

## Psalm 23 (NRSV)

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.

Revd Dr Paul Dean reflects on the psalm:

Psalm 23, one of the readings appointed for 22 March 2020 (Mothering Sunday), presents God as a reliable shepherd and a generous host. In these unusual times during the Covid-19 pandemic the psalm contains themes that have a long track record of providing comfort and strength to people in a variety of tough circumstances - hence the popularity of the psalm.

Though male pronouns are used for God, the qualities of reliability, confidence, protection and hospitality do not belong to one particular gender. They are qualities that are good to find in anyone, and by the grace of God they can be found in us. We can certainly say thank you to God for the care of loving parents, and in particular for womankind.

The psalmist encourages a warm confidence in the goodness and love of God. There is a promise of life and peace in God's presence. This is an excellent starting point for prayer, especially at a time when we need to still our hearts and minds and overcome our fears.

At a time when self-isolation is being encouraged, Psalm 23 reminds us that we are not alone, but belong to a larger flock cared for by a loving shepherd. In the days when the psalm was written a shepherd could refer to a king whose role was to protect and rule over a people. In the New Testament Jesus is referred to as a good shepherd (John 10:11) and the rule of God is called the Kingdom of God.

The shepherd leads the flock 'beside still waters' and 'in green pastures.' In the West Bank I have seen Palestinian shepherds walking ahead of a flock that follows them to the next place of refreshment. When the land is arid and supports little vegetation, the skill of the

shepherd in leading the sheep is all the more important. There are hints here of the paradise described in the opening chapters of the Bible, and of God as the life-giver who revives those who follow until they reach the promised rest.

The soul described in verse three can mean the whole living being, not just some part of us. In current circumstances, when some are feeling isolated and alone because social contact is being discouraged, a sense of connection can revive the spirit, for we cannot live by bread alone (or pasta for that matter). Encouragement came to me when a note came through the door from a neighbour saying that they would help if needed. It prompted me to give my phone number to an elderly neighbour so they could ask for help from me. There are ways of being connected even when we are alone. As churches we are still praying, though we cannot meet as usual, and our pastoral leaders will try to keep in touch.

The 'darkest valley', or 'the valley of the shadow of death', can be thought of in different ways. I recall the Wadi Kelt, a deep ravine with a somewhat perilous path that leads down towards Jericho. The darkest valley can stand for any perilous situation we find ourselves in, not necessarily death itself, but every situation that makes one fearful.

The shepherd has a staff to defend the sheep from wild animals. God is a guardian and a guide, leading us by the Spirit, and protecting us. We need to take care here. It is not that prayer will make us less vulnerable to a virus even if we neglect to wash our hands or to follow the chief scientist's advice. Trust in God, however, brings us hope and by the Spirit we are renewed and refreshed to serve one another, sometimes at cost to ourselves, as the life of Christ showed.

Verse 5, 'You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies' is perhaps harder to understand than the psalm so far. Why would we be eating in the presence of enemies? There are three ways I have heard it explained that make sense to me. The first is to think of hospitality as including protection. In the face of encircling dangers, we can know that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:39).

Another way to think of this passage is to see the banquet as a place of reconciliation. I recall an Observer article (7 July 2019) entitled 'War and peas: meet the chefs working together across the divide.' Food can be a reconciler. In current circumstances it may be that we will be called upon to do food shopping for someone who cannot do this for themselves. Perhaps it will be someone we would not normally have helped in this way. Barriers may come down as a result. Neighbours may discover a new sense of belonging together. Let's hope so.

Another way for Christians to think of the banquet in Psalm 23 is the Holy Communion such as we shared last Sunday at the United Church.

The evening service we held before the current shut-down included the baptism of four young Christian men. The mention of anointing makes me think of how we liberally splashed them with water and signed them with the sign of the cross. The joy on their faces as they stood before us caused the congregation to burst into applause. The goodness of God shines through in moments such as those.

If for a while we cannot worship in the normal way, let us remember to hold on to the assurance of God's presence as a good and loving shepherd who guides us through difficult times and holds out to us the promise of goodness and unfailing love. Even in these more restricted times we can hold on to that hope, and let others know that by the grace of God it is there for us all.

Prayer:

Good shepherd, who is like a mother and a father to us,  
thank you for the joy of your presence  
in good times and bad.

May we trust in you  
and by the grace of our Lord Jesus  
and the power of the Holy Spirit  
be filled with hope and joy  
now and always.

Amen.