

Fourth Sunday of Easter, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020

**“THE LORD IS MY GOOD SHEPHERD”**

**(Acts 2:42-27; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:1-10; John 10:1-10)**

*(This sermon is a revised version of a sermon  
preached on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2016 at St. Aidan’s West Epping)*

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is sometimes called “Good Shepherd Sunday”. Each year in the three-year cycle of readings, the Gospel is taken from John 10, the chapter in which Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, and which is very much taken up with the implications of what this means.

The first ten verses of the chapter, which form our Gospel for today, do not directly include those famous words: we heard them as our opening scripture sentence. However, in today’s reading Jesus warns against the thief who climbs into the sheepfold, rather than coming in by the gate. He points out that the true shepherd will come in by the gate itself. The real shepherd knows his sheep and they recognize his voice and follow his voice. In Jesus’ time, a shepherd would often stay at the gate of the sheepfold to ensure that the sheep came to no harm, and Jesus changes his image briefly to describe himself as the **gate for the sheep**: he himself is the basis of true security, and yet he is the one who also gives freedom to move and live and find satisfaction. Jesus who is the true gate can be trusted. Jesus who is the true shepherd can be trusted **and** followed by us who are his sheep.

Each year on this “Good Shepherd Sunday”, the Lectionary always includes Psalm 23, which of course describes the Lord as our Shepherd. I guess this selection is no surprise. The Psalm provides beautiful images to describe the implications of having the Lord as our Shepherd.

When I was a hospital chaplain, and was invited to read some scripture to a dying patient, or to a recently bereaved family, this was the passage I most often turned to. When I needed to replace leaflets provided by the Bible Society to give to hospital patients and their families, and others who came into the chapel, the “Shepherd Psalm” leaflet was the one I was most likely to have run out of. Even now when I am asked to choose a passage to be read at a funeral service, I often choose this Psalm, so beautiful and so familiar to such a wide range of people.

When I was a child I could never understand the first line of that great hymn based on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: “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 message of those words.

And then of course, I also 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 with people the way it used to. The stockman with huge numbers of animals is much more the reality in Australia than the shepherd who can actually count his animals, and may even have names for them all. You have to go to other parts of the world to see that sort of shepherd. I have a lovely memory from my visit to Israel of seeing a young shepherd leading his sheep through the countryside not far from Bethlehem. The stockman today 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 the days of Jesus, the shepherd knew his sheep: there was a real relationship, and the sheep recognized his voice. If God is our shepherd, the message is that he knows us, he understands us, he cares for us.

And how does he care for us? Remember that 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.

In these stressful days, this is very relevant. We look forward to more and more restrictions being lifted over coming weeks and months, and even to being able one day to gather together for worship as members of God’s family. But right now life for many of us may still be still lonely,

frustrating, difficult. There are still so many losses we have to put up with. For some of us it is easier than others, but for none of us is it the way we want it to be. And we might even be asking “How long, O Lord?” (Or perhaps “How long, O Scott and Gladys?”)

Life doesn't shelter us from pain and struggle and loss and bereavement. And so there are times when we have to learn to live positively without the presence and help of someone on whom we have depended, or without blessings and advantages which we have previously taken for granted. But then, aren't there people **we** know who have triumphed over circumstances of difficulty or sorrow? Isn't what we often need 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 actually 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. But the Lord also so often brings good out of evil.

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 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 French champagne and caviar (if that is your thing) and we may not live in luxury. Indeed in these times we may well be struggling in different ways. But the Lord gives us day by day our daily bread: what we **actually** need. He is our provider.

**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 way to act and to treat people, 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 been told and shown the way to live, the principles that will help us make good decisions. The Lord guides us through life. And in these days we can be thankful that our country has been provided with leadership that has been helping us to navigate our way through the crisis – provided of course that we pay wise attention to our leaders, as the scriptures encourage us to do.

**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, our illnesses and our handicaps, as we maintain 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. He is with us and will be with us through the COVID-19 virus. 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.

In different circumstances the challenges are different. When all is well, it is easy to forget him, 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. However, my guess is that many believers have experienced unexpected blessings during this time, as well as the expected challenges. For 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 believes that he will dwell in the house of the Lord **for ever.** I'm not exactly sure what he had in mind when he wrote those words: in those days, 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 was making 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, as we have been reminded, 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.

As we trust and follow the Lord Jesus, **our** Good Shepherd, we shall indeed receive those things we need most of all. We shall have his presence, his help, even when life is tough. And his promise is that we shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Amen.

*Paul Weaver*