

# THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

*(Psalm 23 and John 10.11-18)*

When I saw that today's talk would be partly based around the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm I thought 'oh great if there is one Psalm in the whole world that people know off by heart and everything to do with it, it's this one!' So what am I going to bring to table that's new?

**Shepherds** - we never really come across them but even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we all know what they do even if we have never met one in the flesh! We can stay in shepherd huts, we can eat shepherd's pie and a very well-known local artist has produced a whole range of paintings and picture around shepherds looking after some very square sheep which we might even have on our own walls at home.

So despite the shift from agricultural to an industrial/hi-tech society shepherds still have quite a high and disproportional profile in society or what might be seemed have positive bias written all over them!

So what is a shepherd and more importantly what is a *good* shepherd? From what I have gleaned over listening to sermons in my Christian life the type of shepherding in the middle east two thousand years ago was different to the shepherding of most sheep particularly lowland sheep in the UK during the last few hundred years.

The shepherd in Jesus' time would be out for prolonged periods with the animals in the wilderness as opposed to animals being kept fenced or walled in and moved around with dogs and quad bikes when required with the shepherd/farmer going home at night. It was a job that didn't allow for any real me-time or bank holidays and weekends (probably still like people today involved in agriculture).

As a whole, shepherds were looked down upon as being the lowest, stupidest and possibly smelliest group of people you would want to have to have dealings with. Yet as Jesus comes towards the end of his ministry, and ultimately his death, he is using the example of a group of

outcasts to describe himself and what he will do for his people, who are the same group of people who were the first people on earth to know of his birth three decades ago! Who said God doesn't use the lowly to achieve his big plans?

In our reading from John's Gospel, Jesus tells us the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I am sure that you are familiar with the Bible image of the sheep gathered in to a stone sheepfold with the shepherd sleeping across the entrance to protect the animals from predators such as wolves possibly lions or other big cats which will involve injury possibly death.

Jesus is saying this is who I am and he is also alluding to his own looming violent death on the cross. He is not the hired hand being paid by the hour who when the big bad wolf appears thinks "stuff that for a game of soldiers" and does a runner. Possibly this may be a reference to the priests, scribes and Pharisees who are in charge of the sheep (as in the people of Israel) who are only in it for themselves and when push comes to shove are happy to collude with Herod and the Romans at the expense of the sheep in their care.

Jesus says 'these are my sheep I know them and they know me and if I need to die for them then that's what I will do.' Jesus then goes on to say there are other sheep and I must bring them into the flock.

How wonderful that two thousand years ago Jesus was saying people like us here today outside the tribe of Israel will be part of that one flock with Jesus as the one shepherd, isn't that incredible and mind blowing?

God's plan was never just for Israel alone and was always for the whole world but as Jesus has continually pointed out, (something we know will propel him to his death at Passover) **Israel** has got it badly wrong and has not been a light to the Gentiles or a good shepherd.

Jesus is saying the **Gentiles** are no longer the enemy which would have went down like a lead balloon in a world filled with suspicion and a desire for revolution over the foreign Gentile rulers.

Jesus makes it clear that he can and will lay down his life for all his sheep. In verse 17-18 Jesus says *"The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."*

By laying down his life at Calvary Jesus will express fully the Father's love for the world. He also makes the Jewish hope of resurrection the personal and specific aim of his **own** work when he says *"I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again."* It also expresses the intimate closeness of the Father and the Son similar to the shepherd and his sheep.

The word 'good' in the Good Shepherd is a Greek word that might also mean *Beautiful*. This doesn't refer to how Jesus looked even with his incredible six pack as seen on most medieval paintings but the innate beauty of his strange, compelling sacrificial love for his followers. Real beauty is not our outward appearance but the loving workings and outpouring of our inner spirit and heart.

What I did not know until researching this talk is that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecy given in Ezekiel 34 which I will read from the Message Bible...

*God, the Master, says: "From now on, I myself am the shepherd. I'm going looking for them. As shepherds go after their flocks when they get scattered, I'm going after my sheep. I'll rescue them from all the places they've been scattered to in the storms. I'll bring them back from foreign peoples, gather them from foreign countries, and bring them back to their home country. I'll feed them on the mountains of Israel, along the streams, among their own people. I'll lead them into lush pasture so they can roam the mountain pastures of Israel, graze at leisure, feed in the rich pastures on the mountains of Israel. And I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I myself will make sure they get plenty of rest. I'll go after the lost, I'll collect the strays, I'll doctor the injured, I'll build up the weak ones and oversee the strong ones so they're not exploited."*

*Therefore, God, the Master, says: "I myself am stepping in and making things right between the plump sheep and the skinny sheep. Because you forced your way with shoulder and rump and butted at all the weaker animals with your horns till you scattered them all over the hills, I'll come in and save my dear flock, no longer let them be pushed around. I'll step in and set things right between one sheep and another."*

*"I'll appoint one shepherd over them all: my servant David. He'll feed them. He'll be their shepherd. And I, God, will be their God. My servant David will be their prince. I, God, have spoken."*

The mention of David is referring to David's messianic line to Jesus not David himself even though we know he also was a shepherd boy.

Once more there is the interweaving of the Old and New Testament, which in case you think I had avoided **it** brings us back to Psalm 23! This Psalm though well-known is only 6 verses long very short by Psalm standards.

I remember as a boy you could buy pottery/ceramic type open books with Psalm 23 (or the Lord's Prayer) on it to possibly put on a grave (I seemed to spend a lot of my childhood walking around graveyards with my grandmother) or just keep on the window ledge of a bedroom as my nan did when she lived with us back in the 60s and 70s.

Within the Psalm there are some wonderful promises, reassurances and advice.

In verse 1 we have to firstly acknowledge that the Lord is OUR shepherd but in V2-3 we see the promise that he will lead us into lush pasture and provide us with access to quiet waters i.e. fulfill our needs but **we have to follow** him.

Pasture means areas of good grazing where we can eat and grow fat (at a time when being fat was a sign of health and wealth!) Sometimes weeds and nettles look green and appealing but they won't make good feeding.

Sheep are generally easily distracted and happy to go their own way particularly if the rest of the flock decide to head off down a ravine. In another parable Jesus talks of the narrow and wide gate which if most of the sheep are going through the wide gate we may be tempted to think that has to be the right way even when Jesus tell us it actually leads to destruction, so we need to follow the Shepherd diligently in the right direction.

Verse 4 is a very reassuring verse as we walk through the valley of death God is with us. Note at NO point does it say we will not face difficult awful horrendous times or death itself.

You often hear people say how can God let this happen or I can't believe in a God that allows X or Y to happen **but the God I believe in says** I gave you a free will but if choose to follow me I WILL STAND BESIDE YOU when you go through the mill; I will be there throughout because I love You more than you will ever know!

Although not popular to talk about in modern times let's not forget the promise of the rod and staff, when we go off piste and astray the shepherd will sometimes use the heavy end of his crook (through life's circumstance and coincidence) to get us back on the path to lush pasture.

Finally, in verse 5-6 it gives the promise of God's blessing and provision for the rest of our lives and in the life to come. Again, this is not a prosperity message but talks about our enemies looking on enviously as God provides for us with our cup overflowing.

What a mighty God we serve! Amen.