

## Sunday Scribbling's No.6 – The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Lectionary readings<sup>1</sup> for today are; **Psalm 23. 1 Peter 2:19 - 25. John 10:1-10. Acts 2:42 - 47**

\*\*\*\*\* Psalm 23 \*\*\*\*\*

You might think that after the intensity of 'The Passion' and the joy of 'The Resurrection' that we would be heading for calmer theological waters. But no, that's not the case. So put on your best theological hat and make yourself a strong cup of coffee as we take a brief look at today's readings and see how they all hang together in the Lectionary.

The words and emotions of Psalm 23 are well known to many of us. What is not so well known is the confusion that surrounds its origin and meaning. In the NIV it is labeled as a 'Psalm of David', but according to British biblical scholar P.C. Craigie, "The identification of the psalm as a *royal psalm* poses more serious problems; the view is not implausible, but the substance of the psalm is so general and so laden with metaphor, that a specific interpretation in terms of 'royal psalmody' is, of necessity, highly hypothetical<sup>2</sup>."

He continues; "Although Psalm 23 is short and relatively free from textual and translation problems, it is nevertheless particularly difficult to interpret with respect to such matters as its form and original social or cultic setting. There has been general agreement since Gunkel's time that the psalm is a *psalm of trust or confidence*<sup>2</sup>." Which I'd suggest is precisely what we all need today.

The psalm starts with the words "**The Lord is my shepherd**", and that's the theme I've used or today's scribbling's. From our viewing platform in 2020, the psalm embodies most, if not all, of what many Christians are looking for today. No shortages. Green pastures. Quiet waters. A refreshed soul. No fear. Protection. Comfort. A prepared table. An anointing by God. To dwell in the house of God.

In other words, a shepherd who will provide for, and look after us (His sheep) in these troubled times.

**1 Peter 2** picks up the story under the passage heading of "**Living Godly lives in a Pagan Society.**"

How prescient and utterly relevant!

To try and get a handle on today's reading, keep that title in the back of your mind. Then I suggest you first read verses 11-18 (of 1 Peter 2), otherwise today's reading will simply not make sense. But even then, there are challenges with this passage which many minority groups, including battered women, have taken issue with. It's not hard to see why.

So as to enable proper comprehension of this passage it's important to understand where Peter is coming from and the situation surrounding the disciples at that time. Israel was under occupation by the Romans and the ownership of slaves (both Jew and Gentile) was common practice in the heavily patristic Jewish society that was sub-ruled by the Sanhedrin, albeit under the watchful eye of the Roman Governor, with all the Abrahamic religious laws being enforced by the Pharisees.

Now, if we are not careful, we can read verses 18 and 19 and come away with the impression that Peter is advocating subjugation, fear and physical pain.

**“<sup>18</sup> Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. <sup>19</sup> For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God.”**

That’s a tough passage to get your head around. But if we think logically for a moment this cannot be the correct biblical interpretation. Therefore, it must mean something else.

Let’s see if we can find some biblical clues to help our understanding.

- Jesus chose Peter to be the rock upon which He would build His church (Matthew 16:18). If you are a believer then what possibility, do you think, is there that Peter has made a mistake?
- Jesus taught us to **“turn the other cheek”**. (Matthew 5:39)
- Jesus also tells us that **“If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.”** (Luke 6:29b)

So what is Peter really alluding to?

Well, it won’t surprise you to learn that, like Jesus, he is pointing us towards love.

- Not the kind of love associated with consumption of an ice cream or a bar of chocolate; but the kind of love that Jesus himself had a deep and utterly conscious understanding of.
- The kind of love that is brought about by kenosis and forgiveness.
- The kind of love that that is known as ‘agape’, and which can only be found when we truly understand the anthropos of our humanity ... just as Jesus did.
- The kind of love attached to the statement **“Father, Forgive them for they know not what they do”**. (Luke 23:34)

Jesus never promoted violence, and neither is Peter doing so here. Rather, he is encouraging us to make the best of whatever position we find ourselves in and to use love as the weapon of choice so as to help us get through the tough experiences of life and thereby to find a solution.

Now I fully recognise that this is a difficult pill to swallow if you are ‘the slave’, ‘the battered housewife’ or ‘the abused child’, for example, and no one is even remotely suggesting that such terrible experiences should be encouraged or left unpunished; but with love, instead of hate and retribution, you can find a way out as he describes here: **“<sup>20</sup> But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. <sup>21</sup> To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”**

The message from Peter is to lean on The Shepherd and He will guide you.

**“<sup>25</sup> For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”**

Eminent theologian W.A. Grudem puts it this way;

*“It is not a stoic self-motivated tenacity which holds out against all opposition but rather the opposite, the trusting awareness of God’s presence and never-failing care, which is the key to righteous suffering. It is the confidence that God will ultimately right all wrongs which enables a Christian to submit to an unjust master without resentment, rebelliousness, self-pity, or despair.”<sup>3</sup>*

\*\*\*\*\* John 10:1-10 \*\*\*\*\*

Being looked after by a shepherd is not only a New Testament concept. Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11 and Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23 and 37:24 amongst others also refer to this image.

