

Sunday 3rd May 2020

This Sunday is sometimes referred to as 'Good Shepherd Sunday' so today we will spend a few moments thinking of Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep.

Some opening words based on Psalm 23

You are my shepherd, O God, and I want for nothing
 You rest me in green pastures
and lead me beside still waters,
 you restore and refresh my soul.
You lead me along right paths
 so that even though I walk through the darkest valley
I fear no evil,
 for you are with me,
guiding and comforting me.
 You treat me as an honoured guest;
preparing a table before me
 even in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil
 and my cup of blessing overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy
 shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in your presence for ever.

A Prayer of Adoration and confession

We praise you, O God, for giving shape and meaning to the ancient image of yourself as shepherd through the person of Jesus Christ. In him, your compassion has been eternally revealed, giving your rod and staff the human face of love. Through Jesus' persistence even to death - in seeking and saving the lost - your goodness and mercy has been abundantly experienced. His ongoing life continues to guide and lead us in paths of righteousness. How can we do other than praise and adore you, O God, and listen to Jesus' voice as he calls us to follow him.

And yet, we confess that there are times when we fail to hear and obey his call because our lives are so filled with activities and noise.

Forgive us, O God, for the times when we fail to reach out and accompany those who are going through difficult times; those who feel imprisoned in a valley of shadows and find themselves overwhelmed by life.

 Jesus, good shepherd, help us to take the time and make the space
 to hear your call to us.

The call to reveal your love, compassion and comfort, wherever you need us to bind up the wounds of the victims of today's society.

 Jesus, good shepherd, help us to take the time and make the space
 to hear your call to us.

The call to reveal in tangible and authentic ways, your passion for those who feel powerless to make any changes for good in their lives.

 Jesus, good shepherd, help us to take the time and make the space
 to hear your call to us.

The call to empty ourselves of all that is contrary to your life within us, so that your goodness and mercies are enjoyed not as rewards to be hoarded, but as gifts to be shared.
 In your name, we pray. Amen

Reading: John 10:1-10

Some thoughts

Unlike many of you who may be reading this I was not brought up in an area where sheep and shepherds were on my doorstep. I therefore feel somewhat inadequate when it comes to talking about the ways of these animals and their devoted carers. However, I grew up in a family that regularly attended church and was very familiar with singing the much loved 23rd Psalm, usually to the tune Crimmond. I don't know what it was that attracted me to the psalm even at a young age - maybe that sense of peacefulness and presence of God that I still have when singing or reading this psalm. I don't think this is something peculiar just to me. In its profound simplicity and matchless beauty this psalm has touched the hearts of countless people through the centuries. In this psalm we find

- a poem which children have learned by heart,
- words which have sustained the mature in the perplexities of life,
- and words which have been a peaceful benediction on the lips of the dying.

“The Lord is my shepherd.” Isn't it strange how after all these years – long since Western civilisation abandoned a pastoral way of life, long since children ceased to know where the lamb in supermarket fridges came from, long since any first-hand acquaintance with shepherds and sheep – the image of a shepherd still has such deep attraction, such power to comfort and console.”

That power to comfort and console is probably why this is a psalm that many people choose to be read or sung when they need the reassurance of God's presence with them, especially when walking through deep and dark valleys. The psalmist puts into words his feelings about this God whose care extends through all of life's events, which leads to a serenity of spirit - peace of mind, and, in all dangers, strength. There is a deepening of an awareness that God directs our lives along a path that leads to fulfilment.

When I was growing up my closest and dearest relations were my great auntie Dorothy and great uncle Ernie. They were a devout Christian couple and their lives were a daily testimony to their faith and trust in God and Christ their Saviour. Uncle Ernie died first when I was probably only in my early teens. In the latter part of his life he was crippled with arthritis and I can remember him telling me, even though I was still quite young, that he was quite ready to die and he looked forward to his new resurrection body which would know no pain. Some years later when I was talking one day with Auntie Dorothy she told me how she and uncle used to read Psalm 23 together each night when they went to bed. And she said to me, “You know what he's waiting for me in the next field.” When I looked a little puzzled she went on to tell me that as they recited the 23rd psalm every night before going to sleep, she pictured herself in a beautifully grassed pasture with him waiting for her close by on the other side of a fence that separated them. She said all this with such a deep sense of confidence and peace that I knew that the words of the psalm were reality for her.

Unsurprisingly at both auntie and uncle's funerals we sang The Lord's my Shepherd. As the character of God is imaged in the words of the 23rd psalm, so the character of the shepherd is shown in his priorities – care for the sheep came before care for his

LAIRG CHURCH OF SCOTLAND & ROGART (ST CALLANS) CHURCH OF SCOTLAND
SCO20871 and SCO10035

own life. A special relationship exists between the sheep and the shepherd because the shepherd knows the sheep and they know the shepherd and therefore trust him. The life of the flock is therefore determined by its relationship to the shepherd – in the trust they have for the shepherd to lead them - and in the willingness on the shepherd's part to die for the flock.

The psalmist remembers how often God had prepared a table for him and, acting as a loving Host, had honoured him! On further reflection, he realised that he had been a guest of God all his life, privileged to receive from God's hand blessings in abundance, meat and drink, and joy at many festivals. The fact that he is able to enjoy God's hospitality proves to be itself a means of grace whereby the often bitter sorrows of life can be overcome. We probably don't think of Psalm 23 in relation to hospitality but that is what it is about - God's hospitality - caring, healing, and nourishing lives.

This is the message of today's gospel where Jesus speaks about being the gate for the sheep – providing a place of safety and security for the sheep. He goes on to say that he came that we may have life and have it abundantly. His abundant life in us. In other words, he is the gate of our hearts giving us a sense of enduring peace and security so that, no matter how many dark valleys we traverse in life, there is that core of certainty deep within us assuring us that we are known, loved and cared for.

If you are able to, can I suggest you listen to this different version of the 23rd Psalm by Stuart Townend which you can access in the link below. It is a beautiful song and the photography with it is also stunning.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN4tPkX0MG0>

A Prayer : Seeking God's Peace

Breathe your peace within me, Lord,	stilling the storm,
peace such as only you can give.	calming the roiling waves,
When I fret about tomorrow,	and in place of turmoil bring
when I worry about my loved ones,	tranquillity,
when I question whether I can cope,	in place of chaos, quietness,
when my stomach feels knotted and	in place of a troubled, anxious spirit,
panic rises within me,	rest for my soul beside the still waters.
help me to hear your still small voice,	Amen.
rebuking the wind and waves,	

Benediction

Go, blessed with
the goodness and mercy of God,
the comfort and love of Jesus Christ,
the insight and guidance of the Holy Spirit. AMEN