

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was growing up, I attended an elementary school where, every morning, the class would stand at their desks and sing the 23rd Psalm. It was a morning ritual, after which the class would sit down and the lessons would begin. The words and melody (to the tune of Crimond) have been implanted in my brain forever. It's a popular hymn, and as soon as I hear the words "The Lord's my Shepherd", I remember the classroom in which I learned to sing the first verse of the hymn.

I associated the psalm with my teacher, whose enthusiasm for the 23rd Psalm was matched only by his passion for corporal punishment. No day would pass without some boy in the classroom being caned on the hand. The teacher would administer four "cuts" in a row, or sometimes six. Believe me, if you were his victim, you felt that pain for the rest of the day. His liking for the use of the cane seemed, in retrospect, to fulfill a need in him. Did we deserve it? Not always. He once said, "the last four people to sit down after play time will be caned", and so the meting out of corporal punishment became a routine fact of life. Not surprisingly, the combination of violence and piety - caning and singing - did not lead me to an appreciation of God's care which is expressed in the psalm. That only happened much later in life.

If, as an adult, I had embraced atheism instead of religion, this early experience would have provided me with useful fodder with which to assail people of faith, or at least to reject God (who wouldn't have existed anyway!) Fortunately, this never happened. I became a Christian and came to love the 23rd Psalm. The teacher is now a distant memory, but the 23rd Psalm is a living song in my present life. I am not alone in my appreciation of the psalm - for many people, the 23rd Psalm is perhaps the most beloved of the psalms.

It's the psalm chosen for Good Shepherd Sunday. The term, "Good Shepherd" is one of the more interesting descriptions of Jesus. We sometimes forget that when Jesus is inspiring his followers and spreading the gospel, he is also acting as their shepherd. The job of the shepherd is to take care of the sheep. The 23rd psalm tells us how, but in a way that reflects both the practical and spiritual care that God has for us.

I want to spend a few moments talking about the 23rd Psalm. It is very beautiful and has a calming quality. It was probably written by King David, who was once a shepherd boy, and later as king became shepherd to the flock of Israel. In the opening line - in Hebrew this is two words, *YHWH ro'i*. - the shepherd David acknowledges the shepherd God who has provided for him. In his eventful and often tumultuous life, David relied many times upon God's protection and blessing.

The psalm continues: “He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.” Here he talks about the healing presence of the natural world. Far from the distractions of town and village life, the shepherd rests among green pastures and still waters. He recognizes them as gifts from God, places of tranquility and meditation. Among this image of abundant life, the shepherd is restored to himself.

The psalm continues: “He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake.” The Lord not only revives our soul, but like a good shepherd he guides us along the right path - that is, if we *want* to be guided. Our pride makes us resist the guidance of others. However, where Jesus is concerned, being a sheep can be a good thing, if you listen to his voice and obey his command.

The shepherd does for the sheep what the sheep cannot do for themselves. It is not good for us to be kept in one enclosed area all the time. To thrive and grow, the sheep need to be led to pastures new. There are always risks in leaving behind the safety of one’s familiar place and venturing out into uncharted territory. When the shepherd leads the sheep out of the pen and into open land, there is always the risk of attack from wild animals. However, the shepherd is not defenseless - he uses a rod to fend off attacks from wild beasts. He also has a staff which he uses to keep the sheep from wandering off. “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

The Lord invites us to a feast where he “spreads a table before us”, and as his honored guest he anoints us with oil and then fills our cup to overflowing. Yet the psalmist also reminds us that this feast is “in the presence of those who trouble me.” The early church, which suffered great persecution, drew their strength from their faith in God. Even when facing death, the martyrs looked ahead and saw the banquet which God had prepared for them once their trials were over. Their reward was beyond their expectations. For God pours out his blessings upon us with abundant generosity, so that “my cup is running over.”

Because the Lord never abandons his sheep, his “goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” The Lord is faithful and trustworthy. Our own salvation depends upon us trusting the Good Shepherd, who is Jesus Christ, whose voice calls out to us. His voice is the voice of mercy, forgiveness, and love. In our gospel reading this morning Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”

Jesus knows you - in fact he knows you better than you know yourself. And we know him, through prayer, through Scripture, through the example and witness of others, and through worship. When we are baptized, we begin our new life bearing the mark of Christ and carrying the seal of his Spirit: “you have anointed my head with oil.” In this new life in Christ, we look to our shepherd to guide us.

Listen again to the words of Jesus: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” His voice can reach us at any time - it is not the loud voice of one who is trying to grab our attention, but a still, small voice within, which we can hear through

the noise and busyness of daily life. "He leads me beside still waters." If we submit ourselves to the practice of prayer, we can hear his voice. We can arrive at the place of stillness and be rested and restored in his presence. But first we have to shake off the distracting voices and sounds and activities of daily life. We have to lose a little of our independence in order to become sheep. We must listen and obey the shepherd's voice and command.

I doubt there is a more restful and peaceful poem in the whole of the Bible as the 23rd psalm. Learn it by heart. Meditate on each line. Recite it when you are troubled or anxious. Read it slowly before bed tonight - let its words still your mind and revive your soul. Jesus, our true shepherd, is with us, to guide and revive us, beside the still waters, where we will find our peace and our destination: "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not be in want.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Father David Beresford