

Introduction

The Gospel reading for today reminds us of Jesus as shepherd; the one who cares for his sheep and in particular keeps check on the gate to the sheepfold. The shepherd he says knows his sheep and they know him by the sound of his voice.

One of the things about the lock down is the freedom it gives us to do church a little differently and so today instead of focussing on the Gospel we going to think about today's psalm. The musician Bono said of King David, 'if we can believe the chiselling of Michelangelo - he was a rock star, he was the Elvis of the Old Testament'. With his strengths and his weaknesses, and he had a lot of both, 'he was as much a performance artist as he was a politician'. He was a performance artist who wrote songs or as the Bible calls them, Psalms. He wrote songs of all kinds, some upbeat celebrations of God's love for the world and others, more blues-like accounts of the human predicament. Today's psalm is one that consistently hits the top of the charts; Psalm 23 – The Lord is my Shepherd.

Psalm 23

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.

Reflection by Paul Goddard

A Reflection on Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is, arguably, the most often visited of the Psalms. It is set to music in the tune Crimmond; it is often sung or said during a funeral service and it has even been used for the signature tune for a sitcom. But, I wonder, while it is clearly very popular, is it the best understood?

It is only when you sit down and take time to really think about it that you appreciate the meaning of this beautiful Psalm.

The Psalm is in three parts – messages of confidence that 'I will lack nothing; I will fear nothing,' and finally, 'I will be with God.'

In each part, there is a relationship. Firstly, between the sheep and the shepherd, in which the vulnerable and weak sheep are promised plenty, peace and guidance.

Then, the relationship between traveller and companion, where, even at the times of greatest danger and fear, we know we can rely on our companion to draw ever closer to us; his rod and staff becoming symbols of support, strength and stability.

And then, thirdly, the relationship between guest and host, in which we, as the people of God, invited into his loving care, are treated with the greatest kindness and generosity – far more than we could ever expect, or perhaps deserve.

As a music lover, I listened to a few different settings of Psalm 23 while I was preparing this reflection. I found that the majority of settings have three clear parts. John Rutter's setting, for example, has the first part sung brightly, sweetly, comfortingly. The middle section is more dark and menacing, despite the comforting words, but then the first theme returns, rising to a crescendo as we are promised a dwelling place with God in the end. Much the same shape is seen and heard in Howard Goodall's Vicar of Dibley theme, with the middle section, about walking through the Valley of the Shadow of death accompanied by a more forbidding theme, which gives

way to a comforting promise that 'You are with me'. The final section ends with the word 'forever', repeated, by full choir in harmony, then just as the melody, then sopranos and finally, simply a solo treble.

All three parts bring a message of hope and certainty. While there are no promises that life will always be easy for us, there remains the reassurance that God, as Shepherd, Companion and Host, is there for each of us. And by extension and example, especially in these strange and testing times, as we call God our shepherd, so we are called to be shepherds, companions and hosts, too – socially distanced of course, but there for each other, none-the-less.

Gospel Reading

John 10:1-10

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Prayers

Lord Jesus, be our shepherd, lead us, guide us, nourish us.

Lord Jesus, be our shepherd, be the source of our safety.

Lord Jesus, be our shepherd and help us to be shepherds to those around us.

Lord Jesus, be our shepherd and help us to rest and find peace in your presence.

Lord Jesus, be our shepherd, bring calm when the tide is against us.

Lord Jesus, be our shepherd and teach us God's way to live.

Lord Jesus, be our shepherd in these difficult times; be with those who are ill and bring them healing; be with those who are dying and bring them comfort; be with those who are bereaved and let them know your peace.

Lord Jesus, be our shepherd and protect us; let the abundance of your love overflow our hearts, our minds and our world.

Lord Jesus, be the shepherd of all in need. Be the shepherd of those who have put their plans for the future on hold. Be the shepherd of those who serve in our hospitals, care homes, surgeries, pharmacies, supermarkets and shops. Be the shepherd of the most vulnerable, the prisoner and those without homes here and around the world. Be the shepherd of refugees and asylum seekers – that your goodness and mercy will be with them throughout their lives.

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Confession

Let us be mindful of the ways in which we have fallen short of God's hopes for us. We keep silent just for a moment....

May God forgive us

May we forgive each other

May we forgive ourselves.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Final Prayer and Blessing

May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great shepherd of the sheep, make us perfect in every good work to do his will. And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be upon us, and remain with us always. Amen.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Alleluia. Alleluia. Amen.

The Lord is my shepherd

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.

My soul he doth restore again,
and me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness,
e'en for his own name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale,
yet will I fear none ill,
for thou art with me; and thy rod
and staff me comfort still.

My table thou hast furnished
in presence of my foes;
my head thou dost with oil anoint,
and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me;
and in God's house forevermore
my dwelling place shall be.



Francis Rous was born at Halton, Cornwall, in 1579. A lawyer, he became MP for Truro during the reigns of James and of Charles I. He also represented Truro in the Long Parliament and took part against the King and the Bishops. He was appointed a member of the Westminster Assembly; of the High Commission; and of the Triers for examining and licensing candidates for the ministry. He also held other appointments under Cromwell, including that of Provost of Eton College. He died at Acton, Jan. 7, 1659, and was buried in the Chapel of Eton College. He published a book of Psalms in English Meter in 1641 from which our contemporary version has its origin.