Psalm 23
The Lord Is My Shepherd

A Series Of Reflections And Prayers
The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want

by Iona Pringle

REFLECTION

Psalm 23 is probably one of the best known passages in the Bible, but sometimes we can become so familiar with the words that we may forget the meaning behind them.

So often, the words can come across as just another platitude to make us feel better, when in reality they not only bring comfort, but are also very challenging words.

Words which challenge us to have complete confidence and total trust in God's ability to shepherd us. Words which challenge us to rely on God's promises to protect us and provide for our every need. Words which challenge us to give God full control of our lives. Words which challenge us to have a real personal relationship with God knowing that we belong to Him and are safe and secure in His care.

Think about what the words of this Psalm mean to you. Do you just think it is a nice poem which somebody else has written or can you also call the words your own? Do you let the words penetrate deep into your heart recognising your need for a Good Shepherd in your life? Like the Psalmist, do you truly know the Lord as your Shepherd?

There was once a competition for the best public reading of Psalm 23 and among the competitors were an actor and an elderly clergyman. The actor recited the Psalm powerfully and without a flaw. Eventually it was the minister's turn and, in a rather faltering voice, he began, 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. At the end of the competition, the judges put their heads together and announced the prize went to the minister. 'I'm sorry you didn't win,' said the old man to the actor, 'I think you deserved to'. But the actor replied quietly, 'Not at all, there was one big difference, I know the Psalm, but you know the Shepherd.'

Many people can recite this Psalm but the true meaning only comes alive when you know in your heart that the Lord is your Shepherd. The knowledge of that relationship not only comforts and strengthens us but also it challenges us to look into our hearts, to see the love the Good Shepherd has for us and to respond by faithfully following Him and committing our lives to Him.

A few years ago I was given this bracelet by a church congregation that I did some work with and it was a very thoughtful gift as each colourful bead or charm represents the verses from Psalm 23 and as I wear this bracelet it reminds me that God is always with me; that He is my Shepherd; that I belong to Him forever and nothing can separate me from His love. Wearing the bracelet is also a way of proclaiming to others that the Lord is my Shepherd while also challenging me to hold true to that relationship.

The Psalmist declares in verse 1 that, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.' It is a bold statement which speaks of a personal relationship with God.

When we look at each word individually, it shows the power of this statement:

In saying 'THE' it makes it clear there is only one Lord - there is no one but Him.

Saying 'LORD' acknowledges the Lord as creator and ruler of all.

'IS' states that the relationship is present tense - not was or will be but is right now. 'Is' also makes clear the Psalmist's assurance - there are no ifs or maybes or hopes but rather the Lord is my Shepherd.

'MY' makes it personal - He doesn't say the Lord is the Shepherd or the Lord is our Shepherd but rather the Lord is my Shepherd.
The word 'SHEPHERD' states the nature of the relationship but it goes beyond merely feeding, guarding and guiding the sheep. It implies ruler-ship, a relationship of provision and authority to receiving and obeying. Even with this authority, a shepherd is the sheep's companion and true friend.

'I' again emphasises the personal nature of the relationship.

'SHALL' means it is guaranteed both now and forever.

'NOT' says never will I have a need that is not taken care of as long as I accept the promise of the Lord.

'WANT' doesn't mean I can ask for anything I want and he will provide it like a genie granting every wish but rather it means that needs will be met.

Only when you can say, 'The Lord is my Shepherd can you say 'I shall not want' - the second part of the statement is dependent on the first.

So can you truly say that the Lord is your Shepherd and that you are His sheep? Maybe you are happy to call the Lord your Shepherd but are you happy to be known as a sheep?

Sheep are not the brightest of creatures - they're stupid and stubborn - would we not rather be likened to a soaring eagle or a cunning tiger!? But the point is that no one cares for the sheep in the same way that a shepherd does and despite their stupidity, the shepherd still shows continual care for His sheep.

A good Shepherd is all a sheep needs since a good shepherd, by his very nature will always provide and protect his sheep at all costs giving each one individual care. The good shepherd knows and understands his sheep but the sheep also need to know the shepherd and to listen to his voice - it is a relationship.

We are His sheep, but, will you allow the Lord to be your Shepherd?

The Psalmist says that when the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. We live in a consumer culture where most of society wants everything. So many people are trapped in a 'prison of want' - always wanting something better - a new car, a new job, a new house, a new relationship and they assume that getting that one thing will give them satisfaction and yet if they do get it, they end up just wanting more!

It can be so easy to be seduced into thinking that happiness comes from getting everything you want instead of recognizing and wanting what you already have. So often, we are more aware of what we don't have and can become consumed by what we lack instead of grateful for our many blessings - driven to get more instead of content to celebrate enough.

True contentment isn't found in having an abundance of wealth but rather it is found in knowing you already have a wealth of abundance. A relationship with God brings true contentment - He is our satisfaction, in fact, he exceeds whatever we may think we desire. As the Psalmist says, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.'

In a sense, this first verse summarises the whole Psalm, while the rest of the Psalm speaks of why this statement is true.

In his book, 'I shall not want', Robert Ketchum tells the story of a Sunday School teacher who asked if any of the kids could quote the entire Psalm 23 :

A four year old girl raised her hand and the teacher was a bit sceptical whether she could recite the whole Psalm. However, the little girl stood up, faced the class, bowed and said, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, that's all I want.' She then bowed and sat down again.

The girl may have missed a few verses, but she really captured the Psalmist's heart of being utterly contented in the Shepherd's care and not desiring anything else but that.
When you truly know the Lord as your Shepherd, you know you have a God who hears you, you have the power of love behind you, the Holy Spirit within you, all heaven ahead of you, you have grace for every sin, direction for every turn, a candle for every corner, and an anchor for every storm - you have everything you need.

May we truly know the confidence and contentment which is found from a relationship with God and may we like the Psalmist be able to boldly say from deep within our hearts that, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.'

He Makes Me Lie Down In Green Pastures
by David Denniston

WORDS OF INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE READINGS

In the previous reflection, we looked at the fact that the Lord is our Shepherd. It is clear that this is a theme that is not limited simply to one psalm. Rather it runs through the Old and New Testaments. The people of Israel regarded God as their shepherd and Jesus refers to himself as the 'Good Shepherd'. This is all the more remarkable and noteworthy as shepherds were generally regarded with a degree of disdain in ancient Israel.

In this theme of 'green pastures', we again find that this psalm is not the only place where God's people are likened to sheep who find pasture in safety. Both Old Testament prophets on the one hand and Jesus himself on the other, refer to pastures for the flock of God.

In the following three readings, we turn first once again to the familiar words of the 23rd Psalm, but also to words form the prophecy of Ezekiel and words of Jesus as relayed to us by the Apostle John.

READ Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34: 11-16, St John 10: 7-10

REFLECTION

Green pastures. What picture does that conjure up for you?

For most of my Christian life when I read this passage I had in mind a large field of green grass, perhaps on a rolling hillside with the well-fed flock quietly grazing and resting. It was a very British image of a pasture I suppose.

It was familiar, comforting, pleasant.

'He makes me lie down in green pastures'

And then about some years ago I was privileged to be able to journey to the Holy Land and see many of the sites of biblical significance. The whole experience of that trip brought alive for me so many parts of Scripture. It was a truly wonderful experience.

One day we set out in our coach on the road from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea... the road to Jericho... the road along which the man in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan was travelling when he was assaulted and robbed. At one point on the road, we stopped and got out of the coach the better to reflect upon the forbidding landscape and to hear a reading of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We were not terribly far from Bethlehem, there among the barren hills of the Judean desert.

