

21 July 2024 St. Brandon's

Psalm 23; Ephesians 2: 11-end; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-end

One of many things I appreciate in our worship is that we say a psalm together each Sunday. So for once, I'm going to preach about today's, the best known of all 150. Psalms, the hymn book of the church throughout the ages and long before that, 'The Book of Praises' for the Hebrews, the people of Yahweh, their God.

Psalms are essentially *communal* texts before *personal* ones. Walter Brueggemann, key theologian of the Psalms in recent years, says:

The use of the psalms in every age is for times when the most raw and human issues are in play.

That's why they have always been read and sung, why Jesus knew and quoted them, why monastic orders place them at the heart of their daily worship, why there are psalms allocated for every day of the year in our Anglican worship. All human life is here, these words speak to us today.

This morning, I want to relate verses from this psalm to Jesus, and to the reality of our own lives, and I'll include some pictures from our pilgrimage to Israel last year.

Shepherds, in at the very start of the Jesus story, first to be told the good news and visit him in Bethlehem.

When we visited Bethlehem, we went first to the fields outside the town, our coach met by a 'shepherd boy', carrying a pristine lamb, ready to be photographed with visitors, for a fee.

PIC 1

But as we often hear at Christmas, shepherds were *not* whiter than white upright citizens in Jesus' day, or before. They lived on the margins with their flocks, in all weathers, and were often considered untrustworthy. Further back in the Scriptures we find that watching sheep was the job of the younger boys in the family- like Joseph, 11th of 12 sons, and David, 8th of 8. Or what the runaway Moses had to do when he fled from Egypt to Midian after killing an Egyptian official

The shepherd boy David, when trying to persuade King Saul to let him go out to meet Goliath, tells him:

'Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, ³⁵ I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it.

So let's be clear, shepherding was *not* a romantic or sought-after occupation. And yet... we love seeing new lambs in our fields, or on *Springwatch*, nurtured and protected by their shepherds.

What we see less often is the ongoing battle against predators, weather and disease, the harsh reality for sheep farmers everywhere.

Back in Bethlehem, a newish church by the ancient fields has a domed mosaic roof celebrating shepherds in the Scriptures:

PICS 2,3,4 with a few seconds of each as I continue speaking

It was deeply moving to sing 'While Shepherds watched', in this church and to gather in a dark, cave-like shelter on the hillside and read Luke's account of the angels telling first century shepherds about Jesus' birth, right there where it happened.

Nevertheless, the first point I want to make about Psalm 23 is that we may often read it in a 'rose-tinted' way too, because of the 'churchy' and pastoral images we have of shepherds.

And then, we miss the *contrast* between fallible human shepherds and *God* as our shepherd, indeed Jesus our *good* shepherd – the adjective 'good' really matters because it's unexpected, as in the *Good Samaritan*.

Thus, in Psalm 23, David says, the Lord, my shepherd is like this – what a contrast. Jesus endorses and amplifies this in his great I AM statement- I am the *Good Shepherd*: trustworthy, compassionate and true, as today's gospel revealed '*He had compassion on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*'

PIC 5

This shepherd, leaning on his staff in a Beamish- like living museum in Nazareth, had a motley collection of sheep and goats in the fold, hard to tell apart (but that's another story). He would have gone ahead of the flock, leading not driving them. The sheep choose to follow, for their own good- something for us to note as God's sheep today.

As I read Psalm 23 again, I was particularly struck by two verses which I want to focus on. They form the middle section of the psalm on the readings sheet. Firstly:

v.3 He shall refresh my soul and guide me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

This verse speaks to us of God's influence in our lives, the Holy Spirit guides our decisions and actions, refreshes our weary souls with hope, joy and peace. 'Paths of righteousness' appear throughout Scripture as an image of following God's commandments, rather than 'straying' from this way into disobedience and death. But when we stray, the shepherd rescues us from the predicaments we fall into – God searches us out to bring us back.

He refreshes our souls in this life and beyond: we know that Jesus the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep and save our souls from sin and death. And all this is '**for his name's sake**'.

Living within Christ's flock, following and trusting, will demonstrate who Jesus is, will glorify the name of God.

The next verse is perhaps the most moving of the whole psalm. There's determination in the first word 'Though', or in the old version

'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.'

This is faith in action, trusting in God when 'the rubber hits the road' or the going is really tough. Ian Adams says this:

This psalm takes seriously the reality that life is often demanding. Wilderness and shadow, valley and trouble are experiences faced by us all. But the psalm also suggests that this harsh reality is, in God's care, neither the only truth nor the last word.

PICS 6, 7.

We took several walks through valleys during our pilgrimage. Most memorably here, the Wadi Qelt, through which ran the Roman road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a road Jesus knew well, the setting in fact of his Good Samaritan story.

The route down was steep, the valley walls high and threatening: we needed the well-trodden path and our guide showing the way.

PICS 8,9

It was scorching hot as midday approached; we felt the heat of the sun and contrasting cool shade of the rock.

PIC 10

We came at last to the site of a St George's Greek Orthodox monastery, established since the 5th century beside the stream, an oasis in the arid, rugged landscape. No wild animals in sight, but a tangible sense of threat, nonetheless.

PICS 11,12

We spent an hour down there, in the valley of the shadow, in silence, amidst the awesome surroundings

PIC 13,14

I watched, listened, prayed, while Nick reflected with his sketchpad Thank you Nick for sharing these...

PICS 15, 16,17

And then we walked back up, past crosses which line the road.

PIC 18. Please leave this on until the final slide

It was a memorable walk, an acting out of this psalm, parable for life. Here's Ian Adams again:

Wanderings though a confusing landscape may turn out to be journeys on guided pathways, The agitation of shadows may lead into stillness. The dark valley may in time reveal itself to be a place of restoration.

We headed into Jericho for lunch that day, in a café based in a Bedouin tent – hummus, warm flat bread, fresh vegetables, yoghurt, oranges, dates, melon, cool water. As we sat on low couches sharing this wonderful food, I thought of the psalm again:

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me...

My cup shall be full.

Our cup is full only because we follow the Good Shepherd, knowing he is with us, and we need fear no evil, today or tomorrow, whatever it may hold.

Lets pray – do join in with me if you wish:

PIC 19

Our dearest Lord,
Be thou a bright flame before us,
Be thou a guiding star above us,
Be thou a smooth path beneath us,
Be thou a kindly shepherd before us,
today and evermore. Amen.