



The Psalms

Psalm 23 The Lord is my shepherd

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Ezekiel 34: 7–16 John 10: 11–16

To be honest, I had expected something more bucolic, something altogether more pastoral, and, frankly, more biblical. I suppose my suspicions were first roused when I spotted, through the window of the coach, a string of neon flashing lights over a sign saying 'this way to The Shepherd's Gift Shop', next to a café called 'Blessings', opposite a large concrete arch bearing the legend, in huge, plastic orange letters in Bauhaus typeface, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. Welcome to Bethlehem. More specifically, welcome to the shepherd's fields between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. I expect you know the story. There were shepherds, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Well, this was broad daylight, and there wasn't much going on flock-wise, and not a shepherd in sight. With a heavy heart, I hauled myself off the coach, past the sign telling me to leave my gun on the bus, and headed with a fairly random group of vicars towards an unlikely looking chapel, hewn into the side of the rock.

It was crammed into this cave that Psalm 23 was ruined for me. Or rather, what I had imagined Psalm 23 to be was ruined. For years I had been singing 'The Lord's my shepherd I'll not want' at practically every funeral that I took. I had heard the choir sing it every fourth evening in the cathedrals in which I worked. I knew it off by heart. Perhaps you do too.

'The most familiar and most beloved of all psalms,'¹ as one commentator puts it. Another describes the psalmist having 'a blissful lie down on the soft grass ... alongside the gentle touch of the grass beneath him, the murmur of lightly flowing water, the sight of greenery, he imagines the anticipation of good food with all its delicious smells and tastes, as at a banquet prepared lovingly for him by none other than God himself'.² Absolutely. What's not to like?

And it's what happens next where everything changes. The mood darkens. It's not quite as bucolic, not quite as pastoral, as we might have hoped.

¹ Bruggemann/Bellinger, *Psalms* (Cambridge 2014), p.122.

² Megan Daffern, *Songs of the Spirit* (SPCK 2018), p.104.

There is danger here, something treacherous is emerging, threat – literally translatable as a valley of deep darkness, but in the famous and rich phraseology of Coverdale as ‘the valley of the shadow of death’.³ But it’s ok. There is nothing to fear. Why? Because the sheep have a good and noble⁴ shepherd at hand, ready to protect, to comfort, with his trusty rod and staff.

I have often had cause to be thankful for that promise: in personal crises, when life has been tough, when the darkness has indeed been deep, deep as deep can be – I have a shepherd, a good shepherd. I can see him there now, as depicted in a thousand stained-glass windows, with his crook in his hand. His rod, his staff, to guide me, protect me, lead me home.

Wrong. Not true. As I learnt in the cave in the fields above Bethlehem. For that rod and staff are not the sort you can buy from a National Trust gift shop. They are not walking sticks. They are weapons. The big one is to drive off predators, sure. But the shorter one? That one is for you. That one is to break your legs.

I thought I’d misheard him at first, the old Palestinian guide with the rheumy eyes and the creased skin. He spoke so gently, and there was so much noise outside as the next crowd of religious tourists waited their turn. But no, I had not. The rod and the staff of Psalm 23 could help to drive off wild animals; but they were also for discipline, for punishment. Because sheep are naughty. Sheep are a bit thick. They don’t always know what is good for them. And they can sometimes do a runner, if the grass looks greener elsewhere. And the problem that the shepherd has is if one sheep wanders off, there’s a strong likelihood that others – guess what? LIKE SHEEP – will follow.

The shepherd can’t risk that. First-century shepherds were as wild as their habitat, barred from entering the city,⁵ outcasts, desperate, and dependent. To rescue a lost sheep was no mere act of kindness to the poor little sheep. It was an economic necessity. No sheep, no livelihood, no life. ‘Thy rod and thy staff’ will therefore smash the legs of the naughty sheep, once caught, to stop it wandering off; to stop it leading the others astray.

‘Thy rod and thy staff’, it transpires, offer a rather different kind of ‘comfort’ than we might have imagined.⁶

But there’s not much comfort for the shepherd. For his discipline is now, for him, an extra burden. For he now lifts up the sheep he has maimed, and places it over his shoulders. For having broken the legs of his sheep, he now has to carry it. And this image, the shepherd carrying the sheep, is amongst the earliest, if not the very earliest, depictions of Jesus Christ in antiquity. Where are they most commonly found? In the catacombs of Rome, the safest early meeting places – and, famously, burial places – for the first Christians. Christ, the Good Shepherd, bears the burden of our waywardness, our wandering, our wantonness. He is Love. And Love bears us to safety. Love brings us home.

The old Palestinian in the cave stunned us all with his tale of ‘thy rod and staff’. But he had something else to say. We were crammed into the cave, which has been hewn into a rough chapel. It had been necessary to crouch down to get through the narrow entrance into the cave, and some more substantially proportioned members of the group had found it

³ The Book of Common Prayer, Psalm 23, v.4.

⁴ See note 9.

⁵ Daffern, *op. cit.*, p.104.

⁶ Comfort in the original sense of being made strong, being changed – see Goldingay, *Psalms* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids MI 2006), p.351.

to be a challenge. The old man pointed to the entrance, and, quietly, simply, said in halting English, 'I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'.⁷ Suddenly a gospel saying which I had known so well for so long was suddenly brought home with force. Christians will hear these words of the Lord, and hear them in the fierce light of the cross.⁸ But there is a more fundamental truth. A good shepherd would literally lie down in a gap in the sheepfold – a human door.

Now if you know your John's gospel, you'll know that the previous ten verses are on a similar theme. And these previous verses suggest that the sheep that Jesus is talking about are distinctly weird. They've got names. Christ's sheep do have names. Mine is Adrian. I expect you know yours. In the Book of Common Prayer, we are told that baptism makes a child 'a member of the congregation of Christ's flock'. And a flock is exactly what we are – easily swayed by others, all too ready to behave with the utmost stupidity.

All we like sheep have gone astray,⁹ and go astray, and always will go astray.

It's what humans do, even Christian humans, especially, dare I say it, Anglican Christian humans. And that's why we need to trust in, to believe in, to hope in, a shepherd – a Good Shepherd, one who puts his money where his mouth is – or to be more precise, lays down his life for his friends. And, being his friends, we are called to love him, to follow him, to seek to be like him. So we are called, each one of us, to be Good, like Him. And the word that St John uses for Good in chapter 10 of his Gospel is *καλός*. That means rather more than just good. It means attractive. It has the sense of beautiful, but beautiful inside and out.¹⁰

I'm not sure that I am very beautiful, inside or out. But Another sees me differently. Beauty, it turns out, is in the eye of the Creator. He sees the potential for *καλός* in me, so much so that he would fashion me into something for himself by the radical force of his Love. And when that force leaves me broken, I will be so borne by that Love, and so made safe by that Love, that I shall know a feast fit for kings; I shall know His anointing, His overflowing grace, His enfolding for all eternity.

For

*The king of Love my shepherd is,
His goodness faileth never.
I nothing lack if I am his,
And he is mine – for ever.*¹¹

⁷ John 10, v.11.

⁸ See Barrett, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (Second edition, SPCK 1978), pp.373–6.

⁹ Isaiah 53, v.6.

¹⁰ Raymond Brown sees *καλός* in terms of nobility, and uses the phrase 'model shepherd'; see Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Volume 1 (Geoffrey Chapman 1966/71), p.386.

¹¹ H.W. Baker (1821–77).