Of course, this area is presently part of the Palestinian West Bank. But historically it would have been the area in which David grew up as the youngest son of Jesse... the area where he took care of his sheep.
That very thought struck me on that day as we stood in the baking heat looking across the vast and barren wilderness. The reason we had stopped had been to contemplate the Parable of the Good Samaritan, but my focus changed when a young Palestinian lad leading a small flock of bedraggled sheep and scraggy goats crossed the road and led them on into the surrounding rocky desert. Two thoughts came to mind. Firstly, would not this have been what David was doing as a shepherd in these very hills these thousands of years ago and secondly, to where was this lad leading the flock? It all seemed barren. And then in the distance I caught site of a patch of green... and then I noticed that there were more of them dotted around the otherwise barren and forbidding hills.

And there and then, my understanding of this verse in Psalm 23 was utterly changed.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures*

This is not a picture of rolling green hills in our British Island. This is a picture of a shepherd leading his flock through barren places, always searching out for patches of pasture where he might graze the sheep. And so in this Psalm, as elsewhere in Scripture, it is no wonder that the sheep are so dependent on the Shepherd!

In our country, the shepherd, farmer, or crofter will gather his sheep and lead them into a field of rich grazing where he may leave them to happily feed. Not so in the Middle East where the shepherd must ever be looking out for the next patch of greenery to which to lead his little flock.

And that, it seems to me, is the picture being depicted in this psalm.

We all know that in our lives - in our Christian lives - we seem to be so often wandering through barren and dangerous places.

Sometimes our faith seems fragile

Sometimes temptation seems ready to pounce at every turn

Sometimes we feel we are by failure or danger or difficulty or darkness

Sometimes we are weary, empty, hungry, threatened...

We are like sheep wandering in the wilderness, feeling lost in wastelands.

Where is the Shepherd?

Where is he leading us?

To green pastures!

Green pastures where we may feed.

Green pastures where we can lie down.

And that leads to one final thought.

This verse from the psalm is not simply about provision in the wilderness, although it is certainly about that! It is about protection in danger.
Sheep will not 'lie down' unless they feel completely secure and entirely safe.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures*

Ours is a Shepherd who provides for us in the barren and bleak places.

Ours is a Shepherd who protects us in the difficult and dangerous places.

And so, with him, we may feed freely and settle securely.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures*

**PRAYER**

Good Shepherd,  
who ever leads us;  
bring us to the green pastures, that we who have walked through the wilderness times,  
may come to feast on your abundant provision.

Good Shepherd, who ever watches over us;  
Leads us through the barren places,  
to the place of your safety,  
that we might gladly lie down in peace;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

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**He Leads Me Beside Still Waters**  
*by Suzie Stark*

**READ** Psalm 23, Revelation 22: 1-17

**REFLECTION**

For a few moments let's take time out - come with me to a different place and a different time ... close your eyes if you wish and imagine . . .

Sitting on a sandy beach,  
bare legs and bare arms feeling the warmth of the summer sun,  
the sand warm to the touch,  
feeling the merest hint of a breeze.  
hardly a sound to interrupt your thoughts,  
the salty smell of the river Forth,  
the blue water,  
the cloudless sky,  
the sunlight reflecting off the water,  
diamond sparkles to dazzle the eyes,  
the merest hint of a wave, lapping the shore.

. . . serene, calm, still and that day, that moment is one of my most treasured memories.

Sitting on the beach at Earlsferry as a young teenager, eagerly participating in the Scripture Union Seaside Mission,  
hungry and thirsty for stories of Jesus, singing songs the words of which stay with after nearly forty years:
"By blue Galilee, Jesus walked of old, by blue Galilee wondrous things he told"
Was the Firth of Forth, flowing out to the North Sea, anything like the Sea of Galilee to look at?
When Jesus walked along its shores, or along the shores of the river Jordan, was he mesmerised by the sparkles on
the water, dazzled by the light, soothed by the quiet sounds of the still waters?

Throughout the gospels, the whole of the Bible, indeed, water plays such an important role. In desert lands with arid mountain
landscapes it is not hard to imagine the significance of a flowing stream or river that would provide water for the animals to drink,
water for people to drink and cook with and wash in.

A tiny spring, bubbling to the surface high up in the hills would be a Godsend, literally to those who passed by, quenching thirst and
wetting parched lips with its crystal clear, cold waters.

From tiny spring to a larger stream, the waters flow before
feeding down into a larger river. A wide river, used to water crops
and irrigate fields as it continued its journey down towards sea or Lake. Always flowing and moving but so often
seeming still and tranquil in contrast to a swollen river, flowing in spate which brought danger, threatening to sweep
animals, people, homes, shelters away.

It is of little wonder that the psalmist speaks of still waters, to be led beside still waters brings to mind safety, to
bend low over the water and drink without fear, to walk into the gently flowing waters to be cooled down, to sit
quietly beside the still waters in quiet contemplation, to be still oneself.

The waters of a stream or river are still but not stagnant - as long as there is sufficient water flowing then there is,
within its depths, life and movement.

Drifting slowly along the river brings life and sustains life: - fish for catching, water fowl for eating - water for
drinking, cleansing wounds, for healing.

The reading from Revelation talks about the river that flows through the streets of the heavenly city, crystal clear,
and on its banks grow the trees which bear the leaves for the healing of the nations - again, precious water that
sustains life.

And in another river, a very different river, Jesus was baptised. The River Jordan was where John the Baptist carried
out his ministry and where, as we know, Jesus came to be baptized.

So let us consider for a moment our own baptism -
'By water and the Holy Spirit,
God claims us as his own,
washes us from sin,
and sets us free from the power of death.'

The cleansing power of water and the Holy Spirit to wash us free from sin and death, first encountered at our
Baptism is still at work in our lives today.

And listen, too, to the words that Christ himself spoke to a foreign woman who came to a well to draw water and
who came away with so much more . . .

Jesus said "...those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty." The water of life, knowledge that
will never dry up, that will sustain us for all eternity, living waters.
The saying goes that still waters run deep.

We read of water in the Scriptures and we learn much.
Still waters run deep, sustaining life and healing our wounds, cleansing us from sin through Holy Baptism. May we all, as the Psalmist before us, walk in the company of the Good Shepherd, beside calm still waters that soothe our troubled hearts, that inspire us, refresh us and will that sustain us our whole lives through. Still waters, living waters, healing rivers - Lead us beside them Lord, we pray.

God Restores My Soul
by Ruth Gillett

READ Psalm 23, Isaiah 40 : 10-12, 25-31

REFLECTION

When it hasn't been your day, your week, your month - what do you turn to ? Chocolate ? Alcohol ? When you are overwhelmed or exhausted by life, what helps you to relax and chill out ? Perhaps a night on the town, a good book, or a long walk, are more your style ? We probably all have several things we turn to, to help us unwind or get back onto an even keel. Because, if one thing doesn't work, maybe the next one will. But do they always help ? Do you always feel better afterwards ? Or sometimes, does nothing seem to help

I wonder where God is on our list of things we turn to ? Or do we keep God in reserve, for emergency use only ? Do we have to be in a crisis before we ask God for help ?

The Psalmist says "God restores my soul", because he recognises that he cannot restore himself - and neither can we ! However hard we try, however reluctant we may be to admit it, there are some things we cannot do ourselves. Although we may temporarily hide from problems, deaden pain, or ignore a situation, for lasting help, for true restoration and renewal, we need God, because only God can restore us.

