

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

25th April 2021 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

PSALM 23

IN THE LOVE OF THE SHEPHERD

It has been described as a ‘secular icon’; a passage from the Bible which even those who have left their Christian faith, who never had a faith, or who are against faith, can still look to and find comfort and strength when they need it. We sometimes hear it used at non-Christian funerals, where, perhaps along with the Lord’s Prayer, this well-loved Psalm is put into the service in what seems to be a matter of ‘just in case’. With the picture it paints of a strong and loving shepherd, giving his sheep all the green grass and still water they need while at the same time keeping away danger, no wonder that it’s an image which means so much to us especially when we do have faith in the Shepherd it is describing here.

For many of us, knowing the background of this Psalm makes it even more meaningful. We know it is one of many Psalms written by King David, who had been a shepherd boy long before he became king. So, we always look at this Psalm as David comparing the way he used to provide for and protect the sheep in his care, as being the same as the way that God cares for and protects him. To that we can add that in Old Testament times kings were often seen as shepherds, so King David wrote this Psalm when he was the shepherd of the people of Israel. But whereas rulers back then, just like today, weren’t always loving and caring and just, the shepherd boy who became king here gives us a picture of the Shepherd we can always follow in absolute trust.

‘The Lord is my shepherd...’. When we hear those words we roll into them just like rolling back into our own comfortable bed after being away on holidays. Many times our mind may go to images or experiences which are immediately brought back to us by these words. Do you have any thoughts which are immediately evoked when you hear the introduction to Psalm 23?

For me, this Psalm takes me back to my time as pastor at Yirara College in Alice Springs. While I was there, I had the privilege of being involved in the training of an indigenous man, Simon

Dixon, to become a pastor. Simon and I would meet regularly and work together through parts of the Bible which had been translated into Luritja, his first language.

On the day we studied Psalm 23, Simon read it out aloud in Luritja while I followed in my English Bible. As always, when he had finished, he turned to me and said, ‘So, Ingkarta (Pastor), what is this one telling us?’ I explained to him the story of King David, the picture this Psalm gives us of God’s love, and why we take so much comfort from it now.

As he often did, Simon then sat and thought for a few minutes, and then said, ‘Okay, so it’s like this: those sheep, they’re walking through a gorge, and they’re scared because they can see all the dingoes up on the side of the gorge waiting to get them. But then, those sheep, they look up, and in front of them they see the shepherd walking along. So, they’re not scared anymore because they know that the shepherd will protect them from the dingoes and make sure they have enough to eat and drink’. For me, thanks to now Ingkarta Simon, that picture of Jesus leading the sheep safely through the gorge is the one which always comes into my head now when I hear this Psalm.

‘The Lord is my shepherd’. The image or memory for you which may come up could be the funeral of someone close to you, or somebody sharing these words with you at a time when you were sick, worried, or suffering for any reason. With its reference to death or the darkest valley, depending on your translation, it’s a reading which brings us comfort at those times when we need it most, like facing our own death or dealing with the death of others, and it’s right that we use it at those times. God gives us a picture here of His love which never leaves us, even at those times when we feel the weakest and most vulnerable.

What we often overlook though, is that this is also a Psalm which is so much about life; that God provides for us when we are healthy and happy, and that everything we have comes from Him. The talk of green pastures and still waters reminds us that whatever we go through in life, God is providing for us. In verses 5 and 6 it talks about the table of the feast and living in God’s house forever, and we probably often think of both of those things referring to our eternal life in heaven. And that is certainly there, but feasting in God’s love and on all He provides, and celebrating life with

Him, this is for us to experience and live in with Him right now. It's a Psalm which is as much about remembering that we live our lives with God when things are going well, as it is about finding comfort and strength when we turn to God in our hard times.

Any picture or image that we find of the shepherd in Psalm 23 will have Jesus as the Shepherd. That's not surprising, of course, because He puts Himself into that role by saying in our Gospel reading for today: 'I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd gives up his life for his sheep.' (*John 10:11 CEV*) That's what Psalm 23 is talking about; that the Shepherd will do absolutely everything needed to the point of even giving up His life, to protect and care for His sheep. Today we remember ANZAC day, a day when as a nation we remember those who have served our country to protect us and to defend the freedoms we live in today. As we remember and give thanks for all those who have served, who are serving, the families of those who died, and the many who came back either physically or mentally changed forever, we especially remember and thank those service men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice by giving up their lives for their family and our country.

The sacrifice members of our armed forces have made for us gives a good example of what we are told about God's love, but Jesus takes it even further. When He gave up His life for us, as we remembered again just a few weeks ago at Easter, He didn't just do it for His family and friends, or even for those from His own country; He died for everyone. He gave up His life for His enemies; for those who put Him on the cross, for those who jeered Him as He hung dying, for those who still today reject Him. God's response to all those people who rejected His love wasn't to just push them aside or punish them, but to send Jesus to die for them. That's where the Good Shepherd does something that we as people can never do; show love and forgiveness to everyone no matter how often they mistreat us.

And with His giving up His life now also comes our new life; when we die but also right now. New life which means we know we are always forgiven. New life which means we know God will

never abandon us. New life which means that we can see everything we have as coming from God as part of His love.

This love and the new life it brings doesn't take away the dark valleys, the struggles, the doubts, the hardship, the stresses we have. They're a part of life in the world we live in. But it does remind us that our Shepherd is always there to lead us through those things. The peace that people who are facing death find in knowing God's love always amazes me; in their darkest valley they know that He is with them. For us, God wants to give us that same peace, comfort and strength in our lives, every day, whatever we are going through, by leading us along His path so that we can have the life He wants to give us. The path of knowing and following His will, of knowing His love and care, and of knowing there is nothing we now face without Him strongly leading us through.

For me, the image Psalm 23 brings up is of that shepherd leading the sheep through a central Australian gorge, dingoes howling on the side, but the sheep going forward because they know the strength and love of their Shepherd. Whatever image this much-loved Psalm brings up for you it is probably also one of comfort and strength. 'The Lord is my shepherd.' 'Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd"'. God give us the faith and trust to always follow Him as our Shepherd, so we can live the life has for us now, and then also live in His love forever. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

The Lord is My Shepherd

- What images, thoughts or feelings come up for you when you think about Jesus as being your Good Shepherd? Is there a particular experience which causes you to think of this?
- What is the message you take from this Psalm, ie, what is it saying to you?
- If you can do so, compare different Bible versions and the words and images they use in this Psalm. Are there different messages which come out from the words which are used?

He Leads Me In Right Paths

The theme of a shepherd leading, not chasing or pushing, the sheep comes through strongly in this Psalm. As well as leading us to still waters, the shepherd also leads us along the right paths.

- How easy do you find it to follow the shepherd?
- What causes you to go off on your own way? Worry? Temptation? Anger, pride, or greed?
- Give these things which cause you to go away from the Shepherd over to God. Pray for His forgiveness for the times you stray, and ask Him to help you to stay strong in following Him.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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