

Sermon for Easter 4A: Psalm 23

Five Comforts – Dr Stephen Pietsch

It might surprise you to learn that I have never, to the best of my recollection, preached on this psalm. I checked my files – nothing there, not even for a wedding or a funeral. Given how beloved and well-known psalm 23 is, that surprises even me given that it is an all-time favourite. The ancient people of Israel loved this psalm and sang it often. It is one of those psalms attributed to King David, and was one of his favourite prayers.

Many people today (even non-church-going people) know and love this psalm too. It is still part of our society's common memory.

If you were at Esther Tobin's memorial service on Thursday, you will know that this was the psalm chosen by the family for that occasion, as it so often is by grieving families. Not long ago I read it to somebody at their bedside in hospital, and one verse in they joined in from memory and said it with me, right to the end.

It is certainly one of the most, perhaps *the most* well-known bible passage in the world. But you know sometimes it is the case that when you have heard something a lot or read it many times, you think you know it, but actually when you sit down and take a proper look at it, you find you don't at all. As I sat down to do some close textual study on this psalm earlier this week, I began to get a new and deeper understanding and appreciation of what is in this psalm and why it is that people are drawn to it, and find it so helpful, so comforting, especially in times of need and trouble in their lives.

Today we are going to take a proper look at Psalm 23, and what I am calling its 'five comforts':

It is comfort for

1. Those who are vulnerable
2. Those who have strayed
3. Those who are in danger
4. Those who are ashamed
5. Those who are afraid.

Lord Jesus, our good shepherd, comfort us and protect and bring us your sheep home to life with you. Amen.

1. Comfort for those who are vulnerable

Verse 1-2: The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters

Sometimes people think this psalm is just about the nice comforting pastoral images – sheep and shepherds, green pasture and still mountain lakes – calming and lovely. But actually nothing could be further from the truth. This psalm is about surviving in a dangerous hostile environment. The lives of shepherds and their sheep in this wilderness world was hard and perilous. Sheep are vulnerable dependent creatures. If their (pasture) feed is not provided they starve. If their water is not provided they die. Undefended from predators they die. Their lives everyday depend on the shepherd. Whether we realise it or not, you and I are sheep. We might think we can do it for ourselves, that we look after ourselves, that we provide for ourselves. But who is it that really provides? Who is who really holds your life?

Your job. Your family security. Your accommodation. Your medical care. What if one or two or all of these are torn away from you? That is *not* impossible, as some of you know, and as I was reminded just a few months ago.

We all had an experience during COVID of our material security being threatened, and many Australians for the first time realised how vulnerable they are, and what a hostile place this world can be.

But the psalmist teaches us that vulnerable as we are, we are nevertheless safe in the care of a shepherd who watches over us as *his* sheep. He knows and he meets our needs. He does not just give us survival rations, but lush green pasture, and quiet safe waters from which to drink. It is God who provides, abundantly and daily. As Jesus says in his sermon about living everyday life, the Sermon on the mount, in Matthew 6, 'don't worry about these things. The Lord know you need them'.

2. Comfort for those who have strayed.

Verse 3: He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

The word translated 'restore' here does not get at the psalmist's meaning. It is not that lying in lovely green mountain pastures refreshes you and helps you relax. This verb means to *return* in the sense of *repent*. The Lord brings me back, turns me back – he 'repents me' when I have strayed from his path, and puts me back in his *right* paths.

King David, who first sang these words, strayed, didn't he. It was not just 'Bathsheda-gate' (dreadful as that was) but many other times when he disobeyed God and wanted to go his own way, astray.

This verse in psalm 23 is what Jesus is referring to in his parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15. He knew he was speaking to people who understood what this verse was about. You remember Jesus's story: The shepherd goes looking for that one straying sheep until he finds it and bring it home on his shoulders rejoicing. He provides what we cannot provide, the forgiveness of sins, which he bore in his own body on the cross (Peter reminds us in today's Epistle reading). Jesus himself is the good shepherd who comes looking for straying sheep, to bring them home – to return them, to repent them, to put them back onto his right path.

This is much needed and precious comfort for straying sheep like you and me. This is comfort you received this morning in the absolution, as your sins were forgiven. The good shepherd brought you back on his shoulders rejoicing, back to his flock, under his care. As Peter says in today's epistle reading 'You were going astray like sheep, but now you have *returned* to the shepherd and guardian of your souls' (1Peter 2:25). There is forgiveness and a way back for us all.

3. Comfort for those in danger

Verse 4: Even though I walk through the valley of death's shadow, I fear no evil. For you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me.

Jesus is the shepherd of those who walk through dark shadowlands, dark valleys where the light disappears, where danger and maybe even death crouches, ready to attack. The psalmist says he *fears no evil* – he does not say that *there is* no evil. There almost certainly is! We should know, and many of you know only too well, that there is evil in our world, in our society. *The evil one* is never hiding too far from God's people. He is the one Jesus alludes to in today's Gospel reading: the thief and bandit who want to attack and destroy, the stranger who wants to lure God's people away into those wrong paths, and ultimately into death.

But even in these dark and dangerous places, Jesus is with us. Like the shepherd with his rod and his staff, Jesus is ready to rescue us and defend us. He walks watchfully, close beside those who walk through dark and dangerous valleys: serious illness, addiction, mental illness, loneliness, all that threatens and distresses us. He will not leave you defenceless or alone.

And when death comes to us or to those we love, Jesus is present as shepherd then too, both as comforter and saviour. Remember his words, again from today's gospel reading: whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come and go out safely and find pasture.

4. Comfort for those who are ashamed

Verse 5: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cups overflows.

Here the picture changes, to the scene of a royal banquet, a banquet that God sets before his highly honoured and much loved guest. Even though their enemies are still around, seeking to attack and humiliate and shame them, God *honours* them, showing them the highest honour a host can show in the ancient world to any guest: pouring oil on their head and filling up their wine glass to full and overflowing. *You* are that honoured and beloved guest.

Shame is a little mentioned but heavy burden that many people carry. They sometimes spend their lives trying to live down and overcome their humiliation and shame, shame that they may have brought on themselves or shame inflicted by others, especially public shame that people feel even because of a past mistake or injury or even because of illness.

Well, when our royal heavenly host sets his table *for us* and pours oil on our heads and fills up our cup to overflowing, our shame is lifted from us, and we are honoured, not just by other human beings, but by God himself.

5. Comfort for those who are afraid.

Verse 6: Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Here again the translations fall short. The word ‘follow’ in Hebrew means not just to ‘follow’, but to relentlessly pursue, to persistently go after – usually it used of pursuer, chasing somebody they are hunting down.

Do you ever feel like you are being relentlessly pursued? By your past? Or by other peoples’ expectations or by something you fear greatly? We are all afraid of something; in fact fear can rule your life. What are those fears that are coming after you? Illness or pain? Finances?

Well, the psalmist here in verse 6 has something wonderful to tell us. He says ‘You sheep of the Good shepherd, look back over your shoulder; you are being pursued relentlessly, persistently, eternally not by death or your sins or your shame, or your fear, but by God’s goodness and mercy – that is what is coming after you; love that never gives up, even when you stray, even when you are ashamed; vulnerable and weak and scared though you may be’. This loving kindness of our Lord is stronger and more unrelenting than pain or shame or fear, even stronger than death – it is so strong that it raised our Good Shepherd from the grave, and will raise us too, so that we will live in his house forever.

Amen.