

Fourth Sunday in Lent, 22nd March 2020

“THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD”

(Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41)

We live in very strange and troubled times. How the coming months will develop we can only guess. There is panic: if not in the streets, certainly in the supermarkets! People are more and more isolated from each other. And we wonder whether we, or someone we know, will be infected with COVID-19, and if so, what the outcome will be.

Many Christian believers and others will be asking “Why?” Why is God allowing this to happen?

I am quite surprised that I am unaware of any loud voices claiming that this virus is God’s judgement on our sinful world, or that this proves that Jesus Christ will return on some particular date.

Regarding Christ’s return, the scriptures are clear that it is not for us to try to predict the date, but to live in faith as people who are always ready for Jesus’ return in glory.

Regarding that powerful question “Why?” our Gospel reading points us in the right direction. Sometimes we can see the reason for particular suffering. The prisoner in jail has committed a crime. The marriage has been ruined because of abuse or neglect or unfaithfulness. Obviously there sometimes are choices we make that open us up to particular illnesses: heart disease or lung cancer linked to smoking, for instance.

But even these are not guaranteed results. Suffering is only sometimes the result of particular sins or actions. Often it is simply because we are caught up in the uncertainties and injustices of a world that has gone wrong. The blind man in our Gospel was not being punished for some sin, either before his birth or after his birth. Nor was his blindness some warped punishment for his parents’ sin. In this world, as someone put it, “stuff happens”.

And we can often see God bringing good out of the evil that happens in the world: in the Gospel, Jesus brings sight to the man born blind, and displays more of his glory, and reveals more of who he is and what he is on about. However, the problem of suffering will only be finally resolved in the new creation.

The important thing in these difficult times is to remember that God is still there, that God still cares, that God will still help and support us – even when he doesn’t provide a miraculous solution to our difficulties. And today’s familiar Psalm – Psalm 23 – can provide us with great encouragement in such circumstances. Many of us know it by heart – or at least very well. Perhaps we know it in the Bible or Prayer Book version. Perhaps we know it as a much-loved hymn.

When I was a child I could never understand the first line of that great hymn: “The Lord’s my Shepherd I’ll not want.” If the Lord’s my shepherd, I used to wonder, why wouldn’t I want him?

Later on, of course, I discovered the point. Firstly that there are two statements in that first line. “The Lord’s my shepherd” is the first statement. “I’ll not want” is the second. Nowadays when I sing the hymn, I consciously make a short gap in that very small space between the two halves of that first line, to remind myself of the true message of those words.

And then of course, I learned that “want” referred to *being in want*, lacking the things I need. In fact in the Good News Bible, that first verse is translated: “The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything I need.” That’s not a bad way of putting it!

It is not surprising that the Psalm is so popular. It is full of beautiful pictures, images of peace and comfort, and it brings a message of help and strength and hope. It brings us a picture of a God who is caring and loving, a God who can be **our** shepherd.

Today the image of a shepherd doesn’t connect the way it used to. The stockman with huge numbers of animals is much more the reality today than the shepherd who can actually count his animals, and may even have names for them all.

The stockman doesn’t walk with his sheep: he will be on a horse or a motorbike or in a 4-wheel drive, or perhaps even in a helicopter. Somehow I don’t think “the Lord is my stockman” conveys the same image! In Jesus’ day the shepherd knew his sheep: there was a real relationship, and the sheep recognized his voice. Quite a difference from the stockman in outback Australia! If God is our shepherd, he knows us, he understands us, he cares for us.

And how does he care for us? Remember that Good News translation of the first verse: “I have everything I need.” **Need** is a very important part of the idea. I might have many things that I want, but don’t really need.

I might want a life of good health, full of delightful experiences, and free from problems and illness and sadness. But desirable as these things might be, we **can** live a positive and meaningful life without them, and indeed many people have done so.

There might be people in our lives, loved ones, close ones, whom we believe we could never do without. We feel we need them, we may indeed depend on them. But life doesn’t shelter us from pain and loss and bereavement, and we can learn to live positively without the presence and help of the one on whom we depended. Indeed, aren’t there people **we** know who have triumphed over circumstances of difficulty or sorrow? What we often really need is the strength and grace and wisdom and support to keep going in difficult times.

