

The Good Shepherd

Readings: Psalm 23; John chapter 10, verses 11 – 18

Our Gospel reading for today has Jesus saying; “I am the good shepherd”. I want to explore that claim with reference to Psalm 23 which is the best known Psalm of all. *The Lord is my shepherd.*

But first a bit of bush-clearing. We have trouble in identifying with the idea of shepherds simply because they are not part of our everyday experience. Many people have never seen a shepherd in real life unless it be on TV. And there is a greater difficulty. We are not sheep. We are more than mere sheep. We have minds and wills of our own, we have a freedom of choice and action which sheep do not have. Not many people would regard it as a compliment to be labelled a sheep — and so the idea that Jesus is the Good Shepherd does not ring many bells in our experience. Yet, allowing for this, there are important truths in the Shepherd analogy !

I go back to Psalm 23. It pictures God as the good Shepherd and describes two functions of a good shepherd. One is that he provides for his flock. The other is that he protects his flock.

The good shepherd provides for his flock.

Psalm 23 says: “He makes me lie down in green pastures, He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies”. In a countryside which was rugged and wild the shepherd knows the places where the grass is green and edible and spreads out like a table before them. He can identify those places where poisonous weeds grow amongst the grass and he can avoid those places where deadly snakes lie hidden amongst the rocky outcrops. The good Shepherd uses his knowledge and experience to ensure that the flock feeds safely.

The Psalm goes on to say: “He leads me in the right path”. In the hill country of Israel many paths lead to a dead end. Other paths led to the edge of a precipice and that spelt disaster for a flock of sheep who would likely panic and be crushed at the edge of the cliff. The shepherd uses his knowledge of the terrain to avoid this.

So with Jesus. He was truly human. As human He experienced the dangers and difficulties, the trials and temptations entailed in being human. To follow Him is to be provided with the knowledge and awareness of what is good for us.

The good shepherd also protects his flock.

Psalm 23 says: “He leads me beside still waters”. One of the dangers facing any flock was to be caught up in places where the river became a raging torrent. To be caught up in that torrent meant being swept away by the current; the woollen coat of the sheep becomes sodden, its weight dragging it down and drowning becomes inevitable. So the good shepherd ensures his flock drink from still waters.

And then we have those wonderful words; “...even though I walk through a valley of deep, dark shadows, I fear no evil” Palestine is criss-crossed by deep, dark ravines, the perfect hide-out for wild animals and wilder men. The shepherd walked armed with his rod and staff. The staff was used to yank out any animal caught in a thicket; the rod a wooden club used to fend off attack by men or animals.

“Thou anointest my head with oil”. At the end of a long day the shepherd would lead his sheep back to the fold and carefully examine each animal as it entered. If there were any signs of cuts which might turn septic the shepherd would pour oil on the wound. And, having ensured that all were safe the shepherd would lie down at the entrance to the sheepfold, literally becoming the door of the sheep.

Jesus described Himself as the door to the sheepfold. It was the point of entry just as He is the point of entry into the Kingdom of God. It is not fanciful to assume that when Jesus spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd He had Psalm 23 at the back of his mind.

Which brings us to that wonderful closing verse. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me ..." The pity is that the English translation waters down the force of the original text. It ought to read: "Surely goodness and mercy shall **hunt** me all the days of my life". The image is of a hunter pursuing an animal relentlessly and so it is with God.

Jesus said the same thing in His parable of the Lost Sheep. He said that the good shepherd would go out seeking the wayward sheep "until he find". Never would he give up the search.

Francis Thompson wrote a poem about God's never-ceasing search for us although we flee from Him.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind and in the midst of tears

Still with unhurrying chase, and unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
Came on the following Feet, and a Voice above their beat:
'Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.'

God, the good shepherd, never gives up on us.