

## Good Shepherd Sunday Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley,<sup>[a]</sup>

I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup>Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

It's a curious thing – that because the region around Jerusalem and much of the middle east is semi-arid, and because much of the Old Testament is located here, then many of the major figures of the Bible have to work in a way that conforms with the environment. And the domestic animals best suited to this semi-arid environment are sheep. Not pretty, white, fluffy, domesticated sheep, or even black faced Suffolk sheep, but sheep that look a lot like goats, with shorter wool, and horns, and small, sturdy frames. And so, shaped by the environment, many of these key Biblical figures, from Abraham to Moses, to David, were sheep herders. And sheep, and shepherding provide a huge range of biblical imagery, which Jesus then draws on when he calls himself the good shepherd... and which the modern church calls on, when many denominations call their leaders 'pastors'. Indeed, sheep are the most mentioned animal in the Bible, with four hundred references, if we include mention of flocks. And there are a hundred mentions of shepherds as well.

There are, apparently seven main species of sheep, of which domesticated sheep are only one. The wild sheep are to be found in wild, rocky, arid environments. The domesticated ones, bred for their wool, meat and milk therefore have their draw-backs – not quite so apt for survival, not quite so self-sufficient.

Or to be more frank, domestic sheep are quite stupid and cannot really survive without the constant care of a shepherd. They are helpless. Consequently a shepherd in those times was with the sheep day and night, and through those 24 hours would lead them from the sheepfold (a place of relative safety) by known paths to places to pasture, and places to drink. He would lead them to a place they might rest under shade during the middle of the day, and would lead them back to the sheepfold for the night, where he would check the sheep for injuries sustained during the day and bind them.

The shepherd would be equipped with a rod and staff. The rod was basically a club, used to drive off wild animals that attacked the sheep. It was a weapon, kept for protection. And the staff was for guidance of the sheep, like the crook. Between these two basic tools the shepherd offered the sheep safety and guidance. All of this imagery can be found in Psalm 23, which, besides being a powerful meditation of trust in God, also offers us a short manual on shepherding.

Sheep weren't fenced in but free to roam – such is the nature of the land, there is not enough grass to feed the sheep if they remain in the same place. This implies both freedom and danger – the shepherd and the sheep have the freedom of a wide range. On the other hand, the sheep are subject to various risks – straying from the flock, falling down off a cliff, predation. The shepherd needed really to care about the sheep, to be active in thinking about the sheep, looking out for them, and ready to rescue them from their latest daft mishap.

If two flocks mingled as they go for a drink at the water, it was ok. The sheep knew their shepherds and responded to the call of his voice. Sorting the sheep from the goats (which, remember, looked alike) would be simple. The shepherd's sheep simply came at the call of his voice.

In the wild, sheep flock together by picking a leader, usually a senior ram to follow. This keeps the flock together, giving them safety in numbers. On the other hand, if the lead sheep gets lost or in trouble, this could lead the whole flock into danger. The shepherd therefore supplants this leadership – proving to be a wiser, more caring leader than that lead sheep. With some of this background, we can perhaps understand more of the metaphorical richness in the various pastoral allusions throughout the Bible.

The story of the Hebrew people starts with patriarchs who were shepherds. Their greatest king began as a shepherd before becoming a shepherd to his people. Yet he himself saw that the Lord, whom he worshipped, was a shepherd, and he was a sheep, as others were. This reference is not only in psalm 23, but in psalm 100, and a number of other psalms that recognise that ‘we are the sheep of his pasture.’

The problem, though, was that despite the Lord being the shepherd, we, people generally can be as stupid as sheep. Just as sheep seem to have a death wish, so we wander from the good safe paths, into danger. We pick other sheep to be our leaders – sometimes they do fine for a bit, sometimes they are catastrophic. And we fail to recognise that these ‘lead sheep’ are not a patch on the Lord.

Jesus’s incarnation and ministry is therefore just a continuation of this ongoing narrative of shepherding. Jesus announced himself as the good shepherd, the perfectly trustworthy one, who always has the care of his sheep at heart, who never has a day off, who always rescues the stray, who always binds the wounded, who always fights off the predators for those who remain in his flock. His pastoral care is so perfect that he lays down his life for the sheep. This is the point at which the imagery pushes into new dimensions. Jesus lays down his life for the sheep, but also he is the lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice. How can he be both? He can be both because he is fully God and fully man. He can be both because both images are apt, and because while no image can perfectly represent all that God is, two contrasting images can open up more of the breadth of who he is.

How this relates to us is refreshingly obvious. If we take seriously that we are the sheep of his pasture, we must take seriously the humble nature of the comparison. Sheep are daft, and get themselves into all sorts of problems. Humanity can be this slow to learn, too. Our leaders are no better than us, if they are still sheep. But Jesus is a good shepherd and looks after us. He is a different quality of leader entirely. We just need to follow him.

What does following him look like? Let’s not be patronising – I’m sure you know what following Jesus means, but it is surely a worthwhile point to meditate on how closely you keep Jesus in sight in all you think and do. Do you stray, but come back? Do you make decisions with Jesus in mind? This is not meant to limit you, but to free you, to enable you to be *you* without fear, *you* without struggle. Jesus’s shepherding is about your flourishing. It is not another self-help scheme – it is about the vulnerability to accept that we’re not completely ‘got it together’, and need his help – and that he really does care to help. Let’s pray: Lord Jesus, good shepherd, you have come that we may have life and have it to the full. Help us to follow you more closely, and so to have more life, and enable others to have life to the full, too. Amen.