

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

21st April 2024 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 23

LIVING IN THE SHEPHERD'S LOVE

It has to be, without a doubt, the most well-known, and possibly best loved, part of the Bible, Psalm 23. While many Christians will know other parts like John 3:16, or be able to recite, 'nothing can separate us from God's love', as well as parts of the Christmas and Easter stories, even many very occasional churchgoers will be able to say, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall never be in want'. And in a way, that's a great thing, isn't it? If all someone knows about the Bible is that God wants to be your absolute protector and provider, that is a great place to start. Not surprisingly for me, and I'd be sure for most pastors, when planning a funeral with families who have little or no church involvement, this is the Bible reading people normally request to be used.

What is it then about this reading that makes it so relatable, so comforting, so special for us. Perhaps we love that it gives a simple picture of someone who is stronger than us who is caring for and protecting us. For those who know a bit more about it, I'm sure we love the fact that it was written by King David (and kings were sometimes referred to as shepherds back then), who back as young boy was himself a shepherd. So, we can imagine David, in writing this Psalm, reflecting back on the days when he used to protect and care for his sheep, and then relating this to how God now cares for and protects him. Another layer for us is that we now have Jesus, our Saviour, linking Himself in with this well-loved picture by calling Himself the Good Shepherd; and He shows how good this Shepherd is by saying He even lays down His life for the sheep. There is so much to these six verses of this short Psalm.

What about you? What do think, or picture, or feel, when you read or hear this Psalm? If you can right now take the time to read through it slowly or carefully, or just close your eyes and think about it, and reflect on what this great Psalm means or says to you.

Many people, at least in part, associate Psalm 23 with suffering, approaching death, and life after death. And that's not surprising; it does refer to walking 'through valleys as dark as death', and to the feast in which our cup overflows, and of course ends with, 'I will live forever in your house, LORD.' It is a Psalm which gives people comfort in God's love when they are in hospital, and in particular when they know they will soon be attending that heavenly feast. And that is great, and important, and one of the reasons we love this Psalm so much; it brings us comfort and strength when we go through those dark valleys which it talks about here.

It is a Psalm which relates to hardship, and sickness, and dying, and eternal life, and that is an important part of it. But it is equally about, and this is maybe sometimes overlooked, God both protecting and providing for us in this life, and God leading us on the path He calls us to follow. It is a Psalm about living; Living in the Shepherd's Love. It talks about God's provision for us, in this life now. David says, 'I will never be in need', and the picture of the fields of green grass and peaceful water assure us that God is providing us with all that we need right now. Those pictures are not describing heaven (which I have to admit is how I sometimes see them), but telling us how we can right now trust in God for all we need. It is about this life. The picture of our loving and caring God we have here is as relevant for us when we feel that we are young and fit and could live forever, as it is when we know that God will soon call us home to Him.

The beautiful Stuart Townend song based on this Psalm has the repeating chorus, 'And I will trust in you alone'. And that is a great summary of what it is all about; trusting in God alone, in this life as well as in the life to come. How do we go with that? How do you go with that? How does that relate to you in your life? It doesn't mean that we shouldn't work, we shouldn't save, we

shouldn't plan for the future, we shouldn't be good stewards of what God has given us. Those things are a part of how God leads us to those fields and that water.

But trusting in God alone, is that something we always find it easy to do? Very often we see this Psalm as being about what God does for us, but there is a response from us being called for here also. Are there times when we worry about how things will turn out, to the point where our worry stops us from coming to God and praying to Him, handing those concerns over to Him? Do we find it hard to trust God in giving our time and what we have in service and worship to Him; will we have enough left for ourselves? Do we sometimes act or speak in ways which maybe don't show this trust, but like Abraham and Sarah in working out their own way of getting a son, we sometimes believe that maybe God sometimes needs a little of help? 'I will trust in you alone'. Putting this up as a lense in which to see our attitudes, our words, our actions, our priorities, how do we go?

And keeping on that thought of not just God's actions but also our response, there is a part of this Psalm, tucked away in the middle, which we often maybe just read over; 'you lead me along the right paths'. This is going back to that picture of the shepherd from those times, who each morning lets the sheep out of their pen and they obediently follow him knowing that he is taking them to good food and water, and that he will keep them away from areas where danger is lurking. What a good analogy for God's call to us. The way God calls us to follow; worshipping Him, living in and sharing His love, following His Word and His commandments, is the way of us receiving everything He wants to give us and of being kept safe. The sheep receive all that the shepherd wants to give them when they follow him, and we receive all our Shepherd wants to give us when we walk along His paths.

If you have had anything to do with sheep, you know there is no way that every sheep would have always followed their shepherd, in fact, Jesus even based a parable on their tendency to go off and do their own thing. And we, as the sheep of our Shepherd, are no different, we know that. We go off on our own way. We decide that we can see a better path. We decide that what we think or believe is more important than anyone else, sometimes even God. And I don't know about you, but

I find that so often when things go bad for me, or I get myself into trouble, or I am worrying or stressing about things, as I honestly look at where I am going I find that I am no longer following the Shepherd, but going off on my own way. How does that go for you? This Psalm is a great reminder of God's care and protection for us, but also a call to follow God as our Shepherd; because it is in doing that we can receive all He wants to give to us.

It is a much-loved part of the Bible. A much-loved picture and reminder of all that God's love means for us. And rightly so. And we can thank God for the great gift of this Psalm and the comfort and peace it gives to people and their families at the times they really need this. To have so much comfort in just these six verses is amazing. But it is also a Psalm which reminds us that this provision and care is with us throughout our lives; that it is God's promise to us, a promise which He ultimately fulfilled in sending Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to lay down His life so we can be forgiven. Hear the words of comfort and assurance. Hear the call to follow Him each day so we can receive all He wants to give to us. Know that in being with Him we are living in the Shepherd's love, in this life and in the life to come. Amen.

For Further Discussion/Reflection

- Are there any other Bible verses or passages which often come into your mind, and which give you comfort and peace when you need it most?
- If you can, take the time to read through this Psalm again. What is it saying to you? Try to see if there are any messages for you in there which you normally pass over.
- If possible, look online for images relating to Psalm 23. What do these images say about how the artist interprets and relates to this Psalm? Do any new understandings come to you through these images?
- Think about that phrase, 'I will trust in you', as a key teaching we get from this Psalm. How well can you relate that phrase to your relationship with God? If there are things, worries, etc, which prevent you from trusting in God fully, hand them over to Him.
- Reflect on the call to follow the path of the Shepherd which we have here. How do you go with that? What people, things, attitudes, entice and lead you off that path? Hand these things over to God and His love also.

Pray: thank God for this great teaching of the Lord is My Shepherd, and for all the comfort and peace which it gives to us. Ask God to help us to follow the path He leads us on so that we can live in the Shepherd's love, now and for eternity.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
21.04.2024*