In our reading from the book of Isaiah, the Israelites have been defeated, and are living in exile, far from home. They feel lost, disconnected, overwhelmed. They believe God has abandoned them. Isaiah's words to them from God, are challenging, soul-stirring, uplifting.

God reminds the Israelites that he created the world and everything in it. He knows what's going on. He is in charge. He hears their prayers. He is with them. And, in his time, he will renew and restore them.

God knew and loved the Israelites, as he knows and loves each one of us.

There will be times in all our lives, when we are the weak and the wobbly sheep that the shepherd lovingly carries. Sometimes, when we are despairing, lost, disconnected, God comforts us, wiping away our tears. But that isn't always what we need. When we feel so overwhelmed or crushed beneath our problems that we can't see beyond them, can't see anything else, then we too may need to be reminded of who God is. Reminded that God is bigger, stronger, and more powerful, than anything we will ever face.

Asking God for help, is not 'wishing on a star', it's asking for help from the one who created the stars ! . . . and the universe ! . . . and everything that it contains ! But more than that, we are asking for help from God who delights in us ! Who stands ready to help us. Who wants to support us, to strengthen us, to guide us.

When we talk to God in prayer, we can be confident that he always hears us. He is never too tired to listen. Never too busy for us. Never distracted. God is always there. Listening. Patient. Loving. Wanting to help. Waiting to be asked. Probably wishing we'd turned to him sooner, instead of struggling alone, reluctant to ask for help.

So often, we are determined to be independent, to prove that we don't need anyone else, that we don't turn to God for help. So our problems increase, our burdens grow heavier. We become more overwhelmed, more fragile, more exhausted, more lost, more disconnected, and ever more in need of God's restoration.
You may be interested to know that in the dictionary, the word 'restore' has several slightly different meanings.

Restore can mean to **give back** something that has been lost or stolen. God promises us his peace and joy, but too often, we are guilty of allowing his gifts to be stolen from us, squeezed out of us by life, and the things around us. But God can restore these to us, if we ask him.

Restore can also mean to return something to its **former condition**. When we think of God restoring us, it’s probably when we are overwhelmed, damaged, hurting or broken. Then, God puts our broken pieces back together, repairing us, and restoring us to our former condition.

Fortunately for us, this is not a one-time deal, because we repeatedly need this sort of restoration. So this becomes an ongoing process - God has restored us, God does restore us, and God will restore us - throughout this life, whatever difficulties or demands, traumas or tensions we face.

But to restore something, can also mean to return it to its **original condition**. Completely renewing it, so that it becomes what it was originally created to be. Our relationship with God was damaged by sin, and needs this sort of restoration. Our relationship with God needs to be completely renewed and transformed - before it can be as God originally intended.

During this season of Advent, we look forward to the birth of the babe of Bethlehem - who was a first step in God’s salvation plan for the world. But we also look far beyond that, in anticipation and expectation, as we await Christ’s return at the end of time. Only then, will our relationship with God be fully restored to its original condition. Only then, will we finally come know God in the way he originally intended. Only then, will our restoration be complete, perfect, and last for the whole of eternity!

Of course, as with all prayer, when we ask God for restoration, that does not compel him to do what we asked. God always hears and answers our prayers, but he may answer ‘yes’, or ‘no’, or ‘not yet’ to our requests.

And beware! Because when God does say ‘yes’ to us, the way he chooses to act, may not be what we were expecting. There are as many ways for God to restore us, as there are ways for us to need his restoring touch.

For instance, when we ask God for help, although he may not make a problem vanish, he will always help us through it. Strengthening, supporting, and guiding, as he walks in step with us. Enabling us to face the situation, or cope with the problem. Until one day, we realise that we have not only faced, but also survived, something we may have feared would destroy us.

If we look back, we can probably all see times when we have experienced God’s restoring grace at work in our lives. Sometimes his touch is so gentle that we barely notice at the time, only realising later what he has done. Sometimes he comes to us like a whirlwind or a refining fire - perhaps turning everything upside down, pruning away things we don’t need, destroying things that may be harmful to us, restoring us in a surprising way. Then his restoration may leave us trembling and breathless at his power and love for us.

Sometimes we need to stop and look back, to see how God has helped us in the past, so that we can thank him. Recalling how God has previously restored us, can help us to trust him to restore us again. Believing that God will continue to restore us, can help us to trust our future to him.

Isaiah told the Israelites ‘God strengthens the weary and gives vitality to those worn down by age and care. Those who trust in the Eternal God will regain their strength. They will soar on wings as eagles.’

Centuries later, Jesus said, ‘Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.’ When it hasn’t been your day, your week, your month, or even your year, God says ‘I’ll be there for you’. So don’t wait until you are in a crisis, clinging on by your fingertips, flattened under your burdens, take God at his word, and ask for his help - you may be amazed by what he does for you!
He Leads Me in Right Paths
by Bridget Cameron

**READ** Psalm 23, Isaiah 35:8-10, Jeremiah 6:16, John 10:1-11

**REFLECTION**

There is a fascination in paths. In childhood, there is a great attraction in the narrow country paths such as might have been used by the characters in Beatrix Potter. This type of path can disappear between bushes, dodge about in a wood, cross a tiny bridge, go through a narrow gate and emerge in a field. It then becomes obvious that the path leads to a group of cottages. Exploration of such a delight is often quelled by an accompanying adult who would say: 'But we don't know where it goes to and it might be muddy.'

'We don't know where it goes to.' In following unknown paths, one needs some kind of guide. It could be a human guide taking you or it could be a guidebook with a map. In difficulties, it helps to have a compass. It is essential to know where a path goes to. Old paths always have a destination because they developed for a purpose, sometimes simply a short-cut between two places as it would be longer for a pedestrian to go by the road. In country areas, many old paths predate the roads as they were formed when all passage was on foot or on horseback. In the highlands, many routes from one glen to the next enabled a community to reach the nearest church on a Sunday.

Many people enjoy walking holidays. In France, there is a nationwide network of pedestrian routes which do not just rely on signposts, but have a system of way-marks, mainly red and white stripes of paint, put on fence posts, telegraph poles, corners of walls and, in open countryside, sometimes on stones on the ground. You learn to look for these and to interpret what they mean; if you are observant and also use your map and guidebook, you are kept on the right path.

The Bible has a lot to say about paths. They are paths illustrative of the path of life, our way through life. In the passage from Jeremiah, God offers ancient paths and the good way but these are not accepted. In life, we often stand at crossroads and look. Sometimes one road looks obvious and right and is clearly signed to where we want to go, but in retrospect, we wonder where the other way might have taken us. As in Robert Frost's poem

'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.'

It is at times like these that followers of Christ hope and pray for guidance and leading, because our decisions can be life-changing. The passage in Isaiah describes the pilgrim path, the Way of Holiness, where people can walk safely on their path through life. We can also find a description of the path in 'The Pilgrim’s Progress', where Christian often felt badly in need of a guide on his way to the Celestial City. He was told that the right path was always straight and narrow although there were often other alternatives. After some of his misadventures, often a helper would appear to rescue him or give him courage. If we look back, we may also remember times when someone, known or almost unknown, gave help or encouragement at a crucial moment.

In Psalm 23, the Lord, the shepherd, leads us in right paths. 'Right paths' are also translated as paths of righteousness, or of justice or virtue, sure and true paths. He leads us in them 'for his name’s sake;' he is true to his
name, it is part of his character and he can do no other. In the Living Bible, this verse is given as 'he helps me do what honours him the most.' He guides his flock, knowing what are safe ways and the paths which are right for us and appropriate. Those who follow can safely trust him. In the passage from John's gospel, Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd; his hearers would have been familiar with the words of Psalm 23.

