

PSALM 23: GOD CARES

[Chelmsford 7 August 2011 – a summer sermon]

Have you heard the story about a little boy, starting his first term at junior school. He was asked, along with all the other children, to speak for a few moments on ‘*What I want to be when I grow up*’. The little boy stood up and said: “*When I grow up, I’m going to be a lion tamer – I’ll have lots of scary lions who will roar when I get into the cage*”. Suddenly, overcome with the thought of what it might really be like to enter a cage of roaring lions, he added: “*But of course, I’ll have my mummy with me*”.

The truly big question in life is this: Is there anybody there? Is there a ‘mummy’ in the universe? Does it matter to anyone what happens to me? Does my life matter? The message of Psalm 23 is that God cares for us. God is with us. We may not have to face lions – but the odds are that we will encounter other perils on the way. Life can be frightening – but we are not alone.

Look closely at the structure of Psalm 23 and you’ll discover that God’s name only appears twice: once at the beginning and once at the end. The Psalm begins: “**The Lord is my shepherd**”. The Psalm ends: “**And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever**”. And that’s the good news – from the beginning to the end, we are never alone.

This morning we begin a new summer series entitled ‘*Psalms we love*’. And I have chosen to begin with Psalm 23 – the world’s favourite Psalm.

You will not be surprised to know that in over 40 years of ministry, this is not the first time I have preached on this Psalm. My records tell me that I first preached on this psalm in June 1975, and that I have preached eight different times on this Psalm – not to mention the many times I have drawn upon this sermon for special occasions such as weddings and funerals. But it’s not always been the same sermon. For every time I come to Psalm 23 I gain another insight into God’s care. In the words of a hymn we used to sing, “*The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word*”

This morning we have not the time to explore every line of the Psalm – with the children present with us the sermon needs to be shorter than usual. Instead we shall focus on the three metaphors used by the Psalmist to describe God’s care.

1. GOD IS OUR SHEPHERD

"The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. He lets me rest in fields of green grass and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water. He gives me new strength" [vv1-3a]

This is not the only time in the Bible that God is described as a shepherd. But there is a difference between the use of the metaphor elsewhere and its use here in Psalm 23. Elsewhere it is always a corporate image: e.g. The Lord is the Shepherd of Israel. But here the corporate image becomes *personalised* and *the first person singular* is used: "**The Lord is MY Shepherd**".

The Psalmist knows himself standing in a personal relationship with God, so that when is he in trouble he can dial 'Mine, mine, mine'.

He cares for **ME**. **I** count in his sight. And because I count, I know that **I** shall never be left to fend for myself.

- Most people have no difficulty in believing in God as the creative force behind this universe.
- Many people have no difficulty in believing God to be the all-powerful ruler of this world who is working his purposes out.
- But the Psalmist encourages us to believe in a personal God who cares for us as a shepherd cares for each one of his sheep. What an amazing thought! Indeed, what a wonderful truth!

This personal care of God for each one of us finds particular expression in John 10, where Jesus speaking of the good shepherd says: "**He calls his own sheep by name**". God knows us - he knows us through and through - he knows us even by name. The mind boggles! Some of us have difficulty in knowing the names of all the people who attend our church: but God knows us all, even in our billions upon billions. God never says: "*Excuse me, I don't think we have met before*".

What's more this caring God never goes off duty.

That surely is the implication of the metaphor.

When the Psalmist wrote this psalm, shepherds didn't knock off at 5pm to go home for dinner, returning to look after the sheep at 9 o'clock the following morning.

No shepherds lived with their flock, they were on duty 24/7.

They were always there for their sheep – and that too is true for God.

It is precisely because God cares for us in such a personal and undivided manner, that the Psalmist goes on to say: "**I have everything I need**" - or as the older versions put it, "**I shall not want**" (NRSV).

In preparing to preach this sermon today, I discovered to my amazement that there is a web-site www.iwantoneofthose.com. The current top six products are:

- A VW camper tent (£299.99)
- A pocket shower (just £14.99)
- A Micro Gyro flyer at £23.99
- A so-called 'winestein' at £6.99
- A crossbow pistol at £7.99
- A mood cushion at £9.99

Frankly, it is pretty pathetic web-site. There are a lot many other things that I would love to have – and here I don't have in mind gadgets

Nor do I have in mind a windfall of £500,000 to bump up my pension, helpful though that might be.

No the things that I would really like are good health for myself and for my loved ones, happiness for my children,

But even such good things pale into insignificance with knowing God and his love.

