

Sunday 21st April 2024 Easter 4

Psalm 23

Acts 4:5-12
John 10:11-18
1 John 3:18 – end
Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd...

My shepherd. I wonder how many of us have first hand experience of a shepherd? Not many, I would suspect.

Maybe second-hand – through TV, radio, books. This psalm, even.

It would be good to be able to say that the modern day equivalent is....

But I'm not sure that there really is a modern day equivalent, for those us who live in towns, or cities, or suburbs, or even on the edge of the green belt. You probably need to live on the hills, or moors or fells to get an idea of just how demanding the life of a shepherd is.

Caring
Providing for
Watching over
Guiding
Tending
Healing
Leading
Rescuing
Guarding...

A combination of teacher, doctor, caterer, and carer... and many more things besides

As a radio commentator put it recently

“Sheep farming is not really a job – it's a vocation. You've got to love the sheep – got to love the way of life to stick at it.”

Dirty, smelly, exhausting work. Not for the faint-hearted.

“I am the Good Shepherd”, says Jesus. I am all these things and more....

So let's listen to that list again, and reflect and recall where we have experienced Jesus as our own Good Shepherd; times where we have known his pastoring....

Caring
Providing for
Watching over
Guiding
Tending
Healing

Leading
Guarding
Rescuing...

[pause]

“I am the Good Shepherd”, says Jesus. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

Maybe we need to add one more action to that list
Rescuing and
...sacrificing

“Sheep farming is not really a job – it’s a vocation. You’ve got to love the sheep...”

Love is costly.

I wonder where love is costly for each of us today?

[pause]

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.**

Food
Rest
Security...
...in body, mind, soul and spirit

I shall not want.

[pause]

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.*

Is this enough?
What else am I chasing after?

[pause]

It is enough

**He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.**

He leads...

Am I following..?

Who am I following?

Am I wandering off?

Am I passively following – Keeping half an eye open? Moving in the same general direction?

Avoiding what I need to?

Am I actively following – sticking close? Trusting? Doing as he calls me to?

[pause]

He leads me in right paths

“Paths of righteousness” some translations have it

Path of right relationship with the shepherd, living in accordance with his will and ways

Food, rest, security...

in body, mind, soul and spirit.....

...are offered and made reality to all within the provision of the shepherd.

But for some, these have to come through the love, care and obedience of the shepherd's followers....

“My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action,” writes St John.

[pause]

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

Life has dark valleys as well as green pastures and still waters.

Trusting the shepherd does not mean that we avoid the dark valleys

Trust is not a magic potion which makes everything ok

Trust is placing ourselves in the shepherd's hands, come what may.
It's knowing that the shepherd is equipped to handle whatever life may bring
The shepherd's rod - used for counting, guiding, rescuing and protecting the sheep
The staff – used for support

Sometimes it's only when everything else – especially our self-sufficiency – is swept aside
that we become aware of the undying commitment and presence of the Shepherd in all that
we face.

When we see him as he is. When the shepherd becomes 'you' and not 'he'.

[pause]

**You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.**

Psalm 23 is attributed to David – the shepherd who was called from the fields to become the
great King of ancient Israel. The one to whom God promised that one of his descendants
would reign for ever.

As the shepherd cares for the sheep, so Jesus, the Lord, the shepherd-King cares for all the
people of God.

And invites us to his feast...
You prepare a table before me

But wait...
in the presence of my enemies;

We are invited to reconciliation with those we have considered to be our enemies.
To offer and receive forgiveness
To enter into peace, healing, wholeness. Shalom.

So – who do we need to forgive? To set free? To be set free from?
Or maybe *what* do we need to let go of? Something which was no-one's 'fault' but has
blighted our life nonetheless
What hurts do we need to seek healing from?

Or is it *ourselves* that we need to forgive?
Is it *ourselves* that we need to be reconciled with?
Because we *are too* this? Or *not enough* that?

[pause]

Jesus – the shepherd King – has made forgiveness and reconciliation and new life available to all who want to accept it

We are invited and welcomed to his feast, where we are richly blessed
Anointing with oil – the sign of God’s blessing - was not just a couple of drop, neatly dripped on to the crown of the head and mopped up with a cloth. Psalm 133 speaks of oil running down from the head on to the shoulders...

We are welcomed to the abundant, reckless generosity of the God who has no limits
To his love, mercy, grace and joy.
We. Are. All. Welcomed.
All.

[pause]

Truly - my cup overflows.

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.**

I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
I will be in the presence of God through his Holy Spirit living within me..
Not just in the green pastures
Not only in the dark valleys
Always

[pause]

Always

Amen