

The Good Shepherd in a time of Covid 19

Ps 23; Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

Today's theme of the Good Shepherd is certainly very relevant for the present days in which we live, especially when it is linked to Ps 23. So I want to use the words of Ps 23, and look particularly at their relevance for these days we are living through.

'The Lord is my Shepherd'. Sheep are some of the most vulnerable, defenceless of animals. They are also not the most intelligent. So, they need a shepherd to guide and protect them. We two-legged creatures, on the other hand, generally have a rather inflated opinion of ourselves. We feel very self-sufficient – 'the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls' in the words of the poem. But this epidemic has reminded us that we are very vulnerable and human life can be very fragile. We have been reminded that we are not the all-sufficient, all-knowing, all-powerful creatures we may think we are.

So like sheep we need a shepherd – we need guidance and help from beyond ourselves. There are different places where we look for that help and guidance – for some, their horoscope; maybe the latest self-improvement book; Aristotle; Capitalism, Marxism. But nothing and no one comes close to the one who is the answer. Jesus knows about how to live life on this earth. He Himself said, 'I am the Way, I am the Truth, I am the Life – I am the way to life and the truth of what life should be. I have come, Jesus said, so that you may have life in all its fulness'.

He can and will lead us into that fulness of life. The question is, 'Will we follow?' We can only really call Him our Shepherd if we are following Him as one of His sheep. The first recorded word of Jesus to Peter were, 'Follow me'. The last recorded words of Jesus to Peter were, 'Follow Me'. We can only experience the benefits of having the Shepherd if we are seeking to follow in His steps. All the wonderful promises contained in Ps 23 are for those who are seeking to walk with Him.

'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want', or in more modern words, 'I have everything I need. Paul writes to the Philippians, 'I have learned to be satisfied with what I have. I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have plenty. I have learnt this secret, so that I am content, whether I have too much or too little. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' From where did Paul write these words? He wrote them from a prison cell; from a situation of long-term lockdown.

The Good Shepherd will provide for His sheep; not necessarily all we want, but certainly all we need. That provision may come from those around us – spiritual, emotional, material provision. Rather like the members of the early church in Acts of whom we read. We shouldn't be too proud to recognise our need, and accept the help of others, especially in these days.

'He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters, He restores my soul.' Sheep receive the renewal and restoration they need from outward resources – water and green pastures. For us, outward things can contribute to our well-being in some measure, but for the full restoration of our souls we need other resources. Most of all we need the peace and contentment that Jesus alone can bring. In a storm-tossed boat on Lake Galilee, with the disciples at the end of their tether, Jesus speaks to the wind and the waves, 'Peace, be still'. Still water may be sufficient for sheep; but we need the one who can bring stillness to the surging waters of our lives.

'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not be afraid for you are with me.' We may well feel that we walk through a valley of dark and threatening shadows at this time. It sometimes feels that we are in the constant presence of a malevolent power. How do we respond? We respond with these ten words, 'I will not be afraid, for You are with me.'

'You are with me'. Not just anybody. You, the Good Shepherd, the Lord of hosts, the Alpha and Omega, the Resurrection and the Life. The one who has passed through the valley of death and emerged alive on the other side. And so, we have nothing to fear as we walk through a dark valley, even the darkness of death itself. **'For You are with me'**.

‘You **are** with me.’ That is Your promise; your guarantee. You are Immanuel – God with us. I heard somewhere that the words ‘I am with you’ appear 365 times in the Bible – one for each day of the year. I wouldn’t be surprised if it is 366, just to cover the leap years as well! You **are** with me. And...

‘You are with **me**’ – even me. And not only when I am good; not only when I am full of faith; not only when I sense Your presence. He is with you and me, unworthy and undeserving as we are. He is with us, not because of anything good in us, but because of His great goodness and mercy. I read of a little boy, who when he was scared at night, would go into his parents’ bedroom. In the darkness he would lie down next to his father and he would say, ‘Father, is your face turned towards me?’ ‘Yes, my son’ the father would reply, ‘my face is turned towards you.’ We too have a Father whose face is turned towards us. ‘**You** are with me’; ‘You **are** with me; You are with **me**.’

‘**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.**’ He prepares a table of plenty – no shortage or rationing here. A table spread, not with physical food, but with spiritual food – the fruit of the Spirit; fruit much in need during these days: love, joy peace, patience, kindness goodness, gentleness, humility, faithfulness, self-control. A smorgasbord of good things prepared for us, available to us and through us by the Spirit of God within us.

‘**Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**’ The word for ‘follow’ has here, more the sense of ‘pursue’. He is the very ‘Hound of Heaven’, who continue to pursue us – never letting us go, never letting us down, never giving up on us.’ We dwell safely in the ‘house of the Lord’; the ‘house’ of His presence – in these days, throughout this earthly life, and in that life beyond, in the very presence of the Good Shepherd.

Amen.