God is my one true need: with him I can face everything that life has to offer.

2. GOD IS OUR COMPANION

"He guides me in the right way as he has promised. Even if that way goes through deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, because you are with me! Your shepherd's rod and staff keep me safe" [vv3b-4].

I like the word '*companion*'. Literally it means one who shares bread with me. As a result, according to the Compact Oxford English Dictionary, a '*companion*' is '*one with whom one spends time or travels*'.

In this context I would like to suggest that God is there with us, through all the twists and turns of life's journey.

In particular he is with us when the "**way goes through deepest darkness**".

What is this '**deepest darkness**'?

Traditionally that darkest valley has been interpreted of death. So we read in the AV of "**the valley of the shadow of death**".

A Greek village woman once took her baby to a wise man, asking him if he could foretell the child's future. "*There is only one thing that I can tell you for sure about your baby*", he replied, "*and that is, he is going to die*". Yes, the valley of the shadow of death is an experience everyone of us sooner or later will undergo.

If truth be told, most people don't look forward to that experience.

As Woody Allen once humourously said: "*Death? I'm not afraid of dying - I just don't want to be around when it happens!*"

But for those who have entrusted their lives to the Good Shepherd - for those who have personalised faith, & can say "**The Lord is my shepherd**" - there is no reason to fear. God is there with us to go with us, to guide us through.

What a relief to know that God will see us through death - and beyond.

But death is not the only dark experience we may face.

There is, e.g. the darkness of depression, serious illness, and unemployment..

God has not promised us a trouble-free life - but he has promised to be with us in our troubles. In the words of Matthew Henry: "*God is a very present help in trouble. He is more present than trouble*".

"Even if that way goes through deepest darkness, I will not be afraid Lord, because you are with me!" Our companion is there.

Sadly, sometimes in those moments of darkness & pain, we turn in upon ourselves - to protect ourselves we roll ourselves up into a little ball, and in so doing we unconsciously turn our backs upon God and upon his love.

At such a time we need to open up ourselves to God, and discover that he is there.

Whatever evil may lurk around the corner, we need not fear - he is there.

3. GOD IS OUR HOST

"You prepare a banquet for me, where all my enemies can see me; you welcome me as an honoured guest and fill my cup to the brim. I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life; and your house will be my home as long as I live" [vv5-6]

The picture changes again.

From green pastures to dark valleys, we now turn to a feast, a banquet.

When we think of banquets, I guess that many of us think of a wedding reception.

Here, however, the banquet in mind is that associated with the Kingdom of God.

At the end of the journey God our companion will turn out to be God the host: in the new world that is coming, we shall eat and drink in the Kingdom of God.

And on that day God will bless those who put their trust in him - he will bless them publicly - even **"in the presence of their enemies"**

Some Christians have struggled with this thought. CS Lewis wrote: *'The poet's enjoyment of his present prosperity would not be complete unless those horrid enemies (who used to look down their noses at him) were watching it all and hating it.... The pettiness and vulgarity of it....are hard to endure'*.

Some have therefore suggested that the table would be a table of reconciliation, where enemies have become friends. After all, did not Jesus tell us to love our enemies?

I am reminded of Abraham Lincoln, who was once asked why he tried to make friends with his enemies. *'Surely you should try to destroy them'*, the person said.

Without a moment's hesitation Lincoln gently replied: *'Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?'*

Much as I like this interpretation, I don't think that is what the Psalmist had in mind.

The thought is surely that the day will come when God's people will be vindicated.

The fact is that for many people following Jesus leads not just to misunderstanding,

but to rejection, persecution, to suffering of one kind or another. But one day God will reward their faithfulness and place his friends in the place of honour

As he reflects on that day, the Psalmist declares: **"I know that your goodness & love will be with me all my life; and your house will be my home as long as I live"**.

I confess that for once I prefer the NIV, which follows the AV: **"I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever"**.

Strictly speaking the Psalmist may well have not had eternity in mind – after all he lived the other side of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus. But I believe we can apply these words to the life of heaven. Indeed, John in the last book of the Bible did precisely that: in Rev 7.17 he writes; **"The Lamb, who is in the centre of the throne, will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"**.

What a wonderful hope is ours.

As we come to the end of this sermon, let me ask you: do you have this assurance?

Is not only your present, but also your future secure in the Lord's hands?

Can you say **"The Lord is my shepherd"**?

The truth is that our only true security is found in the Good Shepherd, who cares for us, and who will eventually bring us to our heavenly home.