But what about equipment for the journey of life? Another psalm gives the pilgrim some help. It says: 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (Psalm 119, v.105). In our study of the Bible, we find a guide to Christian conduct, standards and moral code. Applying these precepts can guide us in decision-making, can help us to decide what is right or wrong, to differentiate the worse from the better. And there is also the power of prayer that we may be shown the right path. Sometimes guidance can seem quite clear. I heard recently of a friend who, well on in life, found it necessary to make a career change. One of the options he looked at was the ministry, as he already had teaching experience and communication skills.

Soon afterwards no less than three friends, quite independently, asked him if he had ever considered training for the ministry. He took that as a clear pointer, and that was the way he went.

We have already considered recreational walking on paths and the necessary equipment for route-finding. Many people prefer to walk in guided groups. The leader takes responsibility. He knows the way, how long it will take, and the best places to stop for a rest. Not only that, he will carry in his rucksack basic first aid equipment in case of anyone taking a tumble. He can judge the ability and strength of the individuals and is ready to offer help if needed at hard places. Much of what the leader does and is prepared for resembles the role of the Good Shepherd. In following Christ, we can trust him to take us on the road suitable for us, to look after our needs and to bring us safely to our destination. Many people, as they go through life, feel aware of the leading of the Holy Spirit, often to places, and into situations which surprise them; sometimes they only realise this in retrospect.

An anonymous writer once composed a hymn based on Psalm 23. It concluded:

'So where he leads me, I can safely go
And in the blest hereafter I shall know
Why in His wisdom He hath led me so.'

May we be so led and guided.

PRAYER

O Lord, our Shepherd and Leader, on our journey we have been helped, encouraged and comforted by many people. We remember before you those whom you have given us as companions, spouses, families, old friends, people whose existence matters to us and whose departure would leave us feeling lost and deprived. Some of them may have already passed on but we cherish their memories and what they gave us.

There are others who appeared briefly to help us on our way, to pull us out of the Slough of Despond or give cheering company on the Hill Difficulty. They moved out of our lives and our paths have not crossed again. Perhaps they were angels or at least messengers of your love and care. For all these we give you thanks and praise.

As we continue on our journey, we pray with St Columba
Be thou a bright flame before us
Be thou a guiding star above us
Be thou a smooth path below us
Be thou a kindly shepherd behind us
Today, tonight, and forever. Amen
Even Though I Walk Through The Darkest Valley,  
I Fear No Evil, For You Are With Me  
by David Denniston  


REFLECTION  

‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.’  

As we have already seen in our reflections month by month, Psalm 23 is reassuring. The image of the shepherd guiding, guarding and feeding his flock is comforting.  

But in this month's phrase, the comfort is offered in the midst of much darker circumstances than have previously been described. The psalmist has written confidently that God guides him in the paths of righteousness, but now follows this immediately with 'though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death'.  

To be led in paths of righteousness sounds good, especially after we have been in green pastures and by still waters! But then comes the valley of the shadow...  

It is as if the Psalmist is saying that paths of righteousness may not always lead to still waters. Sometimes they will lead to dark valleys. The assurance that the Shepherd is with us and leading us is not a guarantee of a trouble free journey.  

The Shepherd is with us, not to make life easy, but to surround us with love and to give us strength for the next step forward.  

‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.’  

Sometimes, the path on which we are led, will take us through dark valleys. It has to be. One hymn expresses it well.  

‘Not for ever in green pastures  
do we ask our way to be;  
but the steep and rugged pathway  
may we tread rejoicingly  

Not for ever by still waters  
would we rest and idly stay;  
but would smite the living fountains  
from the rocks along our way'  

The comfort and assurance we are offered, is in knowing that even in these dark valleys the Shepherd is with us - so we need not fear. HE is with us to comfort and strengthen us.  

This is affirmed in the prophecy if Isaiah when God says 'Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine'  

God assures us that he will be with us, even though we pass through waters or rivers; even though we walk through fire... 'Do not fear, for I am with you' he says 'You are precious in my sight'  

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. We remember in this season how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days. The gospels tell us that he had been baptised by John in the Jordan, affirmed by God and
anointed by the Holy Spirit. Luke says he returned from the Jordan full of the Holy Spirit! Still waters and green pastures indeed. And then Luke says 'and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness'.

Yes . . . led . . . The right paths took Jesus from a place of great blessing to a place of hard testing. But God was as much with him in the desert and the testing as he was in the River and the baptism.

Lent also is the time when we journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem... towards the Cross... towards his death.

*though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*

The phrase in the Psalm may not mean only death... it is a description of any deep and dark and dangerous valley in life. But it certainly includes death, and so is an assurance and strength and comfort to us that even in the shadow of death... whether the shadow of bereavement in the face of the death of a loved one or the dark journey of our own death, we need not fear, for the Shepherd is still with us. 'Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me'.

Indeed, as we will be reminded over the coming weeks, the Good Shepherd is not only one who is with us on that dark journey, but he has himself gone that way and is no stranger to death. It is he who is with us, who accompanies us, comforts us, and strengthens us in the valley of the shadow of death.

Paul affirms that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ . . .not even death.

One of many versions of Psalm 23 that are available, is one which comes from the Native American tradition. In that version we read;

*Sometime, it may be very soon, it may be longer, it may be a long, long time, He will draw me into a narrow place between mountains. It is dark there but I'll not turn back, and I'll not be afraid, for it is in there between those mountains that the Shepherd Chief will meet me*

**PRAYER**

Lord, you are our Shepherd. You make us lie down in green pastures, you lead us beside still waters, you guide us in right paths.

We could so happily spend all our time on the green pastures and by the still waters . . .content.

But when the dark clouds begin to block out the sun, or the path on which you call us seems to lead us into dark valleys we can all too readily begin to fear and panic.

When we tread these dark and difficult and dangerous ways, remind us that you are there, as present in the dark and narrow valley as you were in the sunlit, broad pastures.

'I will fear no evil'

May we know that you are with us, may we be assured of your presence and strength and comfort, and so may we fear no evil.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd, and in his name. Amen.
Your Rod And Your Staff Protect And Comfort Me
Correcting And Comforting
by Suzie Stark

PSALM 23 (from the Moffat Bible Translation)

The Eternal shepherds me, I lack for nothing; he makes me lie in meadows green, he leads me to refreshing streams, he revives life in me. He guides me by true paths, as he himself is true. My road may run through a glen of gloom, but I fear no harm, for thou art beside me; thy club, thy staff - they give me courage. Thou art my host, spreading a feast for me, while my foes have to look on! Thou hast poured oil upon my head, my cup is brimming over; yes, and all through my life Goodness and Kindness wait on me, the Eternal's guest within his household evermore.

READ Hebrews 12: 4-13

REFLECTION

Picture the scene . . . a family gathering, a get-together to celebrate the birth of a new baby. A happy time as the generations gather to welcome a new little one into their midst on the day of her baptism. The oldest person there is 92 and the youngest a mere ten weeks. The room is cosy, a fire burns brightly in the hearth, champagne is sipped, all manner of tempting food is laid out on the tables and there is a steady murmur of conversation, punctuated by a great deal of laughter as everyone catches up on family news.

One of the uncles has been given the job of recording the occasion and he moves quietly round the room with his camera capturing images that will soon become memories of this happy day.

