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Of Sheep and Shepherds – a reflection

I think there's little doubt that the 23rd Psalm is the most well-known and well-loved Psalm in the Bible. Even those who have little or no faith, or little or no church connection, know something about this Psalm and many know how it begins: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....'

So – what about sheep and shepherds, and what relevance does this Psalm have for us today?

The setting for the Psalm: King David, who is credited with writing this Psalm, grew up in an agricultural society and worked as a shepherd., so he knew a lot about sheep and shepherding. He loved the idea of seeing God as a shepherd. The shepherd's job is to care for his flock, making sure the sheep are always safe.

Sheep are very vulnerable. In David's time wolves were a real threat and, as they are essentially herd animals, sheep are prone to panic and run into danger. To care for them properly, sheep need a shepherd to take them to the fertile areas to graze, to protect them from predators and other hazards and to keep them together so they can't stray from the group. It is easy to see how David extended this idea to show how God does this for us.

The opening four verses of the Psalm give us this wonderful image of God watching over us and the comfort and assurance that gives us:

'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside the still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake,

Even 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.

The reality is that that at times in our lives we do behave like lost sheep, wandering aimlessly, feeling vulnerable and uncertain, even afraid. To know that our Lord will be there to restore our souls and bring to us the comfort and peace we need, especially in these uncertain times, is a great blessing. It reinforces the relationship we have with God through Jesus and the love which surrounds us. Notice how

personal this is: 'my shepherd', 'I will fear no evil'. This is love poured for each one of us.

No matter how well we know this Psalm, it's worth pausing to reflect on the last two verses:

'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

The image is still personal, but no longer of a shepherd and his sheep, but of a host and his guest. This is an image of God's gifts to us that are clearly visible for all to see. Our very lives should bear witness to God's blessing and the presence of the Lord with us cannot be hidden. These are blessings which will be for all eternity. No wonder so many people take hope and comfort from this Psalm.

Lord, we give You thanks that You are with us every day of our lives, giving us rest and peace in our souls, refreshing us with the love You pour upon us. Help us to embrace that love and to seek to walk with You every day. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen

(Based on a reflection from Bendochy Church, Blairgowrie)

With love – Gill Short

1

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

2

My soul He doth restore again,
And me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteousness,
E'en for His own name's sake.

3

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear no ill;
For Thou art with me, and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still.

4

My table Thou hast furnished
In presence of my foes;
My head Thou dost with oil anoint,
And my cup overflows.

5

Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me,
And in God's house forevermore
My dwelling-place shall be.



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CALM
AND
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EVERYDAY**

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