to be *made* to lie down. We humans so often live our lives as if we're on a treadmill with no stop button, and when we find the green pastures, they are never quite green enough. So, we work harder, strive more, and forget that God only desires to give us what we need.

The psychologist Rollo May observed, 'Humans are the strangest of all of God's creatures, because they run fastest when they have lost their way.' When we're fearful, we respond by running faster, and that leads us to make mistakes and take the wrong course. It happens in church communities. We think we aren't going to survive, so we involve ourselves in frenetic activity. But what this busy activity says, is that we don't really trust the Divine Shepherd; we don't trust the Shepherd to lead us to green pastures and still waters and down the right paths. Something I rediscovered during our various lockdowns over the past few years, and the ageing process reinforces it, is to push the pause button and re-discover who God is and who we are.

I confess to having a problem with this psalm. I don't mind calling the Lord my Shepherd, but I'm not so keen about being called a sheep, simply because sheep aren't particularly smart. They scare easily and run off in all directions, and left to their own devices, they get lost. But then, when I think about it, the psalmist understood human nature. He's saying, 'Sorry people – you've lost your way in your

relationship with the Lord and with each other. Otherwise, why do you keep running so fast? Why do you keep chasing after things that don't really last? Why aren't you willing to put your feet up and be still with the One who wants to lovingly care for you – who wants to renew and refresh you?'

We experience lostness in various ways – lost in our grief and hurts; lost in our shame for things done and left undone; we lose sight of who we were called to be; lose sight of the fact that we're God's beloved children. Maybe that's what Jesus was getting at when he spoke of coming to give people abundant life – life in all its fulness. Abundant life looks different to different people in different places, at different times. But it's always a response to whatever is robbing us from being the people God calls us to be, and living a life that's rooted in the confidence that God is with us and will never leave us. That's what 'Shepherd' means. It's a metaphor for 'God-with-us' – code for God saying, 'I won't leave you and I'll give you what you need deep down. So, you can slow the treadmill down. You can even get off and have a rest. Then I can lead you beside still waters and restore your soul and take you to a place of peace; to a relationship where you're restored and can be who you are meant to be.'

Psalms 23 is about God who longs to be with us always, even as we walk through the darkest valley. That darkness is different for each of us: sickness, the loss of work, uncertainty and anxiety, a fear, pain, or struggle. It's where life seems to be covered in shadows in which nameless terrors lurk. In this place God says, 'I'm present. Don't fear the evil you face. I'm with you. My goodness and mercy shall follow you. In fact, I'll run after you, and I won't let you go.'

This assurance doesn't erase evil, or suffering, or heartache. Nowhere in the Psalms do we find such naivety. That's part of their attractiveness. They are real. They allow us to hurt and grieve and rant. Deathly valleys and enemies still exist, but they shan't destroy God's loving care and goodness for us, and they need not cripple us with fear so that we have to keep frantically running. We can stop and allow ourselves to be sustained and fed by the Shepherd – to be led to an oasis of green, and there, to lie down by restful waters; refreshed for the journey, knowing that God's loving kindness and mercy will pursue us every day of our lives.

*Alister Hendery  
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