The proud grandfather sitting quietly in a wing chair in a corner, with the tiniest babe sound asleep on his chest. Oblivious to the noise around her, tiny Lily sleeps, comforted by the warmth of a soft, woolly jersey and by the steady beating of his heart.

The teenager sitting between her mother and her aunt, doing her best to appear cheerful, but clearly struggling following a run-in with her father after she stayed out too late the night before.

The two grandmothers, discussing their now-grown up children, smiling as they see their own children married, settled with children of their own. They recall the tears, the tantrums, the love and laughter all part of family life. Perhaps they remember the hard work of bringing up their family and know this all lies ahead for the new parents.

Our passage from Hebrews likens God to a parent. Upon first reading the passage perhaps you are struck by the language the writer uses - punish, discipline, chastises . . . does it seem harsh?

Does it conjure up for you images of a disapproving and tyrannical God?

One dictionary definition of the word discipline - used in various forms seven times in that reading - is this: "control that is gained by requiring that rules or orders be obeyed and punishing bad behaviour"

That sounds quite hard, too, but when we are striving to put God in control of our lives, we need discipline, we need rules and we need guidelines. And punishment - well, for most of us the guilt that we feel when we stray or err is punishment, it is like the tap of the rod that calls us back into line.

I truly believe that the pain of guilt and sense of separation from God is the punishment spoken of. God does not punish us physically - we must remember that, Jesus himself stated that quite clearly, remember he was asked if a man was blind because he had sinned or his parents had - and the answer was very clear - his blindness was not caused by sin - that is not how our loving and forgiving God works.
I suppose, to a large extent how we read that passage and understand will depend on one’s own relationship with one’s parents - not everyone is able to relate to the thought of a kindly and loving father and anyone brought up by parents who believed wholeheartedly that to spare the rod spoiled the child might shudder reading this passage but I think that the intention was to encourage and not to terrify, to show that with boundaries we feel safe, with rules we know where we are.

We call God, Abba, Father, and he is a loving and good father who wishes the best for his children and wishes us to be the best we can. He is the good shepherd who wishes the best for his sheep and who drives and herds and protects them.

When the psalmist writes: 'you are with me; your rod and staff they comfort me' he uses the symbols of the rod and the staff - symbols of discipline and of power and authority, symbols of pastoral care to show the type of relationship he has with God.

It is a relationship that brings him comfort. He is acknowledging that he feels safe with the Lord, the Shepherd, at his side because he knows that the Lord will be there in times of danger to offer protection, to support him through trials, but he also knows that the Lord will be there to ensure he stays on the right path, to pull him back into line should he stray.

The flail and the crook are used by a Shepherd to protect his sheep from danger - to scare a prowling wolf but also to haul a wayward sheep back into line. That is the sort of discipline that I think we read about in Hebrews. The discipline that a caring parent uses to keep their child safe and that, in turn, helps them to learn and to grow.

Any parent will tell you that bringing up a child is not an easy task; parents face the challenges of showing their children how to behave towards others, of encouraging them to learn, of keeping them safe. And all the while, the child will be testing the boundaries, pushing them as far as possible as they explore and learn about the world around them.

Think for a moment of our family party - the teenager is sulky because she stayed out too late and is grounded for a week - why did her father do this ? Because he cares, he knows that his child’s safety is paramount, she might think he is harsh but he knows she needs that discipline, the rules are there to keep her safe and to help her to learn about boundaries. A caring father, like a good shepherd, knows what is best for his children.

Think for a moment of the two grandmothers, they are happy and relieved to see that their children have come through the difficult teenage years, they have watched them learn and grow and develop and they have actively guided and chided them as they have grown and they are pleased to see how their own children have grown up.

Think for a moment of the sleeping baby, so tiny, in need of total care. All of life ahead of her. She is comforted by the warmth and the heart beat - she knows that she is not alone. She’s too little to know that her grandfather is strong, is a man of authority, she does not know that he will protect her, guide her, and comfort her as she grows up.

The Lord is with us, we are not alone, like a loving parent he speaks with authority and we must listen, he is our protector in times of trouble, he guides us in the right direction and will gently stop us and turn us around when we go wrong.
1. When Holy Communion, And A Table For Two, Overlap

READ Psalm 23

REFLECTION

There are many meals mentioned in the Bible. Most are wedding banquets, feasts - huge occasions, attended by many people. This is more unusual - a table for two, reserved by God for his specially invited guest.

In Holy Week, descriptions of tables and meals naturally remind us of the Last Supper. We remember that meal whenever we share Holy Communion. God meets with us as we worship together. He nourishes us with himself, his word, his presence. Strengthening us for our journey. Reminding us of his constant love for us, his presence with us.

Today we could reflect on God's invitation to a table for two, or the Last Supper, or Holy Communion, but instead, I'll you a story . . .

She was sitting, crying, in a corner of a quiet chapel in the cathedral. She'd been there before. It was always empty, peaceful. No-one ever around to disturb her. She felt safe there.

By the time she'd escaped her abusive marriage, she felt there was nothing of her left. Told herself she'd got out before having a complete breakdown. Was too scared to admit, even to herself, she might be wrong.

She was divorced now, with a new job, living in a new country, where she knew only her few work colleagues. But despite the new start, she remained lost in the deep darkness of depression and anxiety, that wrapped themselves so tightly around her, they seemed to choke her.

Most days, she held the pieces of herself together. Just. But on bad days, she feared she would shatter into thousands of pieces, impossible to reassemble. On bad days, she ached to scream out her pain, but knew if she started, she wouldn't be able to stop.

And then there were the dreadful days. Those days, she'd find a quiet corner in a church somewhere. That was why she was in the chapel today, trying to cry silently. Terrified if she made a sound, someone might notice her, or speak to her. Knew she couldn't cope if they did.

She believed God existed - somewhere - he just wasn't relevant to her. She didn't go into churches to pray, didn't know how to, couldn't have expressed how she felt anyway. She simply knew churches felt safe, comforting. Knew it was the only place she could she cry herself out, and find some temporary peace. That day, she'd been sitting there a long time, when a voice disturbed her. One of the cathedral clergy was starting a Communion service in the chapel. That had never happened before. She was devasted not to have heard him enter, would have left immediately if she had.

Looking around slightly, she discovered she was the only other person there. Panic flooded through her. What was worse - to leave now, drawing unwanted attention to herself, or try to sit it out? She sat, immobilised by fear, but desperate for any distraction to let her escape. Nothing happened. She was trapped.

Gradually, she started to hear some of what the cleric said. At first, it was just words, familiar from childhood, but not heard since. Gradually though, it was as if God was speaking through the words. Except that, she was the only one there. Surely God wouldn't be speaking to her?
But she started paying a bit more attention, and heard of God's love for her. That God loved her so much, he died for
her. Loved her so much he came looking for her.

On her worst day - in her darkest place, feeling utterly alone, fighting against everything trying to destroy her - God
stepped into her day. Told her he wanted to help her, be with her, comfort her, give her peace. But above
all, God wanted her to know how much he loved her.

At the end of the service, the cleric left, without attempting to speak to her, and she was alone again. Such an odd
experience - she half wondered if she'd imagined it. Knew at once she couldn't dismiss it that easily. Knew God had
come looking for her.


She hadn't gone there to pray. Didn't know how to. Yet somehow, her pain and tears were a prayer that God heard,
and understood, and answered. That day, she left deeply comforted and at peace.

