

WALKING WITH GOD

(Psalm 23.1-6)

Introduction

Ten years ago, almost to the week, I spent one of the most intimidating hours of my life. I was in Auckland Castle and I was being interviewed by the Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, for the post of vicar at this church.

Such is the sharpness of Tom Wright's theological mind that I came out of his office completely exhausted just trying to keep up with him. He asked me many questions, some of which I had to ask him to rephrase, because, frankly, I was playing for time.

I have no idea how I got offered the job; I can only assume that the other shortlisted candidate was even more bamboozled than I was!

Five questions out of six, I didn't have a clue what he was going on about. But one question he asked me was absolutely straightforward. And it was this: "If you were to preach your last sermon today," he said, "what would you choose as your Bible text?" And, without hesitation, I replied, "Psalm 23."

He asked me why, and I said "Well, having been in a pastoral role for several years, I like to remind myself that, at the end of the day, it's *the Lord* who is really in charge. Pastors may come and go. But the Lord leads his flock onwards."

"Shepherd" in the Bible

The shepherd theme runs right through the Bible, of course. In Genesis 4 it was Abel, the shepherd, who made an acceptable offering to God.

Moses, who kept a herd himself, talked about his people as being like sheep without a shepherd.

David, who wrote this Psalm, was the model upon whom the whole vision of a shepherd king was built.

Isaiah said, "See, the Sovereign Lord... tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

Jeremiah, prophesied these words; "He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd."

Jesus, in the New Testament, is the *good* shepherd, the *great* shepherd and the *chief* shepherd. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me," he said.

One of the last things he said to Peter was, "Feed my sheep."

And the theme runs all the way through to the book of Revelation, where it says, "Their shepherd will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

So this picture of the shepherd heart of God, possibly more than any other in Scripture, expresses what God's relationship with us is like.

1) The shepherd leads (v1-3)

In the first three verses, David remembers how any shepherd worth his salt leads a flock. In the Bible shepherds led from the front. And even now in those countries they still do. They go out ahead.

They seek out good places for the flock to graze and drink. In the arid and often stony scrubland of the Middle East there isn't all that much of it so you need good local knowledge and to have a feel for the land.

They keep the flock moving forward. They steer them away from danger. They drive away any predator ambitious for an easy lunch.

God does all that for you. He is committed to you. He is committed to nourishing your soul with a healthy spiritual diet. Still waters, green pastures.

He is dedicated to watching over your journey. He is devoted to keeping you on a good path and to gently steer you back when you stray. Your rod and staff comfort me. The rod is to chase away predators and the staff is to steer you back onto the right track when you stray.

Those of you who are leaders – in whatever capacity; home group leaders, worship leaders, children’s leaders, preachers, PCC members – remember that the Shepherd goes out in front.

So you leaders, remember. You go out in front and those you lead follow you. So love God with all your strength. Invest in your relationship with God. Don’t be above menial tasks. Love difficult people. Be real. Say “sorry” when you make mistakes. Be truthful. Don’t make excuses. Those you lead will love you for it.

2) The shepherd comforts (v4)

On Wednesday, Sylvia Wilson took a funeral here and, as is very common at funerals, this psalm featured. Whenever I look out across a congregation of mourners, as I have done often enough now, I notice many facial expressions, but perhaps most typical is a kind of dignified resignation. Death has come. What can you do?

I’m not, generally speaking, enthusiastic for archaic language in church (we worship the *living* God) but I find the King James Version of Psalm 23.4 quite helpful. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

Even though, Yea though, yes though... I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... You see, if you are following the great shepherd, you enter the valley and begin to go through it, able to say something positive.

There need be no sense of dread. It’s not “Oh no, here comes the valley of the shadow of death.” You can say, “yes, though...” If Christ, the chief shepherd walks with you, you can face the worst, even death, able to say, “yes!”

Though I walk **through** the valley of the shadow of death... So it’s not a dead end, it’s not final; you walk through it and you know you are going to come out again.

Though I walk through the **valley** of the shadow of death... The valley is a green place. It’s a place of growth.

I am only able to see it with hindsight, but the greatest blessings in my Christian life have come from the valley, from days of tears and seasons of disappointment - not the mountain tops and spiritual highs.

You can point to times of pain in your life I'm sure. In my life, I think back to an eighteen-month period of financial hardship, when someone I thought was a friend drove me to the edge of a breakdown, and when we had four miscarriages.

I wouldn't have chosen any of that, but it was a season, looking back of profound spiritual growth.

I learned about the blessing of tithing precisely at that time when we didn't have enough to live on. How God provided I'll never know, but he did.

I learned about the power of forgiveness and the healing that brings when I was stabbed in the back.

And I learned about the fellowship of Christ's sufferings when Kathie and I cried bitter tears over the loss of those precious unborn lives.

Yes, though I walk through the valley of the **shadow** of death... It's a shadow, and that means there must be some light. It may be dim, but it's not completely dark.

With the Lord you see it's just a shadow, and there's plenty of light there too.

I heard about a man in London who, on being told by his doctor he was dying, sent out invitations to all his non Christian friends saying, "Come and see how a Christian dies!" There's no place for fear when the Lord's presence is all around. "I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

So it's all right. And the promise is good. "I will dwell in house of the Lord forever." So I don't need to be scared, there's plenty to look forward to.

3) The shepherd anoints (v5-6)

Shepherds in the Bible were not just men living out on the hills, providing for their flocks and throwing stones at wolves. The shepherd, especially with David, became the emblem for the royal line.

And so in v5-6 of this Psalm the shepherd king opens his home to welcome those who follow him. There is a royal welcome, there is a great feast laid out on the table. There's plenty of good red wine brimming over every cup. It's a picture of abundance and prosperity and lavishness. Best of all, the king is there too and his presence gladdens the hearts of everyone gathered.

In ancient eastern culture at a banquet like this it was customary to anoint a guest with fragrant oil as a lotion. God the shepherd king is a God who anoints. As

Pure olive oil poured on your head would shine in the sun speaking of favour and joy and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. And it's wonderful that when you're stale and dry, and spiritually tired the Lord just comes and anoints.

Some of you will probably be feeling that way today. We're all busy. Life is attritional. So if you are jaded or worn out today, say, "I am bone dry, Lord. My prayers are stale. My zeal has cooled. My love for you is tired. Please come and anoint me afresh.

Ending

The Lord is *my* shepherd and he is yours. "I will lack nothing."

I know he will be there for you in life's darkest days. "Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

And I know that he will empower you with the Holy Spirit, if you ask him, for what he calls you to. "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."

Let's stand to pray...