Can't we also say that it is often in the times of struggle, rather than in times of sunshine and ease, that we grow and develop as people?

Now I'm not saying that the Lord wants us all to have miserable lives so that we can become better people. The Lord is a shepherd, not a tyrannical manipulator or torturer.

So what does this Psalm tell us that the Lord does for us? It tells us that he is **our provider, our guide, our protector, and our companion.**

The Lord is our provider. As a shepherd makes sure that his sheep have access to grass and water, so God provides in different ways for us and our needs. Some time ago I discovered the importance of still waters for sheep. Apparently they have a natural fear of fast flowing water, and so the shepherd will sometimes have to dig a trench out of a running stream where the fresh water can come, but the flow is stopped. Then the sheep will feel safe to drink from it. The shepherd knows what the sheep need, and he provides for those needs.

In the same way, God knows and understands our needs. If we have food and clothes and somewhere to stay, if we have the necessities of life, we can see God providing for us. It might not be caviar and French champagne – if that is your thing! – and we may not live in luxury. But the Lord gives us day by day our daily bread, the things we actually need. He is our provider. And from time to time we hear stories of God enabling people to keep going in situations where they have been deprived of what we would regard as necessities: even then they can see the Lord's provision for them in their need.

The Lord is our guide. As the shepherd leads his sheep to their pastures, so the Lord shows us the way through life: principles to live by, understanding of the right things to do. He gives direction and purpose for life. In the scriptures and in the life of the church we find guidance: not necessarily every detail, not in a way that saves us the need of thinking things through. But we have the way to live, the principles that will help us make good decisions. The Lord guides us through life.

The Lord is our protector. The Psalmist knows that even when his enemies are round about him, he is still secure in the presence of the Lord.

Of course we will still have to face the realities of life as they come to us. But there is a basic security we can have in the midst of our difficulties as we hold our trust in the Lord our protector.

And **the Lord is our companion.** Even when we are passing through the darkest valley, even when we are in the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is there with us. Sometimes it is hard to see that the Lord is there with us. But he **is** with us in the dark times, when it is hard to see him. The opening part of the Psalm tells us that the Lord is with us when life is good: when the

grass is green and the stream flows gently. But he is still there when things are tough.

The challenges are different when life is difficult, as it is for many of us, especially now. When all is well, it is easy to forget God, and fail to realize our need of him. When things are tough, it is hard to feel that he is there, and easy to believe that he has left us.

But in fact, the Lord **is** with us, his sheep, in all kinds of circumstances. He never gives up, never lets us down, even when things get tough.

The Psalmist ends his hymn of faith by expressing his conviction that God's goodness and mercy will follow him **all the days of his life.** But he seems to go even further. He will dwell in the house of the Lord **for ever.** I'm not exactly sure what he meant when he wrote those words: in those days, perhaps a thousand years before Jesus, there was no clear concept of resurrection as we have it in the New Testament. But our Psalmist is certainly convinced that God will be with him, blessing him with his presence for ever. God's promises to his people are eternal.

The Lord is my Shepherd. It is traditionally understood that David wrote this Psalm. In doing so, he made a big jump. It was one thing to acknowledge the Lord as the Shepherd of Israel, his chosen people. It was another thing to individualize it and personalize it: thinking of the Lord as **my** shepherd.

However that is who he is, as we trust in him.

But the shepherd of Israel did an extraordinary thing. He became one of us in the person of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for the sheep. He knows his sheep and they know him. He leads his sheep through life and stays with them, with us, through the tough times. He gives his sheep eternal life: he gives us hope for eternity.

And in these difficult and confusing times, when getting together is hard to do and isolation tests us, it is so important that we continue to trust and follow the Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd. And when we struggle to understand what is happening, let us remember that he is still with us. Let us daily open up the scriptures and consciously seek his presence in prayer. Let us find ways to keep in touch with Christian friends who can encourage us, and take the opportunity to discover books or resources that will help us to grow spiritually.

The Lord is with us here and now in this world with all its struggles. And his promise is that as we keep trusting in Jesus, we shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Amen.

Paul Weaver