Although I would love to tell that day was the last time she needed to go there, it wasn't. But that day, God took her
in hand, started the long, slow healing process. Started putting her pieces back together.
That day, God started teaching her about himself. That day - one of her very worst days - she learnt God loved her.
That day, she accepted God's invitation, and his offer of help.

\[
\text{God prepares a table before me, provisions in the midst of attack from my enemies.}
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\[
\text{God prepares a table before you, provisions in the midst of attack from your enemies.}
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\[
\text{You Prepare A Table Before Me,}
\]
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\text{Provisions In The Midst Of Attack From My Enemies}
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\[
2. \text{ God Knows All About Us - And Invites Us Anyway !}
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\[
\text{READ : Psalm 23}
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\[
\text{REFLECTION}
\]

There are many meals mentioned in the Bible. Most are wedding banquets or feasts, huge occasions, attended by
many people. This is more unusual - a table for two, reserved for God and his specially invited guest.

The best things about special meals, besides the food, is sharing them with someone special, good conversation, and
someone else doing the cooking !

Here, the Psalmist marvels at the opportunity to spend time with God. All the Psalmist has to do is turn up, because
God has done all the preparation !

And God offers us that same opportunity ! Does spending time with God sound like an impossible dream in this life ?
. . .and yet that's exactly what prayer can be - what prayer should be - it is spending quality time with God.

Although we often join with others in prayer, we also need to spend time in prayer alone with God. God wants us to
talk to him about anything and everything. Ask for his guidance. Ask for his provisions for whatever we face in life. But since no conversation should be a monologue, we must also remember to take time to listen for God's replies, his guidance, his advice.

**How much 'quality time' do you spend alone with God?**

**How much time do you spend simply listening for God's voice?**

**Is it possible you need to talk less and listen more?**

In Holy Week, descriptions of tables and meals naturally remind us of the Last Supper. We remember that meal, when we share Holy Communion.

Jesus was the host at this, his last Passover meal, and he invited his friends and followers to join him.

Jesus invited Judas - knowing he would accept a bribe to betray him.

Jesus invited Peter - knowing he would vehemently deny ever even knowing him.

Jesus invited them all - knowing they would abandon him.

Jesus invited them, not because they were special, or heroic, or deserved to be there. He knew his followers were all flawed, imperfect, weak - because they were normal people - just like us. Jesus invited them, simply because he loved them and wanted to spend time with them.

When we meet together for Holy Communion, Jesus extends his invitation to us. He invites us - not because we are special. He invites us - not because of anything we have done, or will do. He invites us simply because he loves us. We have all sinned, are flawed, imperfect, weak - but God still loves us.

Thomas Cranmer's 'Prayer of Humble Access' (which forms part of service of Holy Communion), express this concept succinctly but beautifully:

*We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord, whose nature it is always to have mercy . . .*

We can accept the invitation because God loves us. Loves us so much, that Jesus has taken our place, our punishment, dying for our sins instead of us.

**Can you imagine loving anyone enough to die for them?**

**Can you imagine dying for someone who doesn't know you?**

**Can you imagine dying for someone who repeatedly hurts you?**

**Give thanks to God for his amazing love for you!**

**PRAYER**

Jesus, friend of sinners, thank you for welcoming me to the Father just as I am. I am so glad to know my salvation does not hinge on my efforts, or on my ability to make restitution for all I have done wrong. Thank you that all I have to do, is be willing to be found by you, and to accept your invitation. Amen
You Prepare A Table Before Me,
Provisions In The Midst Of Attack From My Enemies

3. God's Invitation To A Table For Two

READ: Psalm 23

REFLECTION

This is not a sandwich lunch, eaten on the run, while doing three other things.

This is not cobbled together leftovers, eaten from a tray, in front of the TV.

This is not a snooty restaurant, with haughty waiters, a foreign language menu.

The table was specially prepared. Time and care spent on it. An act of love.

The food was specially prepared. Time and care spent on it. An act of love.

This is fine dining - just for you.

Where everything is prepared by the one who knows you best, and loves you most.

Prepared by the one who longs to show you their love, and to spend time - quality one to one time - alone, with you.

This table, these provisions, all prepared by God, just for the two of you.

The Psalmist had physical enemies, trying to hurt or kill him. Can you imagine taking time out, being relaxed enough to enjoy a meal, while your enemies surround or attack you?

Is God’s message here “don’t be afraid” or “even if you’re afraid, don’t let it paralyse you” or “I am with you always”. ..or maybe it’s all three?

God comes looking for us. Meets us where we are. Wherever we are. God does all the preparation, all the hard work. Makes it easy for us. Simply invites us to join him.

We need to accept God’s invitation, then trust him to know what’s best for us.

God invites everyone - but forces no-one to accept.

God invites everyone - are you among someone else’s enemies?

Imagine sitting at the table with God. What would that be like?

What would you say? What would God say?
God Anoints My Head With Oil, My Cup Overflows

by Iona Pringle

READ: Psalm 23 (NLT), Ephesians 1: 3 - 14 (NIV)

REFLECTION

In Psalm 23, we see many of God’s promises to us. He promises to provide for us and protects us from harm. He gives us rest and renews our strength as we put our trust in Him. He gives us comfort and correction, guiding and guarding us on life’s journey. Psalm 23 speaks of a generous and gracious God who gives us much more than we deserve, a loving shepherd who gives of Himself, promising His constant presence and everlasting peace.

In the second part of verse 5, we see His promise of anointing and abundance, as it says, ‘You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.’

In ancient Israel, shepherds used oil for 3 purposes: to repel insects and so protect the sheep, to prevent conflicts and to heal wounds. Many insects can bug people and if any of you have been to the west coast of Scotland during the summer months, you will no doubt have experienced the swarms of midges that can bug us and bite us.

Summertime for sheep can be a torturous time and they are especially troubled by nose flies buzzing around their heads trying to deposit eggs on the mucous membrane of the sheep’s nose. If the flies successfully deposit their eggs, they will hatch and become wormlike larvae which drive the sheep insane. For relief from this agonising annoyance sheep will deliberately beat their heads against trees and rocks thrashing their heads around and often seriously injuring themselves in the process.

When nose flies start to hover around the flock, sheep panic, they can’t sleep, they forget to eat, they frantically run around trying to hide from their tormentors, sometimes running so much that they drop from sheer exhaustion. Only the loving care and attention of a good shepherd can prevent the sheep from facing these difficulties.

At the first sign of flies amongst the flock, a good shepherd anoints the sheep, covering their heads with oil and as the oil is applied, there is a change in the flock’s behaviour. Gone is the aggravation, frenzy, irritability and restlessness, and instead the sheep will start to quietly feed again and then lie down in peaceful contentment.

The anointing brings protection and peace. But in order for a sheep to be anointed they must stand still, lower their heads, put their trust in the shepherd and so allow the shepherd to do his work. The sheep don’t understand why the oil repels the flies or how the oil heals its wounds. All they know is that something happens in the presence of the shepherd and in that presence they feel at peace and are safe from harm.

In our lives, we can also experience many irritations and frustrations, things that buzz around our heads and may drive us to distraction. So often, it is the small, petty annoyances that ruin our repose. It is the niggling day to day swarm of frustrations, mishaps and heartaches that can wear us down and become burning issues and because of these we don’t sleep or eat well and we may even feel like we are banging our heads against a wall or against a person.

