

Psalm 23

Messiah, Gwynedd

April 21, 2024

Acts 4:4-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

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

I am very happy being a Christian. My initial wariness about Christianity is gone, and in its place is a full blown commitment to loving God and wanting to serve God as far as I can. I want to be a follower of Christ, and I can think of no finer individual than Christ to follow. Jesus was the Son of God, whose close relationship with the Father influenced everything he said and did.

We are all children of God. Now, we are many other things besides, and in today's gospel reading we learn that we are also sheep. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd". It's one of many "I am" sayings in the fourth gospel. All of them address the question, "who is Jesus?" They help us to identify Jesus as being both human and the son of God. The "I am" sayings are all relational. They are all about the relationship between Jesus and his followers.

"I am the good shepherd", says Jesus. Not all shepherds are good: the ones who are only in it for the money run away when danger comes. The good shepherd, on the other hand, has a love and care for the flock. More than that, the good shepherd is prepared to lay down his life for the sheep. That's exactly what Jesus did, in submitting to the judgement of the world and being crucified for it. A shepherd may have the heart of a lion, but against the powers of this world he is effectively defenseless.

Fortunately, death did not take away our shepherd forever, because Jesus came back from the dead, surprising everyone except those who had been listening closely to his teachings. He remains our good shepherd today, and the "I am" sayings are an echo of what God said to Moses, when Moses asked for God's name. God said, "I am who I am".

If God is "I am", then who are we? We are the sheep, although I know it isn't very inspiring to think of ourselves that way. Sheep aren't the brightest of animals. They tend to move together in the same direction, whether it is the right one or not. When they fall over, sometimes they can't get back up again. Come to think of it, we are more like sheep than we realize.

Of course, Jesus was using sheep and shepherds as metaphors because in those days everyone knew what a shepherd was and what sheep were - they were a more familiar sight in the villages and towns of Jesus' day than they are now. Let's not rule out the possibility that Jesus is using the terms ironically. Jesus had a sense of humor, although it was often concealed.

The notion that Jesus is the good shepherd and that we are the sheep is one that will help us to understand the nature of our relationship to God. Jesus is the good

shepherd, the one who has a love and care for the sheep. I hope that as sheep we are able to return that love, but note that this is not a relationship of equals. We are not equivalent to God. The relationship is one of *dependence* - based on the sheep's need for providence, protection and guidance.

Which brings us to psalm 23, which spells out in a concise way what God is doing for us. It was probably written by King David, who was once a shepherd, and later as king became shepherd to the flock of Israel. The 23rd psalm has these famous opening lines, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want". God, who is our shepherd, provides and cares for us. What he gives us are the essential gifts: love, community, eucharist. There are two facets of God in the psalm: one is the shepherd, and the other is the host.

The shepherd is the one who "makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters", who "revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake." The Lord not only revives my soul, but like a good shepherd he guides me along the right path - that is, if I *want* to be guided. My pride makes me resist his guidance. However, where Jesus is concerned, being a sheep can be a good thing, provided I remember that I am not as smart as I think I am.

The other facet of God which is revealed in the psalm is that of host. In the verse, "You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me", God is the host who invites us to sit and eat. God is the God of hospitality. It is appropriate that we keep this image in our minds and remember how, on the eve of the Passover, Jesus met for a last supper with his disciples. He spread out a table for his friends and prepared for them a Eucharist, which he instructed them to continue as a permanent memorial to him. He did this in the presence of enemies outside (and one within).

The final words of the psalm are these: "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever". As someone who has, until recently, led a peripatetic existence, these words have a special resonance. The psalm concludes with a promise of "home". There is a home which awaits us all, built for eternity, to which we are being led by our shepherd Jesus. The psalm has described this home to us, and our hearts recognize it immediately.

Before we arrive, we will have walked some distance, and have faced dangers from without and hunger from within. We will have followed our shepherd to pastures new, to graze and rebuild our strength. We will have heard his voice calling our name, and know that our wellbeing is his chief concern. Jesus knows you - in fact he knows you better than you know yourself. And we know him, through prayer, through Scripture, through the example and witness of others, and through worship.

I doubt there is a more restful and peaceful poem in the whole of the Bible as the 23rd psalm. Learn it by heart. Meditate on each line. Recite it when you are troubled or anxious. Read it slowly before bed tonight - let its words still your mind and revive your soul. Jesus, our true shepherd, is with us, to guide and revive us, and lead us home, where we will "dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

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

Father David Beresford