

St George the Martyr, Shirley

Glimpses of God: Hope for Today's World

The Shepherd who guides and guards His People



Psalm 23 (Henry Williams Baker 1821-1877)

*The King of love my shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
And he is mine for ever/*

*Where streams of living water flow
My ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow
With food celestial feedeth.*

*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulders gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.*

In death's dark vale I fear no ill
*With thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross before to guide me.*

Thou spread'st a table in my sight:

*Thy unction grace bestoweth;
And oh, what transport of delight
From thy pure chalice floweth!
And so through all the length of days*

*Thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
Within thy house for ever.*

Opening Worship

All: Lord, help us to recognise you in those we meet, to know you in your world, to speak for you in our everyday conversations, to serve you in the situations we encounter, and to experience you in our living and loving. Amen.

May God's word be heard; God's will be done; and God's love shared—by us and through us. Amen.

Matthew 28.20: I am with you always, to the end of the age.

John 10:11: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Picture 1: **David the shepherd boy rescuing his father's lambs from the bear and the wolf.**

Picture 2: The modern Palestinian shepherd in Beit Sahour on the West Bank (just outside Bethlehem) looking after his sheep as they scavenge on waste land, scattered with plastic bottles and other rubbish, in the shadow of the Israeli security wall—as a tank rolls by.

To think about and discuss

- *Why shepherds and why sheep?*
- *Are there more telling modern equivalents, or are we still right to talk shepherds and sheep?*
- *Are we ready to be both shepherds and sheep; and, if we are, what does this require from us in practice?*

The dark valley

That Psalm 23 is so often read at funerals is a reminder that the journey through the dark valley is not just likely: it is inevitable. Indeed, most of us have more than one dark valley journey. Lying down in good pastures sounds attractive (and makes us think of shepherd and sheep together in a Summer field with not a care in the world - a rural idyll painted from imagination rather than reality). **I've known two shepherds: one in Lincolnshire committed suicide when he found a dead sheep, and just couldn't take any more; the other I taught in Sunday School, and she had a very tough and lonely job in Devon.** The God/Jesus promise is not that there is a way of avoiding dark valleys, but that the Shepherd will walk through them with us.

How do you feel about:-

- *We do not mind the journey we would rather avoid (and not getting where we really wanted to go) nearly so much as not having any company on the way.*
- *The victory of the cross is not a victory of power: it is a victory of anti-power.*
- *I do believe Jesus is with me always; but it doesn't always feel like that.*
- *Some people argue that we are in a post-Christian society, and, in the absence of the old certainties, we just have to make up our own sat nav to get through the dark valley.*

Practising the Presence of God

It might be nice if we had what I have heard described as “God Glasses” - that is we both saw God all the time (as a very small child sees its Mother all [or most] of the time, and can take it for granted that God is there as the main part of the natural order of things); and we necessarily saw things the way God sees them, without having to vex ourselves as to whether we were seeing things right and getting things right. Sadly, not even the saints seem to have been consistently in this position. As a fall-back position, it might be quiet **nice if we could just get on with life in our own way, but have God's number on our mobiles**, so that, every time we felt that we were on the verge of getting [ourselves] into a mess, we could ring the God emergency number and be rescued.. Many of us kinda work on the emergency contact number basis.

Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford, Who said he knew but couldn't always feel the presence of Jesus, suggested that it was unwise to rely on feelings, and good to practise “those virtuous habits, those spiritual disciplines, which nurture in me that sense that God is with me”. This is sometimes called “Practising the Presence of God”. It can include regular Bible study, regular prayer, regular Communion, reading (some of) the right books, talking with other Christians. It isn't a matter of pretending to have feelings you don't have, or trying to conjure up God a séance: God doesn't work that way; and nor, to be honest, do we!

- *What helps you snuggle up to God... Or let a sometimes uncomfortable God into your daily living and decision making?*

Psalm 23 (Message Version)

God, my shepherd!

I don't need a thing.

You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
You find me quiet pools to drink from.

True to your word,
You let me catch my breath
And send me in the right direction.

Even when the way goes through Death Valley,

I'm not afraid

When you walk at my side.

Your trusty shepherd's crook

Makes me feel secure.

You serve me a six-course dinner
Right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
My cup brims with blessing.

Your beauty and love chase after me
Every day of my life.

I'm back home in the house of God

For the rest of my life.