It's clear from reading John's text that Jesus see's himself as 'The Shepherd', which means that we must be sheep. To the casual reader it may sound like a comforting, friendly and fluffy environment to be in, but of course there is more to Jesus' use of this image than first meets the eye.

In the first verse Jesus lays down the rules – the only way to achieve salvation is through Him, just as we have been taught in numerous other biblical passages. He makes it quite clear that any other perceived route to heaven does not exist; hence the classification of being a thief or a robber, who, when exposed, will be subject to retribution and penalties. But who exactly is Jesus referring to here? Maybe it's non believers; maybe it's evil doer's; maybe it's Satan.

In v2 Jesus tells us that **“<sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him”**. It seems that **both** God and Jesus are involved in “overseeing our souls” and here Jesus is reinforcing His previous teachings where; **“<sup>6</sup>Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”** (John 14:6-7).

Read that last paragraph again; **<sup>7</sup>“If you really know me, you will know my Father. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”** That's a truly mind blowing statement for Jesus.

As a four legged sheep you would indeed know your shepherds voice, and when he called you, you would go to him. Indeed when a sheep is separated from the flock the shepherds say that the sheep experiences considerable distress at being 'lost'.

If only it were that simple for us humans.

If only we could recognize the voice of Jesus as verse 3 alludes to.

If only we could really understand the implications of His words; **<sup>10</sup>“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”**

\*\*\*\*\* Acts 2: 42-47 \*\*\*\*\*

Fortunately, all becomes clearer in Acts 2, as written by Luke.

He reports that the flock; **“<sup>42</sup> devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”**

Notice that there is no mention of wine.

And we know that His body has been broken ... yet now he has now risen.

Verse 46 is interesting. It reads thus; **“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”**

At first glance you might reasonably ask ‘Why would the new followers of Christ still be going to the Temple?’ Christ has just been resurrected, and Christianity as we know it today was not yet in full swing – in fact, you could argue that it did not start in its current form until the Nicene Creed was adopted in AD325, or possibly later when Emperor Constantine chose Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in AD380.

So it’s entirely reasonable that the new converts, many of them Jewish, would continue to go to the Temple to continue the religious discussions that they would have been having in their houses.

I.H. Marshall, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen explains; “They met together in a spirit of unanimity in *the temple*. This could simply mean that they used the courtyard of the temple as a meeting place (cf. 5:12), but it is also implied that they took part in the daily worship of the temple (3:1).

The daily worship consisted of the offering of a burnt offering and incense in the morning and the afternoon; it was carried on by the priests, but there was always a congregation of people who stood where they could see the priests going about their duties and entering the sanctuary; they took part in prayer, and they received a blessing from the priest.

Since the early Christians believed that they had a true relationship with God through the Messiah, it was natural for them to take part in the worship of God in the accepted manner<sup>4</sup>.”

He continues; “Theological questions about the replacement of the temple sacrifices by the spiritual sacrifice by Jesus had probably not yet occurred to them. Nor were the Christians excluded from the temple by the religious authorities. At the same time, however, the Christians met together for their own religious gatherings. They met in one another’s *homes* and broke bread together in a spirit of intense and sincere joy.

The idea is that they held common meals which included the breaking of bread; we may compare Paul’s description of the common church meal at Corinth, which included the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34). The joy that characterizes these gatherings was no doubt inspired by the Spirit (13:52) and may have been associated with the conviction that the Lord Jesus was present with them (cf. 2:45)<sup>4</sup>.”

Which conveniently brings us to the thorny subject of why, especially at this time, the locked down sheep of this age are not allowed to have “Private” communion services at home and share the Eucharist on Zoom or some other similar electronic, remote platform. Fortunately, this weeks Church Times comes to the rescue with an eloquent explanation by The Revd. Angela Tilby, Canon Emeritus of Christ Church, Oxford.

You can find it here:

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/24-april/comment/columnists/angela-tilby-virtual-bread-sharing-is-not-the-eucharist>

May The Shepherd bless you all and keep you safe in the sheep pen of salvation.

Amen.

1. All biblical passages from the NIV.

2. Craigie, P. C. (2004). [\*Psalms 1–50\*](#) (2nd ed., Vol. 19, p. 204). Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electronic.

3. Grudem, W. A. (1988). [\*1 Peter: an introduction and commentary\*](#) (Vol. 17, pp. 134–135). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
4. Marshall, I. H. (1980). [\*Acts: an introduction and commentary\*](#) (Vol. 5, pp. 90–91). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

**To finish: A short prayer utilising the words of Psalm 23.**

Lord Jesus ...  
hear my prayer.

Lead me to the still waters of life and refresh my soul.  
Guide me along the right paths,  
especially now, as we are in tough times.  
Help me to trust in you and fear no evil.  
Help me to understand that you are my shepherd, and I, am your sheep.  
Comfort me.  
Anoint my head with heavenly oil and surround me with your love.  
Show me the sheep gate ...  
that I might enter in and dwell there with you ...  
now and forever more.

Amen.

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