



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fourth Sunday of Easter

readings: [Psalm 23](#), [Acts 9 36-43](#), [Revelation 7.9-end](#), [John 10.22-30](#)

8th May 2022

There are 150 of them in the book, some long, some short, but one stands out. There are praising ones and penitential ones, consoling ones and challenging ones, but one stands out. There are peaceful ones and powerful ones, but one stands out. Psalm 23 is undoubtedly the stand-out favourite and most familiar for churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike, often set to beautiful music, often used at funerals for its image of peace and comfort. But it is not just a psalm for funerals and grieving: it is a psalm for living and for life.

The Lord is my shepherd: The 4th Sunday of Easter is colloquially known as "Good Shepherd Sunday". Across the various lectionary years, it features gospel readings about shepherds as gatekeepers calling and leading the sheep (John 10 1-10), the hired hand who runs away at the first sign of danger contrasted with the shepherd who defends his flock at the cost of his life (John 10 11-18), and today's gospel (John 10 22-30) where the sheep hear the shepherd's voice, are known by him, and are prepared to follow him. All these readings relate to God's providential care seen in Christ, the Good Shepherd who provides all that we may want, who offers us guidance, protection, presence and assurance. But all the lectionary specifications have one thing in common across every year, they major on Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd".

I was born in the shadow of the steelworks of Glasgow, and grew up in the vicinity of Teesside chemical plants; my adult and professional life has been spent in industrial towns and their suburbs, where the ways of shepherds and sheep are not daily familiar occurrences, so the danger is that a psalm which majors on pastoral images of sheep and shepherds distances itself from those in urban contexts. Yet the familiar phrase "The Lord is my shepherd" still carries a powerful meaning even for city folk.

The Lord is MY shepherd: The Lord, Yahweh, a name so holy that the people of Israel would not utter it; a name first revealed to Moses as I AM; a name so powerful that when it needed to be written, the scribes would take ritual baths before writing it and destroy the pen afterwards. Yet the Great I AM: the God who was, and is, and always will be, is our shepherd. The author of the psalm, David, could quite legitimately have begun with the words: "The Lord is *our* shepherd", but he didn't. The Lord is *my* shepherd: the all-powerful God has made it *personal*.

The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not be in want. Many people reciting this psalm will use the words from the 17th Century King James version: "I shall not want". Some translations render it as 'I shall lack nothing'. Sadly the phrase "I shall not want" can reinforce the consumerist culture where we are being conditioned to want, to want everything, and to want it *now*, and are driven to dissatisfaction unless we get it. It has been said that "We spend money we don't have, on things we don't need, to make impressions that don't last, on people we don't care about". So we live in a self-inflicted prison of want: wanting it bigger, wanting it better, wanting it faster, trapped in a prison cell of disillusionment with what we already have.

But more modern translations render the phrase as "I shall not be in want" a different meaning altogether in our present cost-of-living crisis, where many folk are 'in want'. We have faced a 54% hike in energy bills, with more to come, we have 7% inflation, the highest for 30 years, but I can remember it being nearly 25% in the oil shocks and miners strikes of the 1970s and 80s, so there could be much more to come there too. 1 in 7 households in England, that's over 3 million of them, were already defined by government data as being in fuel poverty in 2020 (the latest data available) and that is bound to increase too as fuel bills rise exponentially. People are already revealing they now have to choose between heating and eating.

Citizens Advice report a 44% rise in foodbank referrals in March compared to last year (and that's before the recent fuel rises took effect). The Trussell Trust reports that 1 in 10 parents (that's 1.3 million people) think it very likely they will need to resort to using a food bank in the next 3 months. Figures which should be unbelievable in an affluent developed country such as ours, but are sadly true.

It has been said we live in an age of 'entitlement', the tip of which is seen in £840 a roll wallpapers and heated outdoor swimming pools, funded by rich donors or dubious non-domicile tax-avoidance schemes. Perfectly legal but thoroughly immoral. But there is surely another far more morally worthy sense of entitlement, the entitlement for all to be able to rely on the supply of their daily bread.

The all-powerful God, whose Son taught us to pray for that daily bread, has given to those who believe in him a *promise*, a promise that they will not perish as they walk through the valley of the shadow, for as today's gospel tells us, no one will snatch them out of his hand.

As well as being Good Shepherd Sunday, today, May 8th, is the Feast Day of Julian of Norwich, 14th Century mystic and teacher, theologian and anchorite. Norwich at the time of Julian's life was a vibrant town, the second largest city in England with a population of about ten thousand, whose wealth came from sheep breeding and wool production, and trade with Europe. But then came the pestilence, the bubonic plague pandemic known as the Black Death. Julian herself survived but within a year, three-quarters of the population of the city was dead. The pandemic persisted for over three years, and then it kept returning. The city itself came to a standstill. There were no workers to repair the roads or shepherd the sheep. Trade with Europe ceased. And are there not echoes here of the pandemic we ourselves are experiencing? *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

But whilst facing all this, Julian kept a written record of her visions and her reflections. In her famous book "Revelations of Divine Love" she offers us a spirituality of unshakeable optimism, a faithfulness in the face of turmoil. She asserts that God has told her "All shall be well; all manner of things shall be well, and you shall see for yourself that all things shall be well."

For God's provision for us is all-pervasive. In the sunshine of the green pastures or in the valley of the shadow, his providential care is perpetually and pervasively present. "All shall be well; all manner of things shall be well", if we would but see it and believe it. For we are in the hands of the Good Shepherd; a shepherd who is prepared to lay down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd who went ahead of his flock to clear the path of danger, taking the risk even unto death, to make sure that the sheep could safely follow.

And we his sheep *are* called to follow, not simply in the paths of righteousness, of social justice and fair dealing, but *through* the valley of the shadow. No matter what tribulations we face, we are all called not only to be sheep, but to be shepherds; not only to receive God's loving care but to transmit it, no matter what the personal cost.

Being called to co-shepherd with Christ carries a cost: it may not be your physical life you are called to lay down, but it will certainly involve disruption to the smooth passage of your life; it will impact on your relationships with the world; it will alter the world's perception of you. Yet it is a price worth paying in the service of our personal, all-pervasive God who promises to all who believe in him that "*All shall be well; and all manner of things shall be well*".

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