

Sunday 26/04/26 God cares for us

Some thoughts

Psalms 23, read for us by Elliot, one of the best known parts of the Bible and full of Bible style imagery. We don't need to worry that the picture of God as the shepherd condemns us to being like sheep – although I guess we all have our moments.

The more I have looked at it over the past few days the more it reads to me like a contract. OK its not in grand legal language and a formal contract would probably say, 'the provider' rather than simply, 'he'. But the real way in which it differs from a formal contract is that it is one sided. It is all about what God does and makes no reference to what we should do in return.

It sets out one side of our relationship with God and asks for nothing in return. God is providing – I shall not want, offering healing and comfort – he restoreth my soul, protection – I will fear no evil, security – I will dwell in the house of the Lord. And a whole lot more. He is offering them for ever. And there is no mention of any price to pay, either financial or in terms of lifestyle.

Somehow it ties God into some very onerous and long lasting commitment and leaves us to set out our side of the contract. In practice what we do in return is driven by circumstances and conscience. How we repay that abundance with worship, prayer, and service is left to us to determine. We each lay down our own unspoken rules which we follow as best as we can. And how often do we fail to do even the minimal tasks that we have set ourselves.

But it's OK because the God who gives us life in abundance and gives it forever has no penalty clauses in his contract.

Some more thoughts

One of the problems with Biblical imagery is that it doesn't always translate into the modern world. Anyone who has recently driven through Wales or parts of Yorkshire will have seen flocks of sheep spread over large areas who will not see their shepherd very often especially during the summer. They know their shepherd by the sound of his dog or Landrover, rather than his voice, and he knows them by the tags in their ears.

But that is just a different relationship to the Biblical shepherd. It is not no relationship. In other ways the sheep can still identify where they belong and the shepherd knows which are his. In the same way God knows each of us by name and we know that we are his.

In the gospel reading this morning we hear Jesus' warning of thieves and robbers who will try to enter the sheepfold but not through the gate. The thieves and robbers can equate to all those things in the modern world that threaten to distract us from what we

should be doing. We think immediately of politicians with their false promises and condemnation of anything that shows them in a less than perfect light. Of the way in which social media can provide false information 'fake news', waste hours of time, and lead people into dark places. The valley of the shadow of death from psalm 23? The whole cult of celebrity where it is possible to become well known for doing exactly what it is hard to say. Addictive behaviour or friends who are not really. Remember those 'friends' who helped the prodigal son to spend his inheritance? Just our own desire to have a good time. These thieves are not very subtle – they enter not through the gate but climb in over the wall.

One of the features of the Jesus model of the good shepherd is that he allows the sheep to come in and out, to find the pasture they need to survive. They are not restricted and able only to do certain things. They are led into good ways. Because of the relationship that has developed with the shepherd the sheep have a sense of trust in where they are being led, and when it matters that makes them obedient.

Like the Biblical sheep we need to learn to listen for the voice of the true shepherd, to pick it out from the cacophony of other noises. It is there although we can be distracted by the other things and fail to hear our own name being called. And God may use others when he calls us, we need to be alert to the fact that not all voices are false, to consider what we are being asked to do and whether it is genuine.

Think back to the Christmas story. Joseph dreamt that marrying Mary was the right thing to do, and after Jesus birth that he should take his family to Egypt. The wise men dreamt that they should go home without seeing Herod. Throughout the Bible there are examples of people who heard from God in a dream, who received their guidance while they were asleep but never doubted what it was that they should do.

Is our role simply to find and follow the shepherd? As God cares for us so we too should care for others. In one book I read this week it talks of undershepherds – we are all undershepherds. It is up to us to help to lead others in the good ways, to show them how to distinguish the thieves and robbers from the people who care.

The imagery of the sheep fold with its one entrance, with its one guardian acting as a gate is simpler than most of us will find it. Finding our shepherd, knowing when to follow is not easy but if we take the trouble to seek out that true voice, and then to follow where it leads, We will be rewarded with fresh pasture and security.