

Sermon The Lord Shepherds us 17.04.16
Psalm 23 John 10:22-30 Julian Templeton
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The question 'Who wrote the psalms?' will receive a different answer depending on whom you ask. The answer from tradition is: David wrote the psalms. The answer from a typical Old Testament scholar would probably be: it depends which psalm you are referring to. There are many different types of psalms, and David could not have written some of them unless he had achieved the ability to time-travel. For example Psalm 137 begins "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down, there we wept when we remembered Zion." This psalm almost certainly arises directly out of the experience of the forced exile of the Israelites in Babylon in 586 BC, 400 years after David had died. However, there are other psalms that would seem very likely to have been written by David, and the 23rd Psalm beginning, "The Lord is my Shepherd" is one of these.

The innovation of Israelite religion was that instead of worshipping many gods, the early Israelites from Abraham onwards worshipped *one God: the Lord*. This practice of rejecting polytheism for monotheism created a quandary for the worshipper, summed up by Moses's question when he was first encountered by the Lord at the burning bush:

'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them.' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. That is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent you.' (Ex. 3:13)

The problem the early Israelites had is that the Lord's self-designation 'I AM WHO I AM' told them nothing about the

Lord whatever. And this was something of a problem, because back in Egypt you had a goddess for fertility and a god for strength; in other words, you had gods and goddesses for specific things you wanted, and everyone knew where they stood.

It is not very different today. Leicester City Football Club supporters place their trust in Jamie Vardy, and during this season their devotion has been rewarded. Some women of a certain age still hold a special place in their hearts for Elvis Presley, still listen to his music, and some of the more devoted go on Elvis pilgrimages (proving that you don't have to have been resurrected to inspire religious devotion)! Some young people today exhibit that same intensity of devotion for Justin Bieber or Taylor Swift. You know where you stand with your present-day gods and goddesses: they deliver the goals or the music, and their devotees and fans are kept happy.

But a God who calls himself, 'I AM', whom you cannot see; there we have a problem because humans naturally ask the question: what is this I AM God like? What qualities does he have that make him trustworthy? It is the brilliance of David, we assume, in writing the 23rd Psalm to have taken what would have been a readily recognisable role, that of the *shepherd*, and used the relationship of the shepherd to the sheep as a *metaphor* for God's relationship with his people.

A metaphor derives its power from taking two different things and applying the qualities of one to the other, and in the so doing brings new insight and understanding into the nature of the thing being compared.

What was the occasion for the writing of this psalm? Was it written while David was out shepherding? Perhaps. I get the

impression from the psalm that David has had a longer experience of life than that of a shepherd boy. I imagine that David looked back on his shepherding experience sometime after he was made King of Israel. Perhaps it was the occasion when he was informed of the seditious actions of his son Absalom. On that occasion one of his own family members threatens David's kingship and kingdom; what should he do? One of the things David might have done was, in a moment of reverie, remember simpler times, when he was a lone shepherd out ranging over the hills followed by his flock of sheep. In a flash of divine inspiration, David realises that what he used to do for the sheep when he was a shepherd is what he and the people need the Lord to do for them. What he and the people of Israel most need is to become one flock with one Shepherd. What they each need to do is utter the statement of trust:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. (23:1)

David and the people of Israel, and even urban-dwellers like you and I today, can relate to the simple but profound metaphor. We can say: 'this is what God is like: he cares for me like a shepherd cares for his sheep.' And the manner in which God as shepherd cares for us is, first, to provide for our most basic needs: food and drink:

He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.
(23:2)

When I worked as a shepherd, one of the simple pleasures of the job was when I opened the gate from the paddock in which all the grass had been eaten into the next paddock with fresh long grass. The sheep ran through into that next

paddock with great enthusiasm, some of them frolicked and jumped into the air because they were so happy!

If we trust him, the Lord promises to provide for our most basic needs. And when our basic needs are met, we can then give time to what is just as important: the strengthening of the soul or self. Jesus once said, "No one can live on bread alone but on every word that the Lord speaks." (Matt. 4:4; Dt. 8:3). Those of us who are involved in Foodbanks realise that in giving crisis food we are responding to a genuine basic need: we all need to eat, but some people don't have enough money to buy the food that they and their family need. However, crisis food is addressing the symptom and not the cause of food poverty. To address the cause, or causes, requires many more resources and much more time than most Foodbank volunteers have to give. How much money is enough? What do we spend our money on? What food nourishes us? What is the role of national and local government in supporting the poorer and less independent? And most importantly of all: what are we living for? What gives life purpose and meaning?

Jews and Christians claim that God has given us life. When we acknowledge the life God gives us in thanksgiving and worship we find purpose in life. This acknowledgment of God nourishes the soul, one's inner being, and gives us the strength to face the challenges of life.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
(23:3)

The shepherd guides the sheep. The typical far eastern shepherd would have a small flock, he would know them all by name, and he would lead them from one location to another. In other words, where the shepherd leads, the sheep follow.

And the good shepherd only leads the sheep in places that are the best for them. Jesus picks up on this same idea and imagery when he says:

My own sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. (Jn. 10:27)

Obedience and *trust* are the two main ideas here. Are we obedient to the direction of Christ, the good shepherd? When faced with major choices in life, do we seek his guidance? Do we trust that his purposes for us are good? And do we trust him with our lives no matter what happens? It might seem that trusting God is most difficult when we are severely tested; in fact, those who have been severely tested tell me when all their own resources are exhausted, the only thing left is to do is trust God. It is *when things are going well* that we are most tempted to forget about our need for God. We are called to trust the Lord in *all* circumstances. And there is perhaps no more testing circumstance than when facing death, either the death of one we love, or one's own death:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (23:4)

David's life was threatened many times: by Saul, by his enemies, even at times by his own family. Yet he was able to put his trust in the Lord as his shepherd through very difficult times. Admittedly, the difficult times were sometimes of David's own making. He made mistakes; he abused his power, he was in some ways a flawed person and king. Yet through it all God was with him, guiding him, and was faithful to him. David remained as king over Israel to the end of his life with

God's support. David was saved from those who wanted to do evil to him. And God promises the same with us. We, who are flawed and make our mistakes, are asked to place our trust in God, and when we do so we will be saved from those who would do evil to us. Indeed, we are promised more than this:

You spread a table for me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup it overflows. (23:5)

The metaphor changes here from shepherd and sheep to host/hostess and guest. God is the host; we are the guest—and not just any guest but we get the 'right royal treatment' of an honoured guest: our head is anointed with oil—and despite our enemies God spreads a table with a feast and we are invited to dine.

And there is more! As well as being an honoured guest at God's feast, we are promised God's unfailing love and faithfulness for the whole of our lives:

Surely goodness and unfailing love will follow me all the days of my life, and will dwell in the house of the Lord throughout the years to come. (23:6)

The Lord's goodness and unfailing love followed David all the days of his life; and we who trust in God, as David did, are promised the same. The promise is not that life will proceed smoothly; the promise is that God's goodness and unfailing love will support and strengthen us through the rough and the smooth.

Thanks be to God.