

I shall not be in want...

Today's theme is that of God as Shepherd, and today's psalm is the one that we all know from funerals. Probably because of the reference to the valley of the shadow of death – even there, even in that loneliest of all places, God's comfort is made known. Ah, isn't that a relief. Even in the hardest times of our lives, God is still there. Good news eh. Is that it. God can bless us even when life is tough.

Well, how true is it? Really? Because I have heard countless stories from disaffected people who leave churches the moment disaster strikes, the moment a serious crisis occurs. The moment of the loss of a friend, or the loss of youth, or the loss of a dream or hope or ambition. And there are countless people who feel in precisely those instances, that God has abandoned them. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, God has turned his eyes. When it comes to it, actually, is it really true – that we shall not be in want.

You don't have to look too hard around the world today – to see millions dying, in want. And in the valley of the shadow of death, death has the final word – wasting, destructive, through hunger, through violence, there are no green pastures – there are no quiet waters. Only want. Only death. No happy ending.

But does the psalm promise that! I read it in Hebrew this morning, and there is one aspect of it that is utterly shocking. In Hebrew this psalm says nothing about death. The word death does not appear – even through the darkest valley – is the phrase. And you can understand how, metaphorically it may have come to refer to that. I can't help wondering whether this psalm, so familiar to us, has been mistranslated for a many, many centuries – blinding us to what is really going on! This is not a psalm simply about comfort through death – and it is not a psalm just for funerals.

The Shepherd.

It's probably worth remembering that this is a psalm with a history. It is one man's experience of God – and that one man happened to be both a shepherd, and a King. It was, of course, David. So, bearing that in mind, you probably think that David is being just a touch anthropomorphic – and I have to say – I think you're absolutely right. Taking our values, our experiences, our ways of being – and attributing them to God. There is a sense in which we cannot help but do that.

And naturally, David does it here – he portrays God as a shepherd. Now, the picture of God as a shepherd seems like a bizarre one. We all know that shepherd's cannot be trusted. It was not a respectable job. The word of a shepherd did not count in court – the Jewish legal system did not recognise shepherds as trustworthy people.

Now, we are so used to the image of the shepherd in the bible, so familiar with Jesus talk about being a good shepherd – that in the end we can lose touch with the nature of the relationship between shepherd and sheep. This is not David saying – Oh God, you're in charge and I am a mere sheep who serves. Because in a shepherd-sheep relationship, it is the shepherd who serves the sheep.

Early this morning on Radio 4 there was an extended interview with an eleven year old girl, talking about her experience of looking after sheep. And the welfare of those sheep was

paramount to this little girl, not because she was an eleven year old girl but because she really knew what she was talking about. She was serving them – going out of her way to do the very best for them.

This is not like the relationship between a King and his subject, between a boss and his worker, between a master and his slave. David is not saying – Oh, God – you are in charge of everything and I am just your humble servant. David instead, is saying – O God – you are in charge of everything – and for that reason – you serve me. When you look at what God does in this psalm – he waits upon David! Now, is that simply because David has become accustomed to having things his way – so that God himself now waits at David’s table? Because, in the end, God is David’s waiter! If you read this literally. “You prepare a table for me... my cup overflows...” I think not. There is more to the picture of God here, than David simply revelling in his privilege.

Where does he lead us?

Whatever else the shepherd does in this psalm – he leads the sheep. This is not a God who simply walks alongside David, or walks alongside Israel, through the ups and downs of life. And when hardship comes – it’s okay, because even in the valley of the darkest shadows, thy rod and thy staff comfort me.” The valley of the darkest shadows, is not some hardship that we inevitably face as we journey through life. That dark valley is precisely where the so-called “Good shepherd” has led David. God has led David into the shadow!

Now – if there is one place that God really ought not to lead Christians, it is into a place of darkness! At least, that tends to be our great cultural assumption. God blesses us surely – he wants us to be happy – not to go leading us into darkness. Well, sure God wants to bless us – and this psalm ends with the confidence of God’s blessing – and yet, David sees no inconsistency with God’s blessing on the one hand, and being led into utter darkness on the other. This is not a case of – oh, we made it through the darkness, and then later we are blessed. “All the days of my life” is where David locates the blessing – and that includes the times when he goes through the darkest valleys.

