Psalm 23

The Divine Shepherd

A Psalm of David.
The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

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
my whole life long.

Prayer

Good Shepherd,
you call us by name,
and we know your voice.
Open the gate for us,
that we may come and go freely,
have life, and have it abundantly.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

as you, O God, are our shepherd,
let us not fear, but confess our sin
so that you may restore our souls.
Holy One, we confess to you and to one another that we have not always followed Christ’s example. When we have been abused, we have been abusive in return. We have gone astray. Lead us back into your fold and guard our souls in Jesus’ name.

The promise of our faith is that if we entrust ourselves to the One who judges justly, we need not feel threatened, for we will be returned to righteousness. Having been brought back into the safety of God’s fold, may we all know God’s peace today and always.

Amen.

John 10:1-10

Jesus the Good Shepherd

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Reflection

Loving God, we pray that your Holy Spirit will strengthen us to be devoted to the teachings of your Word, that through it we may hear your voice and follow it into eternal life.

Amen.
It is one of the greatest gifts that Jesus had, the ability to communicate his message to the people around him in ways that drew on scenes and images from their everyday lives, and that touched also on deep theological understanding rooted in the tradition in which he and his audience had been raised: the scriptures of Israel, of history, and prophets and poetry, that speak so powerfully of the nature of God.

Today we hear Jesus speaking of what it is to be a good shepherd – indeed, to be the Good Shepherd of God’s people. Everyone who heard him speak would have understood what Jesus meant, because they would all have been familiar not only with the shepherds who watched over flocks of sheep in the Palestinian countryside, and also because they would have remembered that God is cast as the shepherd of Israel in the Psalms, and even more, that the Kings of Israel, like David himself who started out as a shepherd-boy, were designated as the Shepherds of their people, given a sacred duty to watch over, protect and nurture their collective and individual lives.

All these ideas are held together in what Jesus says, and should have been clear in the minds of those listening. They should have understood only too clearly that here is the one whom God has sent to be their shepherd – like God, like a King – he is the one who will lead them to green pasture and by still waters, protecting them from danger and death, and guiding them in the paths that lead to such fullness of life as only God can provide.

Unlike many who have come before, who were false prophets, out to deceive, Jesus is the true prophet and the true King, the one who is both human and divine, who will save the people, if they have eyes to see and ears to hear. For like shepherds in those days, Jesus walks at the head of the flock – calling them, showing the way, leading them on, not driving them from behind.

Yet the gospel records that the people – even his disciples – did not understand what he meant. All too often, they – like ourselves – can be slow to understand, deliberately hard of hearing when we don’t want to listen, and deaf to our calling to be God’s people in the present world and present moment. But to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd is to be led into the light of God’s kingdom, and the fullness of life which is ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus himself – and that is the most important thing we can know and believe in this Easter season.

To follow Jesus, we must learn to listen for his voice calling us; the same voice that called to Samuel in the darkness of the night, the voice that spoke out of the silence to Elijah, the voice that summoned each of the disciples to get up, and follow. Whenever we hear that voice, that speaks to our hearts and to our minds, we need to have the same trust in the good purposed of God that these others had: trust in God’s intentions to lead us from where we are or where we have been into a future where we can become all that God desires. People made whole, people made new, people made in the image of Christ.

To hear that voice can at times be difficult; it is hard to listen when our minds and hearts are distracted by the busy-ness of our modern lives, or preoccupied with the challenges and obstacles that we each encounter; hard to hear clearly, when the noise of the world and all its concerns drown out everything else, even the voice of God.
In these days, when we are weeks into our time of physical isolation from one another, and may remain so for weeks or even months yet to come, many of us look for ways of using this enforced quarantine in creative and productive ways (over and above our daily time of exercise outside). Homes, gardens, work projects, reading lists, learning new skills and practising old ones all have their place in developing a new rhythm of life to fit our circumstances.

The danger might be, however, to allow our pre-occupation with the troubles of the world, the constraints of our situation, to lead either to total inaction in the face of overwhelming worry, or the hyperactivity that displaces our anxieties for a time. In between these two extremes, as people of faith who long to hear God speak to us, and to be drawn closer to God, finding balance between action and inaction, between being and doing, means finding time for reflection and prayer. It is in silence, after all, that God speaks most clearly, and is heard most truly.

And if we can use these days to rediscover the importance of times of quiet in nurturing faith and understanding, we are simply doing what Jesus himself would often do, which was to retreat from the pressure and demands of the crowds and the disciples, to find a quiet place where he found time to speak not just to God, but with God, and be renewed for the journey that lay ahead.

**Prayer**

O God our Shepherd, in a dangerous world, let us hear your voice and come and go through your gate.

We pray for the whole church, that we may be devoted to your Word and to universal fellowship, being generous to all who have need.

We pray for the earth, for green pastures and still waters, that we may restore them to the goodness and purity that they had at the time that you created them.

We pray for the people of the world, their nations, and leaders, that your wisdom and peace may govern all, so that no one will fear.
We pray for all those in need,
for those in want,
those ill and those dying,
that we may be the banquet that you set before them
as we anoint them, feed them, and comfort them
in your name.

We pray for ourselves, our families, and those we love.
May no one live in fear; may all dwell in your presence.
Blessed are you, Great Shepherd,
who, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit,
gives us goodness and mercy,
leads us down right paths, and restores our souls.

Our prayers we offer in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ,
and as he taught his disciples to pray, so now we pray to you:

Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory
are yours, now and for ever.

Amen.