

Easter 4 Year B 2021 (St John's Inverness)

Psalm 23 - we know it so well; perhaps the most popular, certainly the most well-known psalm in the whole psalter. I expect most of you could recite it from memory - probably in the King James Version. In fact we know it so well that it just washes over us and we barely think about what it is saying.

Therefore on this Good Shepherd Sunday, I invite you to spend a few minutes with me, thinking about this much loved, but little thought about psalm. It is a psalm much needed today as we face so many problems in our world - will 'opening up' lead to another wave of viral infection? Will we, our government, world governments, 'face up' to the reality of climate change, perhaps even climate chaos, or will we put off doing something, anything, because of the impossible dream of ever increasing 'growth', until it is too late? Will those who have lost their jobs during the pandemic ever get new ones, or how will we pay for mass unemployment? Will the NHS ever catch up with its backlog of cases? All this on top of our own particular anxieties and problems. In the middle of all this, isn't it wonderful to be able to say 'The Lord is my shepherd'?

The image this conjures up - a young man walking in green fields with a shepherd's crook and with a lamb on his shoulder may be very out of date - more likely to be an older man (or even a woman) riding a quad bike with the lamb in a trailer - but the ideas the image conjures up are totally contemporary.

The good shepherd is someone who has the answers to our anxieties, who gives us a fresh start when we seem to be stuck, he is someone who cares. He loves us. He protects us with skill, devotion, attentiveness. He ensures we have what we need - 'I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters'. When life seems to be a rushing torrent of worries, that thought of being led to still waters, the thought that 'this, too, will pass', to know that the Lord is my shepherd - could we ask for anything more reassuring? And then - 'He guides me along right pathways' - the pathways to eternal life - 'for his name's sake' - because that is the sort of God the Lord is - the sort of God who loves us enough to want to ensure that we are walking towards what is best for us. We meet him, we follow him, here - in word and sacrament, and also in those we meet along the way - friend and neighbour, family member, social worker, teacher, counsellor, doctor, helpful shop assistant -

maybe even a minister - we meet him in all those guided by him, walking alongside us 'along right pathways'. He comes in prayer, in music, in birdsong, in art, in sunset, in the noise of the day and the quiet of the night. The Lord - my shepherd!

And, the psalmist tells us, when we move from green pastures and quiet waters into 'the valley of the shadow of death', there is no need to 'fear evil' because - and here he addresses God directly rather than talking to us - he makes a confession of faith - 'You are with me'. Even in the worst of times we can say that - 'Lord, you are with me'. Even in the middle of an exhausting shift in ICU, a nurse can pause and say 'You are with me'. When a doctor tells you your test results are in and 'it's not good news', 'You are with me'. When a grandchild fails exams, doesn't get the job he/she was after, says his/her marriage is on the rocks - 'You are with me - please be with them'.

We do not know what the future holds - but we know who holds it, we know whose we are. No matter how uphill and rocky the road seems to be, we know we don't walk alone. Not only is he with us, he is ahead of us, leading us to a place of comfort and safety.

And the good shepherd becomes a generous host who not only spreads a table - as he does here this morning - he spreads it 'in the presence of those who trouble me', in the presence of my enemies.

And those enemies might be of our own making - a tendency to snap back, causing hurt; an unwillingness to forgive, causing rifts; the love of bearing a grudge - nursing our wrath to keep it warm, as Robbie Burns puts it - you know, I know, what enemies are about - but in spite of that God spreads a table before us - the good shepherd become the generous host, inviting us into a place of safety and welcome, where we not only know 'no want', but are offered a cup running over - more than enough - enough to be generous to others, to share the love and joy of knowing Jesus with those we walk alongside every day, not in an 'holier than thou' sort of way, but in a 'this is so important, so comforting to me' sort of way - an invitation to join the flock and follow the shepherd sort of way.

Centuries after this psalm was written Jesus told some people 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' On Calvary he looked less like a good shepherd and more like a lost sheep, with nowhere to turn. 'My God, my God,

why have you forsaken me?' The first verse from Psalm 22, a Psalm which turns from despair to praise - Jesus would have known that. 'The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and those who seek the Lord shall praise him'.

We are back with God the generous host who gives us so much to enjoy, to relish - the beauty of the liturgy and the comfort of the sacraments, the companionship of fellow worshippers, the satisfaction of participating in charitable works and the guidance of children, the relief of knowing our sins are forgiven, the opportunity to try again, the inspiration of Scripture, the support of prayer - green pastures, quiet waters, gentle leading, a table spread in the House of the Lord for ever. Amen.