

His sheep

29 4 12

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life;
raise us who trust in him
from death of sin to life of righteousness,
that we may seek those things which are above,
where he reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
one God, now and forever

My text is the opening verse of Psalm 23: **'The Lord is my shepherd'**.

It's good to be back from La Vendée. I bring you fraternal greetings from the folk of All Saints, Puy de Serre. Last Sunday, while I was preaching and celebrating holy communion there, Mark led the service here and the sermon was preached by Gilbert Beaume. I am grateful to both of them for leading the worship in my absence. Gilbert is a retired pasteur de L'Eglise Reformée. The title 'pasteur', used to describe a minister of religion in his Church, nicely illustrates one of the key roles of a clergyman, that of pastor or shepherd, responsible for his people who, in one sense, are regarded as sheep.

The idea of God being our shepherd and us, his people, being **the sheep of his pasture** (Ps 100 v3) is an image that is rooted in the Old Testament. Psalm 23 is

surely the best known example of this idea, and it's a favourite choice as a reading or a hymn at funerals or weddings. Our text, this morning, 'The Lord is my shepherd' is a clear statement of our relationship with Jesus, the good shepherd, (John 10 v11) and this morning, I want to focus briefly on what that psalm tells us about us his sheep.

The first statement about us, his sheep, is extraordinary: 'I shall not be in want.' In a world where not all are well fed or have the basic necessities of life, it is a challenging and exciting prospect. Here, in verse two, the image is clear and unambiguous:

He makes me to lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters

It is an image of peace and tranquillity, of security and calm where there is enough to eat, enough to drink and there is safe lodging. In my experience, born in England after the Second World War, it has always been true for me but I know it is not the experience of all Christians at all times and in all places. Is what is being expressed then a literal truth, a present reality or is it a promise of the life to come when the Kingdom of God is restored?

Verse three provides a double image:

He revives my soul
and guides me along right pathways for his name's sake.

Both are encouraging: the first, the promise of refreshment, of life renewed, life re-energised; the second, the promise of being guided along the right path, that we are not lost, alone, left to wander aimlessly but that our life has purpose and

direction. The second image fits nicely with that of a shepherd guiding and leading his flock. The first is more personal, human, the work of the Holy Spirit encouraging us and empowering us to be and to do.

Verse four is an image of great comfort in the face of the certainty of our eventual, inevitable death:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.

The valley of the shadow of death conjures a picture of the threatening dark, the fear of the unseen, the evil that lurks in the shadow. Die we all must but we will not die alone – Jesus, the good shepherd, our pastor, is with us and his rod, his staff, his shepherd’s crook, is a symbol of the fact that we are guarded against that which might trouble or disturb us.

Verse five seems to be a repetition of the idea of being well fed and cherished:

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;
you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup runneth over.

There is food to eat, wine to drink and as an invited cherished, guest, our hair is perfumed with sweet-smelling oil to denote that we are special and enjoy real status in the eyes of our host. Odd the fact that all our comfort is taking place in the presence of those who trouble us who seek our discomfort. Perhaps the picture of such a feast is a vision of heaven, of the life of the world to come wherein we are finally justified even in the eyes of those who don’t rate us overmuch, who set out to make our lives difficult if not a misery.

And finally to verse six:

Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The psalm comes to a climax with the expectation of a promise to be fulfilled: that the goodness of God and the mercy of God, his kindness and compassion, his love for us is life-long not just at a particular time and in a particular place and that ultimately we will dwell in the house of the Lord – beth el – the place where God is and where we will be with him too. Wonderful or what ?

So next time we hear the word pastor, we can be reminded of Jesus, the good shepherd; that we are indeed the sheep of his pasture; that he loves us, that he knows our name and whatever happens, he will guide us home.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

29th April, 2012

H: Sermon 25: Sheep

