

Psalm 23
Lent 4
22 March 2020

This morning I bring to you grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am proclaiming the Word of God to you from Psalm 23.

Verse one says:

‘The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want’.

Let’s pray:

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock, our shepherd and our redeemer. Amen.

Can you think of a more famous Psalm than Psalm 23?

For millions of people across time it’s become their special psalm of comfort.

The words make this plain to see.

It ‘drips’ contentment, relaxation and ‘plenty’ – both here and in eternity.

There is another reason though.

We take this one for granted.

That's to do with the fact it is written in the ‘singular’.

It's is a psalm talking about the experience of an individual.

Not the experience of the group (the collective, the we).

That might not seem very significant.

Almost pointing out the extreme obvious.

But what surprised me when I took a closer look at the background to the Psalm is that the motivation for its writing came from being with other people in the worship of God.

Regarding the worship context, verse five talks about God as a generous host.

Verse six about dwelling with God in his household.

It’s been pointed out that both of these are highly descriptive of the experience God in worship (eg see Weiser, *Psalms*, p 227-28).

That experience of God at the time it was written previously occurred in the temple.

That experience of God continues today where we meet God as both host and meal in the Lord’s Supper and come to his house to receive him.

But the thing to notice is we don't come here alone.
We come to church with others as part of the family of God.
With believers, friends, relatives and community.
So it's really quite surprising in a sense that this Psalm that has been the
pinnacle of *personal* comfort has its origins in the collective.

This all seems fitting and ironic at the moment.

Fitting because many of our members and friends are thinking deeply
about what church means to them and what it is they receive there.

Ironic because just when this Psalm inspired by the experience of God in
public worship comes up in our readings, here we are finding ourselves on
the first Sunday of a temporary suspension from meeting for public
worship.

A natural question is how God will bring us the good things he does if
we are not meeting for Divine Service?

I think on one level many of you know that the promises of God's word
come to us in his word apart from where we hear it.

So that can be at the breakfast table and in the car as much as it is sitting
at 29 Robinson Road Morley on a Sunday morning.

But we also know that there is something sacred about the holy hour of a
Sunday morning.

For a start, every Sunday worship is a memorial celebration of the
resurrection that first Easter Sunday.

Then there is the practical side.

We don't often get to just put life down for an hour or so.

And receive.

Hear someone else read!

Be sitting and let it wash over us!

Will we have the discipline to continue this, try as we might?

There is also something beautiful about community singing – there's a
reason why we are told to sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
(Col 3:16).

Another thing is that with so many other restrictions being imposed on us
this one is not just any other.

It goes to the heart of our being.

Our beliefs and what drives our thoughts, behaviour and shaping.

The good news for us today is that while much has changed, **nothing** has **really** changed.

The Lord is still our shepherd. We shall not want because he is still our shepherd.

You see, just as God has brought us into his beautiful presence it is **NEVERTHELESS** not a presence based on church buildings or the number of persons around us.

Yes – you’ll never catch me saying that these things are not important. They are gifts from God and the finite such as building really does hold the part of the infinite (God).

We are flesh and blood people with flesh and blood needs where space matters.

But the thing is that its not by bricks and gathering exactly the way we do that has brought us into his eternal presence.

It is by his son.

Jesus’ cross on Calvary.

And his open grave that opened eternity’s door for us as well.

Jesus is not defined by bricks, carpet, a Roland piano or a cup of coffee over a chat.

He is defined however, or shall I say, given to us by a whole lot of things you will still have.

Such as a good set of readings from his Word.

And words and prayers in the liturgy I’ll make available to you each week.

And a sermon which I will still prepare (and record as soon as I can do this without too much fuss).

And decent songs that tell of what he has done and point to his truth (in time we’ll hopefully link to music for these too).

All these things you will still have.

And those others that already bring you Christ and his gifts that you use outside of this place.

That said, one of the things that will be a little more difficult is that there will no longer be an almost guaranteed place in your life where once a week you can come and feast at his table through the Lord’s Supper.

We’ll miss that.

I know that as you come to the Lord’s Supper there you are like that writer in the Psalm where they sit at this abundant table prepared by the Lord.

Grinning as they receive his grace.

At that moment even the presence of life's enemies doesn't interrupt the grace that is received.

'For you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies' (v 5a)

The abundance of the Lord overcomes the enemies - sin, death and the devil – and all the ways they manifest.

Even in a microscopic virus that has brought our world and even our way of worshipping to a halt.

Yet there is no doubt that just as with other parts of worship, how we have received the Lord's Supper will require some adjustments.

But it's the highest priority to me to ensure your regular access to the Lord's Supper in some way.

I have lots of ideas and people are sending really helpful suggestions too.

One important thing to know is that the Lord's Supper is no way banned – how could it be?

It has sustained Christ's church for 2000 years.

Through countless threats.

It will sustain us through this one.

Afterall, you can't really ban Jesus' grace!

We just need to bring it in ways that take account of the risks of this virus.

I think the reality of how Christ has sustained church for 2000 years is really important to remember.

You are a part of his church.

Therefore he will continue to sustain you in it.

In fact, the whole of Psalm 23 is a really helpful way of seeing how God has operated across the various years of our life.

In the line 'he makes me lie down in the green pastures and rest beside still waters' (v2)...

... you can hear the voice of experience reflecting on God's gift in the past of safety and rest.

The writer takes that knowledge of the past and in faith receives comfort for the present.

And the future.

In verse three we hear how it is for his sake that he restores our soul and leads us in paths in righteousness.

That has to be comforting.

If we only had our own resources to face the problems of this world – no more so than COVID-19 – could we be confident?
Or could we be comforted?
But instead God's care of us is for his name's sake.
The one who is dependable and able.
Thanks be to God!

And what about the realism of verse four?

Even though I walk through the valley of deep darkness...

... 'or the valley of the shadow of death' (as we have often heard at funerals)...

... your rod and your staff they comfort me.

Thankfully it's not **our** rod and our staffs though.

It's the rod and staff of our Good Shepherd Jesus.

That's too good for words.

We've all had a sense these past few days of how fragile we are as we walk through what looks like a very deep darkness.

You all have your own accounts.

I'm currently experiencing a little bit of stress in the thought I completely need to rethink how we deliver Word and Sacrament ministry and much that I was trained to do.

Yet I'm deeply grateful that for the present I have a vocation with a workplace that is still viable (don't forget the way God has blessed us all in this).

What grief for the many of you that are watching work slip away.

And other plans and dreams.

Or working through what it is to be in a high-risk health category.

And together we really do need to be prepared to care for the sick among us that will come from this virus.

Thank God it's not **our** rod and staff to comfort us.

But instead the gentle tap on the ground beside us of the Lord's Word of promise and guidance.

Lastly, the writer of Psalm 23 used all their **lived experience** of the good they had received from God to declare confidently that they would dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

"Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (Psalm 23:6, NIV)

What they were really talking about here is **faith**.

Acts of the past interpreted by eyes of faith to see God at work now and certain in the future.

That statement was only able to be made because of faith.

So it will be for us.

You see, God is not going anywhere, except along with us.

God is the giver and generator of faith.

A virus does not get to determine faith and its outcomes.

It's God who gives faith and the means to grow it.

And there his promise is simple:

'I am your shepherd; you have everything you need!'

Let's pray: And may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.