

Psalm 23

1. *The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing.*
2. *He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.*
3. *He shall refresh my soul
and guide me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*
4. *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*
5. *You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;
you have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.*
6. *Surely goodness and loving mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

The Lord will watch over us
as a shepherd watches the flock.

Psalm 23, probably the most famous of all the psalms and a poetic gem, is a song of confidence. Here, a worshipper, grateful for deliverance from enemies and dangers, comes to the temple in Jerusalem to make a thank offering.

There are three images, God as shepherd, guide and host.

The psalm contains a triumphant message of faith; 'You are with me'. In ancient Near eastern literature, kings are called shepherds of their people, and in the Old Testament this is applied to God's relationship with Israel. (Psalm 80: Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, you that led Joseph like a flock', Psalm 95: For he is our God; we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand'.)

The psalmist lacks nothing because of his place in the covenant community. God the shepherd leads him by the right paths to nourishment and rest, and if the way leads through a steep and dangerous place (the valley of the shadow of death, deathly shade), the sheep fears neither pitfalls nor enemies, because the shepherd is there to defend him (with club and staff). 'For his name's sake' probably means 'because that is the kind of God he is'.

Then the Lord becomes the host, providing for his guests with lavish generosity (ancient laws of hospitality required that the host take his guests under his protection). The psalmist has come to the temple followed by enemies; now he will be followed by God's saving goodness and mercy (steadfast love, a theme frequent in the psalms), and he will live in that protecting presence for the rest of his life and for evermore.

The psalm presents a beautiful picture, but it offers a serious comment on life, which can be difficult, problematical and sometimes dangerous. We face all kinds of problems. war, disease and sickness, as the corona virus has shown in 2020, decisions which present us with a struggle, difficult relationships. But the psalm

proclaims that God is with us, alongside us as we sometimes pass through the 'valley of the shadow of death', and we realise that we are being guided by the right paths. During the corona virus crisis, we are learning new things, new ways of working, meeting people whom we didn't previously know, finding new activities and sometimes rediscovering old ones. We are pulling together as they did in the 1940s during wartime, people are working very hard to help others. Out of the darkness can come restoration, new experience, new life, and the faith that we shall come through.

In the presence of God, the psalmist discovers that "my cup shall be full" So out of our difficulties can come new hope, new life and freshness, a realisation that God will always be there with us, showing us a different way and, whatever happens, surrounding us with his steadfast love.

Prayer

O God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the good shepherd of your people: grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads;

who with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

(Episcopal Church, USA)