We all get wounded as we face loss, illness, betrayal, injustice but Jesus, the Good Shepherd promises to care for and tend his sheep. But, will we allow him to tenderly care for us and heal our wounds? So often, like stubborn sheep, we may rebel and may allow eggs to be laid in our minds - eggs of bitterness, anger, depression, doubt, fear, guilt, low self-esteem or insecurity. So often we can allow things to bug us and get under our skin, we can become infected with negativity, and so, like the sheep, we need the shepherd’s anointing. We also need to go to Him, to bow before Him, to trust Him and so allow the shepherd to do his work.
But one application of oil is not enough - sheep need continuous and renewed application of oil to prevent the 'flies in life' and so, we too, need continuous anointing of God's gracious spirit to counteract the many daily frustrations that we face. We need to spend time with God, to be still in His presence, to feel His touch and allow Him to anoint us, and allow that anointing to transform us, so we too can rest in peaceful contentment, knowing that we are safe in the Shepherd's care.

When we think of God's touch in our lives we become more aware of the abundance of blessings we have from God. Out of the anointing, comes the abundance. As our verse says, 'You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.' The overflowing cup is a powerful symbol of God's overwhelming gracious love and mercy which He pours upon us. In ancient times, the overflowing cup was seen as a sign of welcome. The guest would know he was welcome as long as the host kept filling the cup, but when the cup sat empty, the host was hinting the hour was late. On those occasions, however, when the host really enjoyed the company of the person he filled the cup to overflowing, he didn't stop when the wine reached the rim but kept pouring until liquid ran over the edge of the cup and onto the table.

There are no half measures with God as He welcomes us and wants to fill our cups to overflowing. He gives us bountiful blessings, blessing us even in the presence of our enemies and in the midst of all our frustrations.

Yet how often do we truly recognise how blessed we are? Instead of an overflowing cup sometimes, we may feel more like it is half empty, as we get caught up in worldly issues, and may think we are low on cash and clout. We may feel that our cup is low and that our mistakes are too great for God's grace, but God is not a miser, as He wants to lavish His blessings upon us, and He wants us to live an abundant life, filled to overflowing with His love, His joy and His peace.

In the passage from Ephesians, we see that God blesses us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Not just some, but every blessing - that truly is an abundant love.

In the original Greek, this passage is one long sentence, an outburst of adoration for a giving, generous God. Paul doesn't stop to punctuate, let alone pause for breath, his passion for the gospel flowing from him like a great waterfall of cascading truth. Throughout the passage, we can sense Paul's excitement and enthusiasm, as he writes of the abundance of God, and his amazing grace, freely given to us out of love. It has the energy of a child bursting to tell you some great news - barely stopping to take breath.

This passage shows that Paul knows that his cup is overflowing with God's blessings, and he is desperate to share this with others - but what about us? Do we overflow with that same excitement, or have we become so familiar with the gospel that we begin to take it for granted, and so not be blown away with the awesomeness of God's love for us?

Jesus said, 'I came that you may have life, and have it in abundance, until it overflows'. In Christ, God promises us abundant blessings, and He also promises to anoint us through His Holy Spirit.

God promises us anointing and abundance, if only we would be open to fully receive what He offers us. For the cup to be filled to overflowing, it first has to be turned the right way up. In most good restaurants, coffee cups are placed upside down on a saucer, and if you desire some coffee, you have to turn the cup the right way up.

It may be that many people are trying to live an abundant life with upside down cups, so not being open to receive the fullness of God's blessings.

We need to be open to receive God's anointing and abundance, and we need to keep the anointing flowing so it doesn't run dry, so continuing to be open to receive, open to refilling, open to renewal and open to refreshment.

May we truly know God's anointing and abundance in our lives, so we can then overflow with love for others and truly be able to say, 'Lord, you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows'.
PRAYER

Loving Lord, we thank you that in Christ you have given us life in all its fullness. We thank you for your overflowing and gracious love which you continue to lavish upon us despite our many failings.

Lord, you give us so much more than we deserve, providing for our every need, protecting us in times of danger, anointing us with your Spirit, giving us peace and contentment as you promise to be with us always.

Lord, help us to never take your love for granted and help us to come humbly before you, to bow down and trust our shepherd who cares for his flock. May our hearts always be open to receive your love and your bounteous blessings, and may your anointing truly make a difference in our lives, making us more like you.

Lord, come renew, refresh and refill us with your love till our cup overflows, and may we in turn overflow with love for others, so allowing your Spirit to work in our lives.

Lord fill us with your abundance and make us wholly yours. In Jesus name, we pray.

Amen

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

by Bridget Cameron

READ Psalm 23, Deuteronomy 8: 1-10, John 14: 1-3

REFLECTION

Everybody knows the story of the man who had a vision of his past life. He saw the whole of his life as a long journey and for the greater part of it, he could see two sets of footprints, his own and the footprints of God accompanying him. But at one point of his life, when he remembered that he went through a very difficult and trying time, he noticed that there was only one set of prints. He reproached the Almighty for having left him at the one time when the going was really hard. The reply came that he had not been abandoned, that God had been true to his promise and at that hard time he had carried him.

Since last September, we have been studying section by section the 23rd Psalm. Some of you may be thinking, as we do, that it is time for a change of subject. We have however come to the last verse and it seems as if we had covered the whole of life.

This psalm is one of the best-loved and best known. It was certainly the first that I ever got to know. It is sung at weddings and funerals and most people know which tune they prefer. We have looked at this psalm in many different translations, both ancient and modern, prose and metrical, versions in the vernacular from both Scotland and England and other paraphrases based on the shape of this psalm. We have dwelt in green pastures beside the waters of comfort, we have been guided through difficult paths, sometimes dark and dangerous, we have been defended from trouble and sustained in the presence of hostility, and in this last verse, we can assert with confidence:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life....
The psalmist is talking about the future as well as the present, now and always, but it is usually in retrospect that we recognise the goodness and mercy, the blessings we received, the things we can give thanks for, the times we were helped.

Most of us can do this, but for some people, life has been so truly hard, has always been a struggle, that one hesitates to identify the goodness and mercy with confidence. There must be some mercy in the fact that they have reached this point, they have won through this far, despite everything.

At the worst of times, it is salutary to count one's blessings but in the good times, it is only too easy to forget to be thankful, to take everything for granted as if nothing could change.

Moses reminded the children of Israel of the way that God had led them all those years. In the passage from Deuteronomy, Moses had just given them the commandments, which they were to follow as God’s chosen people. They had been tried, tested, and disciplined by the forty years in the wilderness to make them become the kind of people who were fit to inherit the Promised Land. They were to remember to live by this code of conduct when they entered this new land. To this point, they had been followed by goodness and mercy, although they frequently chose to forget it or failed to recognise it. Perhaps we are not so very different.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long

For some of us, we are more familiar with the words 'for ever', which seem to look forward to the future. In this translation, we are reminded that this dwelling is something we do today; it is not something we only look forward to at the end of our earthly life. In our second reading, Jesus promised us a dwelling in the house of the Lord which he would go to prepare for us and where we shall be with him for ever.

John Donne wrote a prayer looking forward to this event

Bring us, O Lord, at our last awakening, to the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house....

We shall be at home; a house is a friendly place. It is a wonderful concept, the continuing to dwell in the presence of the Lord, and when that day comes, we may count on the promise.

PRAYER (by Cardinal John Henry Newman)

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over and our work done. Then, Lord, in thy mercy, grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Some Ways of Praying with Psalm 23

1. Prayers of Intercession
   by Ruth Gillett

PSALM 23 (New Life Translation)

The Lord is my shepherd. I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows. He leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honour me by
anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely, your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord for ever.

