

## Journey with the Shepherd

Texts: Psalm 23, John 10:22-23

When one of my former piano teachers turned up for his first lecture at Oxford, he saw there was a gramophone player set up at the front of the lecture theatre. When the Regius Professor of Music came in, he surveyed the class, and enquired of them in his most serious voice: 'Which one of you has never heard Bach's St. Matthew Passion?' My teacher sheepishly put his hand up, together with a few others. He fully expected a telling off for being an ignorant philistine and all that. But, no; the Regius professor broke into a broad smile and said to these select few, 'You lucky boys; you are the only ones who will have the pleasure of listening to it for the very first time today. Enjoy it, because it only happens once.'

That Oxonian professor has a point. In music, as in so much else, familiarity breeds not so much contempt, but inattention. After a piece has been heard many times, it loses its original ability to engage, surprise, and challenge us.

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want. He makes me down to lie In pastures green: he leadeth me the quiet waters by.

These must be among the most familiar words of the Bible to all of us here today. And familiarity breeds inattention. We all think we know it - yeah, yeah, that one about sheep, grass and water; we know all that. Very homely and pastoral. But let's move on to something more interesting.

That was where I started when I first looked at the texts for today. I was about to settle for the fanfare from Revelation when it struck me that I shouldn't pass over familiar texts too easily. I decided to take a fresh look at Psalm 23.

The poem opens with words of quiet confidence:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

These are very familiar words to us. But they would have presented quite a shock to their original audience. The shock comes from the little word 'my'. By the time this psalm was written, there had already been a long tradition of referring to God as the nation's shepherd. But that's the point, God was *the nation's* shepherd. No one had ever referred to God as *my* shepherd before. To the first audience of this psalm, such personal familiarity with God would have sounded at least presumptuous, if not blasphemous.

“The Lord is *my* shepherd.” In my fresh look at Psalm 23, I was challenged to stop and ponder by the very first verse. It is easy to sink into a kind of corporate religion in which we simply borrow god from the church we belong to. The church worships god, I go to church, so I have a relationship with god. Psalm 23 challenges us to go beyond that - do I know God personally. Our reading from John 10 poses exactly the same challenge:

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. (v. 27)

Earlier in the same chapter, Jesus says that he is the one who ‘calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.’ (v. 3) Calling by name - it doesn’t get much more personal than that.

We, the church gathered in Luton Place today, can certainly claim that the Lord is *our* shepherd. But can I, can you, honestly go beyond that and say, with the Psalmist’s confidence, that ‘the Lord is *my* shepherd?’

How did our poet come to the position of such confidence about their relationship with God? Later verses in the poem give us the answer. Think first of verses 3 and 4

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.

Our poet says that God the shepherd leads the sheep ‘in right paths’ and ‘through the darkest valley’. To talk about ‘right paths’ is to imply the existence of multiple paths, only one of which is right. It speaks of having to make choices at confusing junctions where there’re no road signs. Both ‘right paths’ and ‘darkest valley’ speak of the the fear of getting lost. The best commentary comes from the opening of Dante’s *Inferno*. Here’s Longfellow’s translation:

Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.  
Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say  
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,  
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

The poet's confidence in a personal relationship with God was forged under such circumstances. It is important not to have too idyllic a view of Psalm 23 - green grass and quiet waters and all that. At the heart of the psalm are confusing choices and dark valleys. It is through such experience that we learn that the Lord is *my* shepherd.

Indeed, even the green grass and quiet waters of verses 1 and 2 make a similar point. Every living sheep knows that feeding time is when you get eaten! We can easily see a reference to this in verse 5:

You prepare a table before me *in the presence of my enemies*.

Through many a scare and close encounter with predators at feeding time, the sheep have learnt that while the shepherd watches, they can indeed relax and enjoy green grass and quiet waters.

Do we want to be able to assert confidently that 'the Lord is *my* shepherd?' Then we must not be afraid to face the confusion of having to choose between many uncertain paths, to go down dark valleys, and to feed in the presence of danger. It is on such parts of our journey that we forge and refine our confidence in having a God who is *my* shepherd.

I said 'journey' there. It is very important to realise that there is nothing static about this Psalm. It is shot through with references to journeying. In verses 3 and 4, the journeying is explicit - right *paths* and *walking through* dark valleys. But the journeying motif is there right from the very beginning:

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.

'Green pastures' translates Hebrew terms denoting fresh grass, which is very rare in Palestine - grass doesn't stay green very long after sprouting. To find green grass, you have to keep moving. And notice the plural in 'he leads me besides still waters'. We're going from water hole to water hole - journeying again.

Other references to journeying come in the last verse.

"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."

Notice first that the poet speaks of goodness and mercy 'following' him all the days of his life - so we're talking about a journey. 'Follow' is a limp translation.

'Pursue' is a much better rendering - the Hebrew verb is typically used in talking about 'pursuing' one's enemies! The poet speaks of God 'pursuing' us with goodness and mercy. An unusual way of speaking, but, if you think about it, a comforting way of speaking. Time and again through life's journey, we want to shake God off our backs and go our own way, especially if we think we're being led down dark valleys. But the good shepherd will pursue us, yes, pursue us, with pastoral mercy - it is a severe mercy, but mercy nonetheless, because the shepherd knows that the way to grass and water lies through the dark valley.

The final reference to journeying comes right at the end: 'I shall *dwell* in the house of the Lord my whole life long'. Here, the original uses a word that means literally 'I shall *return* to the house of the Lord', with the intention of staying there. So to say 'dwell' is OK, but it loses the implication of 'returning', which again speaks of journeying.

Many scholars think that this psalm was written during the exile of Israel to Babylon. This was indeed a darkest valley for the people of God - far from everything, everywhere and everyone they knew and loved. It was in such circumstances that our poet spoke confidently of God being his shepherd, of being pursued by God's mercy, and of his confidence that he will return to the house of God.

My reading of this psalm is that there is no other way. There is simply no short cut to the point where we can say with our poet, 'The Lord is *my* shepherd, I shall not want.' The path to such a quiet confidence goes via confusing choices and darkest valleys. But when we allow the shepherd to take us on such a journey, and *return* to the house of God, then we can truly say with T. S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration,  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

Let's pray.

Good Shepherd, pursue us with your mercy, so that we may each be able to say, 'The Lord is indeed *my* shepherd.'

(Main text: 1546 words)