

## Psalm 23

Written by Sarah Ashton

May my feet walk in your way Lord, may my hands do your work Lord, may my mind think of you Lord, may my heart be filled with your love Lord and may my mouth speak your words Lord. Amen

Firstly let me introduce myself. Many of you will recognise me as a member of the choir and I am also a member of the lay preaching team here at St Michael's, but the main reason that I am speaking tonight is that along with Sheridan and Steph, I am a bereavement support worker for the church and one of us will have spoken to many of you at a time that is most difficult for you.

I have chosen the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as my topic as it speaks of God's care and comfort for us at all times, even though there may be times when we are not aware of it. It is a Psalm that many of us have heard before and may know it set to music, such as Crimmond (hear first line/verse) or Brother James' Air (hear first line/verse) or maybe you know the Howard Goodall version that the choir will sing later, if you are unsure, I am sure it will ring a bell when we sing it.

This Psalm is attributed to David who spent a lot of time in the wilderness evading capture before becoming the king of Israel. He lived about 1000 years before Jesus, who in the Gospels often talked about shepherds and, in John's Gospel, Jesus even refers to himself as the "Good Shepherd" and the "Door to the Sheepfold"; the significance of these statements depends on us understanding what a shepherd does. Today, we are not really familiar with the work or responsibilities of a shepherd, but David certainly was. In his youth he spent time caring for his father's sheep. It was probably honing his skills as shepherd, protecting his sheep that made him such a good sling shot and led to the demise of Goliath! In Biblical times a shepherd would be with his sheep 24 hours a day. He would know and recognise each one of the flock. It was his responsibility to take his sheep to pasture and in a land that is arid he would need to know where the grass grew and water for drinking could be found. A sheep was a valuable piece of livestock and whether he was minding his own animals or those of his employer, a shepherd would be very aware that the loss of one would be devastating financially.

At night he would light a fire to ward off predators and sleep across the opening of the pen his sheep were in. A shepherd could be away from home for weeks at a time as vast distances were covered.

The first verse of Psalm 23 describes God as a shepherd, so these words give us an image of a God who is there to care for us and the next two verses talk

about him finding green pasture and calm waters. The image is quite idyllic, but we all know that life is not like that all the time, particularly when we have suffered a loss and our emotions are stirred in so many ways. Even when times are tough, when we ignore God or reject him, his love is still there for us. We only have to listen and wait, and we will receive his guidance along the right path.

V4 talks about walking through the darkest valley, and that is what grief is like, it takes over every aspect of our life, but with our faith in God we must not despair, as He has his rod and staff to protect and guide us. The rod was like a club for attacking wild animals; the staff was the shepherd's crook that we can visualise and was used to guide and rescue sheep. With God's protection we can move through the darkest times safely and come out of the shadows into the light.

All three of the poems that have been included in our service this evening talk about moving through the grief to a more constructive and positive way of thinking and feeling, without denying or diminishing our loss. This is God taking us through the valley of the shadow of death. Grief is a natural emotion and it affects us all in different ways and sometimes when we least expect it. Our grief is an expression of our love for the person who has died. It doesn't leave us, it becomes less raw; those we have loved and lost don't leave us. The last lines of *The Existence of Love* (Marjorie Pizer) say  
"I am learning to look at your life again  
Instead of your death and your departing."

It is only natural that we feel pain when someone close dies, but when we focus on our pain we lose sight of the life of the departed; we know what we are missing and are not able to appreciate what we have had. The main part of the poem *Turn again to Life* (Mary Lee Hall) says:

"For my sake - turn again to life and smile,  
Nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do  
Something to comfort other hearts than thine.  
Complete those unfinished tasks of mine  
And I, perchance, may therein comfort you."

Psalm 23 also moves on from the Valley of the Shadow of Death to the blessings that God pours out for us in v 5. We have a bountiful host who can provide for our every need; He sets a table with a feast that can be eaten in comfort knowing that you are protected from your enemies. We are treated like honoured guests and our heads are anointed with oil. This was a sign of respect for the most important people. This bounty is followed by the reassurance in v6 that we can experience God's Goodness and love for ever.

It is a short psalm but it packs a punch. It is reassuring of God's love at all times, and whilst it acknowledges that some of those times will not be easy it gives us hope for the future.

To finish, I'd like to read the Psalm as translated from the original Hebrew by Robert Alter, professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California:

The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.  
In grass meadows He makes me lie down,  
by quiet waters guides me.  
My life He brings back.  
He leads me on pathways of justice  
for His name's sake.  
Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow,  
I fear no harm,  
for You are with me.  
Your rod and Your staff—  
it is they that console me.  
You set out a table before me  
in the face of my foes.  
You moisten my head with oil,  
my cup overflows.  
Let but goodness and kindness pursue me  
all the days of my life.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
for many long days.