

Year C

Psalm 23

Is there any better known Bible passage than Psalm 23? I don't think so. I'm sure that the older generations will have learnt it by heart at school, and the beautiful rhythm of the Authorised Version is unforgettable:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
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.
Thou preparest a table before me in the
presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup
runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for
ever.

Wonderful.... The Psalm is unusual in that it
describes the benefits of God's shepherding
care towards the individual. The shepherd
analogy is a common one in the Ancient Near
East and of course it is found frequently in
the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. But it
always occurs outside of Psalm 23 in the
context of all the people. There is no
specific, personal, individual focus.

The king of Israel or Judah would be
described as the shepherd of Israel. In an

ancient Babylonian text the king introduced himself as; “I am Hammurabi, the shepherd”. The analogy was popular and clearly there were individuals who felt worthy of the ascription and so Psalm 23 stands as a necessary corrective. You may have shepherds but there is really only one Shepherd.

It is said that when at first the Fox saw the Lion he was terribly frightened, and ran away and hid himself in the wood. Next time however he came near the King of Beasts he stopped at a safe distance and watched him pass by. The third time they came near one

another the Fox went straight up to the Lion and passed the time of day with him, asking him how his family were, and when he should have the pleasure of seeing him again; then turning his tail, he parted from the Lion without much ceremony.¹ Hence the expression in modern English - ‘familiarity breeds contempt’.

I wonder if that could apply to our perception of Psalm 23. It’s not that we don’t appreciate it, it’s just that we know it so well that we take it for granted, like the fox with the lion. I hope that isn’t the case and I hope I can

¹ Aesop’s “The Fox and the Lion

inspire you today to re-find the Psalm and love it afresh. There is so much here that a series of sermons would only scratch the surface. I know that, and so I will limit myself today to one or two thoughts that hopefully are helpful.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” - I shall not be in want. Let me turn that the other way round. If the Lord is not my shepherd, then I shall want and want and want until I am worn out and good for nothing. Do you believe that?

Marjorie Holmes very helpfully put it this way in her writings.

“Help me not to put too much stock in possessions, Lord. I want things, sure. But life seems to be a continual round of wanting things -- from the first toys we fight over as children to our thrilled unwrapping of wedding presents to those we buy in our old age. Our concern is not primarily love and friends and pride in what we can do, but things.

Sometimes I'm ashamed of how much I want mere possessions -- things for my husband and the house and the children. Yes, and things for myself, too. And this hunger is enhanced every time I turn on the television

or walk through a shopping mall. My senses are tormented by the dazzling world of things.

Lord, cool these fires of wanting. Help me to realise how futile is this passion for possessions. Because -- and this is what strips my values to the bone -- one of my best friends died today in the very midst of her possessions. She was in the beautiful home she and her husband worked so hard to achieve, the home that was finally furnished the way she wanted it with the best of everything. She was surrounded by the Oriental rugs she was so proud of, the

formal French sofas, the painting, the china and glass, the handsome silver service...She had been snatched away while silently, almost cruelly, THEY remain. Lord, I grieve for my friend. My heart hurts that she had so little time to enjoy the things that she had earned and that meant so much to her. But let me learn something from this loss; that possessions are meant to enhance life, not to become the main focus of living. Help me remember that we come into the world with nothing and we leave with nothing.

Don't let me put too much stock in mere possessions.”

Easier said than done for most of us but the spiritual principal behind it all is stark and challenging. If the Lord is not our shepherd, we will want. Where are we to find our satisfaction if it is not in God himself, our shepherd? This is countercultural in our age. We are encouraged to aspire to a better standard of living which will enable us to enjoy great comfort and maybe even luxury. The influence of the culture is so powerful that it can grip a person and drive him or her. The compulsion to want and accumulate can destroy relationships and hopes; it's that strong.

The answer: “The Lord is my Shepherd”.

Martin Luther wrote: “I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess.”²

If the Lord is our Shepherd we shall not want even in the darkest place - for that’s the test, isn’t it? How often have you felt that you’re all alone? There will have been times, most likely associated with illness and death, but not exclusively so, when you will have felt that you were entirely on your own. This

² (J.H. Merle D’Aubigné, History of the great Reformation of the sixteenth century in Germany, Switzerland, &c., trans. H. White, vol. 4 (New York: RobertCarter, 1846), 183).

was your dark night of the soul; your darkest valley. God himself experienced this abandonment as the Son cried from the Cross; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The Lord, your Shepherd, knows, and so he will not let your foot slip.

Campbell Morgan, the famous minister of Westminster Chapel in London, was one of 150 young men who sought entrance to the Wesleyan ministry in 1888. He passed the doctrinal examinations, but then faced the trial sermon. In a cavernous auditorium that could seat more than 1,000 sat three ministers and 75 others who came to listen.

When Morgan stepped into the pulpit, the vast room and the searching, critical eyes caught him up short. Two weeks later Morgan's name appeared among the 105 REJECTED for the ministry that year.

Jill Morgan, his daughter-in-law, wrote in her book, *A Man of the Word*, "He wired to his father the one word, 'Rejected,' and sat down to write in his diary: 'Very dark everything seems. Still, He knoweth best.' Quickly came the reply: 'Rejected on earth. Accepted in heaven. Dad.'"

In later years, Morgan said: "God said to me, in the weeks of loneliness and darkness that

followed, 'I want you to cease making plans for yourself, and let Me plan your life.

It is true: The Lord's our Shepherd, we will not be in want. May we trust him alone and nothing else. Amen.