

The Shepherd's Psalm

Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, Easter 4, 2024

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The 23rd Psalm probably ranks as one of the best-known portions of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It is read or sung at many funerals – even some that are styled as being ‘non-religious’ ceremonies and many people have it read or sung at their wedding. Even some people who never darken the door of a church have its beautiful words hidden away in the recesses of their minds. A year or so ago I had the sad task of ministering to a family of a 43-year-old man who died after a long battle with cancer. He wasn't a religious man himself and his father, children and brothers did not count themselves as religious people, yet when the moment of death came and I stood with them around his deathbed, his father said quietly to me, ‘Do you think you could give us a few verses of the twenty-third Psalm?’

When our cantor sang it for us this morning, I am sure the words rang home with you as they do with me every time I hear them. Perhaps it is the beautiful symmetry of the poetry or the lure of the imagery that works to offer comfort. There is comfort in the words of this psalm. I wonder why.

When I was taught this psalm as a small child, I had an image in my mind of David the shepherd sitting under a tree strumming his lyre, by a beautiful pool of still water in a verdant green pasture, with his 20 or so snow-white sheep secure in his keeping. In my childish mind I saw myself as one of those sheep and suddenly for me, David with his lyre had become the Lord Jesus with a shepherd's crook, as we sometimes see portrayed in religious art and stained-glass windows. I was safe in his arms – Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon *this* little child.

The Good Shepherd of our Gospel reading today (John 10: 11–18) had become for me the Good Shepherd of this psalm. I don't believe that this childish theology is in error, but now that I am a man I have come to see that life is not always as perfect as this image might have led my young mind to believe. If you think about it, the Psalmist doesn't paint a picture of a perfect world.

The 23rd psalm is ascribed to David. Although there is some debate whether he really was the author, I am happy to accept that he was. We know that his life was certainly *not* one of peace and tranquillity from start to finish. Yes, he was a man blessed by God: the scriptures call him a ‘Man after God's own heart’. Yet David the giant killer, the mighty general and hero of Israel, faced great trials and tribulations throughout his life. King Saul wanted him dead and actively pursued him. David famously fell into sin and became an adulterer and a murderer. He had a child who died shortly after being born. He had an adult son, Absalom, who turned his back on his father out of jealousy, became his enemy and was in the end killed by David's own general, causing David great grief.

No. David's life was by no means a bed of roses. He was a real man, with real life hardships that tore his heart apart and caused him to be in anguish and emotional pain. He lived in a violent world and faced wars and rumours of

wars as we do today. There is an authenticity about David's life, yet he could write:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pasture.
He leads me beside still waters,
He restores my soul.*

You and I know that life is *never* continually peaceful. So often during times of wonder and delight when all seems to be going well, each of us faces trials and tribulations whether they come in the form of family breakdowns, rebellious children, illness, disappointments, poverty, loss of jobs, betrayal, or acts of terrorism such as happened in Sydney this past week ... the list goes on. If we look closely at Psalm 23, we find this is all there too, if we have eyes to see it.

The opening words of tranquillity stick in our minds, but think for a moment about *he restores my soul*. Restoration of the soul implies that the soul needs restoring. It implies difficulty. It implies times of being downhearted, dejected, sad and depressed. The Psalmist declares that our God is a shepherd who *restores* souls. He is one who lifts us out of the doldrums, who brings our souls out of despair into hope. Note that he doesn't say 'He restores my body' or 'He restores my finances'. I take 'soul' to mean our very essence, the 'me-ness' of me.

The Psalmist is writing about himself as a living *soul* rather than focusing on his body-life. He declares that as a *soul* he wants for nothing. It is not hard to find people of faith who are in want in a physical sense. There are those who are hungry, naked and poor in terms of physical possessions; yet they too can proclaim 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. ... He leads me beside still waters, He *restores* my soul.'

Yea tho' I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me.

The Hebrew word that scribes of old interpreted as 'the valley of the shadow of death' means 'the valley of deep shadows'. I guess there is only a nuance of difference between the two. Certainly, approaching death and death itself bring dark shadows to one's life, but death is not the only cause of deep darkness in our life. Life brings its times of darkness. Some of us feel we are surrounded by it and can't see a way forward, but we should never lose sight of the fact that we are the objects of the Lord's protection when crowded around by enemies who would devour us. The Lord's protecting rod is there to ward off our attackers and lead us through the darkness to the light at the end. The truth is that he is with us in the darkness, even if our ability to recognise his presence wanes!

Although it is often called the *Shepherd Psalm*, there is within its short six verses another image – that of the perfect host, the one who sets a table in the presence of our enemies, anoints our head with oil, makes our cup full and finally brings us to dwell with the Lord for ever. In verse 5 the imagery changes:

You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

I am told that during World War II in London this verse was a favourite text at the Holy Eucharist at the height of the bombing. Christian folk gathered around the Lord's table to be spiritually fed as the bombs fell and destruction loomed. Anointing with oil in the Middle East was designed to bring refreshment and/or healing. This verse reminds us that the shepherd of the soul goes the extra mile and provides us with all that is needed to renew us and heal us. It is no wonder that the psalmist wrote that his cup – his lot in life – was overflowing. The Good shepherd, the perfect host, provides for us in every circumstance.

The final verse of the psalm brings the two images of shepherd and host together reminding us that throughout our pilgrimage, the shepherding and care continue until finally we are brought to eternal peace with Him forever.

It is so easy, isn't it, when things are hard, to look at the world around us and think that God has left us. In the past two weeks, we read in our papers about the terrible massacre of innocent people in the Sydney shopping mall, and the teenage boy who attacked and stabbed the Christian bishop while he was preaching. Almost daily we see young people stealing cars, invading homes, attacking the innocent. Within our own families, even those within the church, we often see rebellion and despair. We see marriage breakdowns, children and parents who cannot get along with each other, workers and bosses who can't agree. We see broken friendships and workplace bullying. All this is part of our broken and divided world and is the reality of the world in which we as Christian people are called to live.

It is through this world that the Good Shepherd guides us and walks with us – leading, protecting, and restoring our souls to bring us finally to that place where we will sup with him in his glorious presence until the end of the ages, just as he did for his servant David of old.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.