

*Reflection on Psalm 23 – Belair Uniting Church – 15 May 2011*

There are times when as a community our reflection on the word of God looks in an outward direction to the world, as we did last week. There are times when we look in, and address the needs of our community here, or our individual selves. And we need the movement between, to and from, in and out of different perspectives because we are whole when we nurture the individual self and the connections between us, and our community as a whole. Today is a day to look in.

Perhaps because of its lines, yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and, I'll dwell in the house of the Lord forever, Psalm 23 is often read at funerals. It certainly gives great comfort at that moment of farewell and in our grieving.

But should it be confined to being 'the funeral psalm'? Do we miss something of what this poem expresses of life, by hearing it only at the time of death?

For me, this psalm feels like falling backwards into someone's arms. Trusting, surrendering, falling backwards into God. As I read this psalm, I can almost feel myself standing in the shallows of a pool, falling backwards with complete trust that the water will hold me and set me free.

Come stand with me in the water, and fall backwards into God, a shepherd who welcomes us home with open arms and a warm sheltering loving embrace.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, I SHALL NOT WANT

Most often, the Lord as shepherd is shepherd to the flock, the many. Here, God is *my* shepherd, shepherd to the individual, in an expression of intimate relationship.

Jesus knew this intimacy, and he spoke of it, too, and of the importance of the one to God as much as the many: he says ‘Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.’

The Lord is *my* shepherd.

I shall not want. ... I shall trust.

HE MAKES ME LIE DOWN IN GREEN PASTURES;

HE LEADS ME BESIDE STILL WATERS;

HE RESTORES MY SOUL.

God the shepherd provides food, water, shelter for the sheep, preserving physical life.

The life of the soul, too, is restored, revived, strengthened through the spiritual nourishment of stillness. Up here in the hills, with the national park, the trees and space – I wouldn’t mind guessing many of you have had moments when you’ve been able to stop and breathe the air and feel nourished to the depth of your soul?

So much of our daily lives drains our energy, takes the life out of us.

And so wherever we go to be still and breathe – the golf course, the beach, a bath, a walk in the park, a cup of tea – wherever the stillness is, we go there to find life.

HE LEADS ME IN RIGHT PATHS

FOR HIS NAMES’ SAKE.

For a sheep, life depends on a shepherd’s guidance on safe paths.

Right paths: right relationship with God is a central concern of the Old Testament and the people of Israel. Their identity was wrapped up in being the people of God, and so they were striving daily to walk closer with God.

If you read the prophets, there are many calls to Israel to return to right relationship with God. Many answers to questions of how to 'fix' the relationship, how to live out their covenant relationship.

God has told you, O Mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you, but  
To do justice  
And to love kindness,  
And to walk humbly with your God.

For walk humbly, we could say, live rightly, follow right paths for the sake of your God.

And God will lead you – I shall not want. ... I shall trust.

EVEN THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE DARKEST VALLEY ...

The psalms are nothing if they are not real.

In the midst of such positive, affirming statements about life and how to live it, this psalm acknowledges the dark side of life as part of its affirmation of the trust we can have in this intimate relationship.

Dark valleys, troubled times, loss, depression, illness, I could go on.

There are times when life asks a lot of us – asks us for strength we don't have, demands courage we cannot find, wants us to be resilient when we'd prefer to crumble.

But –

I SHALL FEAR NO EVIL

Why?

FOR YOU ARE WITH ME

You are with me

This is the centre of the poem, the statement of ultimate trust on which the whole psalm hangs.

The intimacy, the still quiet assurance, the right relationship we've talked about so far, lead to this falling backwards, letting go, with trust.

You are with me.

YOU PREPARE A TABLE BEFORE ME

And now the celebration!

Among enemies, trouble and darkness, my 'cup' overflows because it is filled with God.

This relationship, this trust, means that even in the midst of indescribable pain, somewhere deep inside I can still smile – my cup runs over.

And this celebration, this table, it's not just for two.

Even though this is quite a personal, intimate psalm of the individual, the community is so much part of who each one of us is, who a person was in Israel, that the feast must be about community. *My* shepherd is the shepherd of *my people*.

SURELY

Of course, certainly ...

This psalm, I may have mentioned it already, is about trust.

These statements are from the heart of someone absolutely certain of God, certain enough to let go of myself and find freedom in the flow of God's Spirit. Can you feel it?

GOODNESS AND KINDNESS SHALL FOLLOW ME

Firstly, the Hebrew word we translate as follow is apparently used in other places as pursue – the shepherd doesn't amble after the lost sheep, he runs, he pursues it with goodness and kindness and brings it home. Secondly, kindness, in Hebrew – hesed. There's my favourite Hebrew word again – hesed, lovingkindness – it's about giving honour to the receiver. Goodness and kindness follow me – pursue me, overrun me – and we might imagine run through us as we show lovingkindness to our neighbours. It's part of our right relationship with God, allowing the fullness of one another's humanity to be honoured. Again, it's about life and how to live it to its fullness.

I SHALL DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD MY WHOLE LIFE LONG  
For the people of Israel, the House of the Lord was the Temple, a place of safety, sanctuary and ultimate closeness to God.  
Also, Jewish people then, and some today I understand, have no concept of life after death. So this confidence in God is about the relationship that exists here, now, in life.

But, for Christians, we live with this notion of the reign of God, which is here, but not yet here. And life in the realm of God transcends this earthly life. So dwelling in the house of the Lord for a Christian person might be more about living out the reign of God that Jesus spoke so much of, and living in hope of the fulfilment of that realm in time to come.

### **Psalm 23 – Bruce Prewer version**

The 23rd Psalm, is, for me, very much about life, - *ah life! Without end, amen.*

*Sarah Agnew, 15 March 2011*