

Psalm 23- 8.00 am

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen

Today I'm preaching on psalm 23 which you can find on page 166 in the green books.

Psalm 23 is probably the most well known psalm there is, it is on a par with the Lord's prayer in that millions of people know it and can probably recite it off by heart, and like the Lord's prayer is full of deep meaning.

This psalm has probably comforted more people over the centuries than any other written work, it has consoled political prisoners and those who have been falsely imprisoned, it has certainly helped the sick and dying, and in many cases has been the last words people have heard or spoken.

It is often used in funeral services chosen by people who, while they may not be particularly religious themselves, nevertheless get comfort from it in their grief.

The first line of the first verse reads, "The Lord is my shepherd"

The first mention of God being a shepherd appears in Genesis chapter 48 verse 15, the last reference is in Revelation chapter 7 verse 17, and of course we have that beautiful declaration of Jesus when he said, as recorded in St John's gospel chapter 10 verse 14, "I am the good shepherd".

And if you remember, when Moses said to God, after God had told him to go to the Israelites in Egypt, "Who shall I say sent me" God replied, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you". You can find that in Exodus chapter 3.

So in that short sentence of Jesus as recorded by John, Jesus has declared himself to be God the Good Shepherd.

So from the very beginning to the very end our Lord has been, and will always be, our Good Shepherd.

Psalm 23 is attributed to King David, who affirmed that God was his shepherd, and David would know all about shepherds because he was a shepherd before he became king.

Now shepherds in David's time, and indeed even today in the Middle East, had an additional role to shepherds in this country.

In the Middle East shepherds had to find grazing for their sheep in a landscape where grazing is very scarce, and where they would go very long distances to find it.

Also they had to defend their sheep from wild animals, and as a result sheep became totally dependant on the shepherd which had learnt to follow the shepherd wherever he went.

So the analogy of God being our shepherd is a perfect analogy because God, like the shepherd of sheep cares for all our needs, providing we, like the sheep, follow him.

Now it has long since been my experience that while I may not be able to see God actively in my life in the present time nevertheless in retrospect I can.

For example, I can now see clearly the activity of God in my life when I was apprenticed into a heavy goods vehicle factory, which I loved.

And of course when God introduced me to Jill a blessing beyond my wildest dreams, and of course when our three children arrived, and then when I was thinking of retirement the opportunity to be ordained and to serve in the church.

For those same sort of reasons I think that David wrote this psalm when he was king and when, like me, was looking back to his younger adult life and in retrospect was seeing God active in his life,

And he would probably say that one such time that he realised that God was with him was when he was a shepherd and where he learnt to care for his sheep a lesson he took with him when he was king looking after his people, and certainly another was when Samuel anointed him to be the next king of Israel.

And now looking back on his life he realises that his life had been a blessing to him, and his first verse reflects his experience of life when he wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.

Verse 2 reads, “He makes me lie down in green pastures”. Just recently we have all been seeing pictures on our televisions of the dreadful famines in North Africa, the landscape they are travelling in is barren desert with no signs of water what so ever. For these people to be given by God green pastures would be for them like heaven on earth.

The significance of verse 2 for people in the Middle East where the temperature reaches 50 degrees in the summer time cannot be over emphasised because here David is expressing the infinite extent of God's provision when David said, “I shall not want”

And then, from verse 2, he continues to list the blessings he has received from God, but the writing is again reminiscent of an older man speaking about his past life.

In verse 3 he is aware that while he may be middle aged or even older nevertheless he is young at heart because God refreshes his soul.

And although his work was done he was still following God and therefore God continued to comfort him.

And in that there is a lesson for us, because while we are still here we have to remain steadfast in our faith in Christ right to the end of our lives, as St Paul wrote, we must finish the race.

The first part of verse 4 reads, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”.

This speaks of a dark and dismal valley full of unspeakable terrors and dangers, and I'm sure that some people feel like that not only in their lives but also when they approach death.

But that is not my experience with Christ in my life nor is it my experience of people of faith who are dying.

On the contrary their lives have been a joy in the Lord and they do not fear evil and are an inspiration to us all.

That doesn't mean of course that they don't have bad days, of course they do, don't we all.

The second part of verse 4 reads, "For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me".

The reason why people of faith do not fear evil is because they know that God the Good Shepherd is always with them.

The rod and the staff are both used by shepherds for guiding and defending their flocks, and God defends us in the same way, and he will also guide us to heaven

Verse 5, "You spread a table before me in the presence of my enemies". Here David expresses his confidence in the Lord, because he knows that Satan is continually at his heels but nevertheless he relaxes in the knowledge that the Lord is with him and therefore the devil is powerless to interfere.

The second part of verse 5 reads, "Thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full.

Of course in David's case his head was anointed with oil by Samuel when Samuel selected him to be the next king of Israel and as a result David lived a full and creative life.

In our case we have been selected by God to be members of Christ's family when we were baptised and as a result we too can lead full and creative lives.

In verse 6 David is asserting that God's loving-kindness and mercy will follow us all our lives if we stay faithful to Christ.

In the second part David is asserting that death cannot separate us from the love of God, which reminds me what St Paul wrote to the Romans.

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

As we sit let us pray;

Lord Jesus we thank you for David and all those of faith who have left us with such beautiful psalms to sing and to reflect on.

Amen