PRAYER

The Lord is my shepherd. I have all that I need
Forgive me Lord, when I stray from you, because of my greed for things I don’t need

He lets me rest in green meadows. He leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength
Forgive me Lord, when I think other pastures look greener, or when I reject your offers of help, thinking I can manage without you

He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name
Lord God, forgive me that although I long to be led by you, I still complain along the path

Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me
Forgive me Lord, that despite knowing your promise to be with me, I am often afraid. Help me to be more aware of your presence, your strength and your comfort

You prepare a feast for me in the presence of me enemies. My cup overflows with blessings
Forgive me Lord, when I refuse to sit down at your table, rejecting the blessings you freely offer me. Make me more aware of your overflowing love, and of my desperate need of you

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all my days, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever
Lord God I thank you that whatever I do, you never leave me or stop loving me. I thank you for the blessings you shower on me every day, and for welcoming me into your eternal embrace. Amen

Some Ways of Praying with Psalm 23

2. Prayers of Thanksgiving
by Ruth Gillett

PSALM 23 (The Voice)

The Eternal God is my shepherd. He cares for me always. He provides me rest in rich, green fields beside streams of refreshing water. He soothes my fears. He makes me whole again, steering me off worn, hard paths to roads where truth and righteousness echo His name. Even in the unending shadows of death’s darkness, I am not overcome by fear. Because You are with me in the dark moments, near with Your protection and guidance, I am comforted. You spread out a table before me, provisions in the midst of attack from my enemies; You care for all my needs, anointing my head with soothing, fragrant oil, filling my cup again and again with Your grace. Certainly Your faithful protection and loving provision will pursue me where I go, always, everywhere. I will always be with the Eternal God, in His house for ever.

PRAYER

The Eternal God is my shepherd. He cares for me always
Lord God, thank you for your faithful guidance, and that when I stray, you gently draw me back into your embrace

He provides me rest in rich green fields, beside streams of refreshing water
Thank you for the lavish gifts you bestow on me
He soothes my fears. He makes me whole again, steering me off worn, hard paths to roads where truth and righteousness echo His name
Thank you for restoring and renewing me day by day

Even in the unending shadows of death's darkness, I am not overcome by fear
Thank you for your abiding presence, and for supporting and sustaining me whatever I face

Because you are with me in the dark moments, near with your protection and guidance, I am comforted
Thank you that you never leave me to face my dark times alone

You spread out a table before me, provisions in the midst of attack from my enemies
Thank you that I can always trust you to fulfil my needs, even when everything seems hopeless to me

You care for all my needs, anointing me with soothing, fragrant oil, filling me again and again with your grace
Thank you for your lavish love and grace, in providing more for me than I can ever imagine or deserve

Your faithful protection and loving provision will pursue me wherever I go, always, everywhere
Thank you that you never stop loving me, and that I can never escape from you

I will always be with the Eternal God, in His house for ever
Thank you for welcoming me into your eternal embrace. Amen

Some Ways of Praying with Psalm 23

3. Praying in the Dark Valley
by David Denniston

PRAYER

'Even though I walk through the darkest valley'
Lord, you are our Shepherd.
You make us lie down in green pastures, you lead us beside still waters,
you guide us in right paths.

We could so happily spend all our time on the green pastures and by the still waters . . .content.

But when the dark clouds begin to block out the sun,
or the path on which you call us seems to lead us into dark valleys
we can all too readily begin to fear and panic.

When we tread these dark, difficult, and dangerous ways,
remind us that you are there,
as present in the dark and narrow valley
as you were in the sunlit, broad pastures.

'I will fear no evil'
May we know that you are with us,
may we be assured of your presence, strength, and comfort, and so may we fear no evil.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd, and in his name. Amen.

Some Ways of Praying with Psalm 23

4. Praying for Others
   by Ruth Gillett

**PSALM 23 (New Life Translation)**
The Lord is my shepherd. I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows. He leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honour me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely, your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord for ever.

**PRAYER**

*The Lord is our shepherd. We have all that we need*
   We pray for those who feel overwhelmed and alone in the darkness of depression, illness, loss or anxiety

*He lets us rest in green meadows*
   We pray for refugees and asylum seekers who have given up everything, for survivors of natural disasters who have nothing left, and for all who are homeless

*He leads us beside peaceful streams*
   We pray for people who have only dirty water to drink, and those for whom hunger is not a choice

*He renews our strength. He guides us along right paths, bringing honour to his name*
   We pray for those whose faith is new or fragile, for those burdened by doubts

*Even when we walk through the darkest valley, we will not be afraid, for you are close beside us*
   We pray for those who struggle with temptation or addiction, for those who feel invisible or voiceless

*You prepare a feast for us in the presence of our enemies*
   We pray for Christians who live in countries where it is dangerous or illegal to be a Christian. For those who face persecution, imprisonment, and death, as a direct consequence of their faith

*Our cup overflows with blessings*
   We pray for people who have hurt us, for people we find it hard to forgive, for people we find it difficult to love

*Surely, your goodness and unfailing love will pursue us all the days of our lives, and we will live in your house for ever*
   We pray that the time will not be far off when your Kingdom will come, and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of your glory. Amen
Some Ways of Praying with Psalm 23

5. Prayers During Lent / Holy Week

by Ruth Gillett

**PSALM 23 (The Voice)**

The Eternal God is my shepherd. He cares for me always. He provides me rest in rich, green fields beside streams of refreshing water. He soothes my fears. He makes me whole again, steering me off worn, hard paths to roads where truth and righteousness echo His name. Even in the unending shadows of death’s darkness, I am not overcome by fear. Because You are with me in the dark moments, near with Your protection and guidance, I am comforted. You spread out a table before me, provisions in the midst of attack from my enemies; You care for all my needs, anointing my head with soothing, fragrant oil, filling my cup again and again with Your grace. Certainly Your faithful protection and loving provision will pursue me where I go, always, everywhere. I will always be with the Eternal God, in His house for ever.

**PRAYER**

*God the Eternal One is our shepherd, He cares for us always*

Lord God, we thank for being the Good Shepherd, prepared to lay down your life for us your sheep

*He provides us rest in rich, green fields beside streams of refreshing water*

Omnipotent God, you created the universe and everything in it. Yet for us, you were born in a stable, lived as a refugee, died as a criminal, and were buried in a borrowed tomb. Grant us the courage to always follow your example of humility and service

*He makes us whole again steering us off worn, hard paths to roads where truth and righteousness echo His name*

Crucified God, your path led you to death on a cross. We thank you that through your death and resurrection you have saved us. Grant us the courage to follow wherever you lead us

*Even in the unending shadows of death’s darkness, we are not overcome by fear. Because you are with us in those dark moments, we are comforted*

Immanuel - God with us - you know how it feels to walk in dark times. We thank you that you never leave us to face our dark times alone, but are with us always, to protect and guide us

*You spread out a table before us, provisions in the midst of attack from our enemies*

Nurturing God, even on the night before your death, you took time to encourage and strengthen your disciples. We thank you that you now invite us to share your table, where you nourish and strengthen us for the journey ahead

*You care for all our needs, anointing our heads with soothing, fragrant oil, filling our cup again and again with your grace*

Generous God, you love us extravagantly, unflinchingly, whatever the cost. We thank you for the abundance of your gifts to us. Forgive us that our love is so meagre, and teach us to love as you do

*Your faithful protection and loving provision will pursue us where we go, always, everywhere. We will always be with the Eternal God, in His house forever*

Risen God, you go before us to prepare a place for us. Thank you that you have made it possible for us to dwell with you, in this life, and throughout eternity. Amen