So how can the dark valley become a place of blessing? The dark valleys are the places to avoid surely! What on earth is a good shepherd doing, leading sheep into a dark valley? Well, you don’t have to think too hard through the history of Israel to see that. Countless times after the Exodus, the people – being led by God himself – start grumbling because it’s worse here on this journey than it was when we were back in Egypt. And yet it was through that journey, the Israel becomes Israel. Or think of the story of Daniel in the lion’s den. How can a lion’s den be the place of blessing. Or think of Jesus in Gethsemane – or Jesus in a tomb. How can those places be places of blessing?

No – if you want the blessing of God – you go straight for that fruit! Countless Christian paperbacks apply management and sales technique to encourage churches to achieve for themselves the kind of blessing that comes in the darkest valley – but without the necessity of being led into the darkest valley. So you want your church to grow – here’s how you do it. You want your Christian life to be fruitful – here’s how you go about it. You want your church to be politically active – here’s how you achieve it. The fruits of God’s blessing – achievable without the inconvenience of actually being led by a shepherd who might actually lead you into the darkest valley.

Contemporary stuff:

The psalm itself gives a great example of how this works. The good shepherd – does something utterly horrific to poor old David. Sure – it looks as though God is waiting on him by preparing him a table. But who is David's company at that meal? His friends? His subjects? No! His adversaries. His enemies. And quite a specific type of enemy. Not someone who wants to kill David.

Do you remember the opening sequence to the 1970s batman tv series? At the beginning, all of Batman's enemies were lining up to attack him – and one at a time they get beaten up and go flying back. We don't have to picture David like some ancient Palestinian bat man – as though his arch enemies are all there to watch David being waited on by the King of the universe. Instead – David is there with his adversaries. He is there with people who tell him what he does not want to hear / people with whom he disagrees / people who stand over against him. Now, to have a meal with those people – is an incredibly difficult thing to do! But that is where God leads David. We see it, for instance, when David is confronted by the prophet Nathan – who told David what David really did not want to hear. And God brought David to that point.

For us to be confronted with our adversaries – by people with whom we profoundly disagree – by people who threaten us – who might pull the rug from under our feet! That is a dark valley for any of us to walk through. Much easier – to surround ourselves with people that agree with us, that will justify our position, than to be confronted with who we really are. Much easier to cut a short-cut to God's blessing – through strategy, and goal-setting and initiative – than to allow God simply to lead us, and to leave the when, where and how of God's blessing, in the hands of the God who blesses us.

Because the blessing that comes from God himself, rather than that achieved by our own plans, ambitions and objectives, is the kind of blessing that causes our cups to overflow. It's not controllable, or predictable, or tidy. It is messy, and unmerited, beautiful.

If our ambition is to avoid the darkest valleys at all costs – and let's be clear – that is where most of us are – then we will never allow ourselves to be led by this shepherd. And we will never know the blessing of those who are led by the Shepherd – and no matter what our aims and hopes and dreams – we will always be in want.

My second son Lewis – is very sporty and athletic and strong and fast and ... lazy. And without exception, whenever I take the children to engage in any kind of activity that requires energy to get there, his first reaction is to stamp his feet and refuse. And yesterday, I took them to the park with steep hills. And he stamped and complained and didn't want to go. But when we got there, and the game that we played involved spending 45 minutes charging up and down these hills – his face radiated utter joy – and he'd forgotten about his complaints. It will be the same next time, because it's in his nature to avoid anything that might cause him the slightest discomfort.

And that is pretty much where most of us are. We don't want a shepherd who leads us into the valley of the shadow of death. We don't want a shepherd who sits us down at the meal table with our adversaries. We don't want a shepherd who restores us – who literally – remakes us. Because those things involve potential hardship. And if that's who we are, then can we really expect the blessings, the quiet waters, the overflowing cup? It is much easier to

go straight for the blessings promised in this psalm – to claim the fruits of obedience without walking the path of obedience, to claim the blessings of God without the sacrifices of God, to aim for that experience of goodness and mercy without being exposed to the experiences that actually forge a character of goodness and mercy.

Being led by this Shepherd changes the kind of person we are -that is what is behind this idea of our soul being restored. We are not simply being refreshed, but remade – because of the disturbing but liberating way that this Shepherd leads us. Is this really a shepherd that we want to follow?

But when you look at the action here that is ascribed to God – in fa

David is distorting the idea of a shepherd – he is in charge – but David is living this life of luxury. Thank you very much -

Preparing a table in the presence of enemy. There is no such thing as shepherd without sheep!

Much harder to find a servant than a boss – you need to trust your servant – anyone can have a boss. He restores / re-makes – makes you someone different.

Communion.