

Psalm 23

What would you say is the most well known passage in the Bible? (feedback)

Why is it so well known? (funerals)

Though this psalm is an appropriate one to be read in the midst of death and dying, it is also very much a psalm about **living!** Yet because of its familiarity in the funeral setting, I think we often miss this aspect of the psalm.

Psalm 23 is a psalm that puts daily activities such as eating, drinking and seeking security in a radically God-centred perspective that challenges our whole way of thinking.

I asked my Scripture class a while back, if they could tell me what things they felt were so important in life that they couldn't possibly do without them. I got the expected answers of food, water, clothing and shelter, but among them, I also got answers such as T.V., computer games, and "my motor bike"!

Ours is a culture that teaches us to want everything, isn't it? Driven by greed rather than need, it is really hard for us to imagine having only the necessities of life – things such as food, drink, shelter and protection. Clever advertising has convinced the majority of people that what former generations considered luxuries, we now consider basic necessities. Does anyone here not have a television? What about a washing machine? A vacuum cleaner? It's sobering to think that two thirds of the world have never even seen such things!

In a consumer-based society, it's extremely difficult to hear the simple but radical message of psalm 23. And that is,

GOD IS THE ONLY NECESSITY OF LIFE!

In our secular society, we are encouraged to trust first in ourselves and to work first to secure our own lives and our own futures. Psalm 23, if we really heed its message, speaks to us of trusting not in ourselves, **but in God.**

The words are very familiar – but let's take a moment to look at them.

“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters....”

In a sense, those words are lost to us today. We no longer have shepherds as they did in the ancient Middle East. Aussie graziers on their large properties often have so many sheep, that they have factored into their profit and loss calculations the inevitable loss of a certain number of stock each year.

A shepherd in David's time had charge of a small number of sheep. He knew them all individually. He slept with them. Spent his day with them. Personally led them to green grass that would feed them, and streams that would quench their thirst. (Incidentally – the shepherd would lead from the front, on foot, and the sheep would follow - unlike our drovers who roar around behind their sheep on a motor bike!) The shepherd provided for their every need, watched over them and protected them.

The shepherd saw his sheep more like pets than a commodity. He committed himself to his sheep. The relationship was close and deeply caring. It's actually a very intimate metaphor.

Perhaps a metaphor that would give us more of a feel for the intimacy described in this psalm might be that of a loving mother who cares for and nurtures her children. The image of God as a mother can be found in a number of places in the Old Testament. Isaiah 66:13 says, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

So how about, “The Lord is my Mum. She gives me everything I need! She wakes me up for breakfast in the morning, packs my lunch for school, and always puts in a cool drink.”

The sense is one of loving provision.

The next verse in the psalm is, “He restores my soul.”

After the tenderness of the first two verses, we have a glimpse in this next verse of God's firm and faithful dealings with his people. "He restores my soul" is a term that speaks not just of physical refreshment. It pictures the deep renewal and healing of that part of us that becomes hurt or damaged as we travel through life. It also alludes to the gentle correction of God, if we stray from the path he has set before us.

If we continue with the Mum metaphor, we could say something like:

"She's always there to put her arms round me when I'm hurting, and though she rouses on me if I do something wrong, she'll always give me another chance if I say I'm sorry."

"He restores my soul" is followed by "He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

Paths of righteousness, or "right paths" for sheep meant simply "straight paths" – keeping them safe, and headed in the right direction. But for us as God's flock, those words carry a moral content. They indicate that the way we live will either shame or vindicate our Shepherd's good name.

Staying with our Mum metaphor, we could say, "Mum shows me how to behave, so that I don't give the family a bad name."

David goes on to say,

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

"The valley of the shadow of death" is usually interpreted as being death itself, but the Hebrew word used here can also be translated "deep darkness," which could refer to an experience of extreme desolation. Whether the term refers to death or desolation, it is as much a "right path" as the green pastures – a fact that can take the sting out of it. David expresses his confidence in God's presence on this path – and God's presence overcomes the worst thing that the psalmist will ever encounter - fear.

It's interesting that at this point, David switches from talking about God as "he", to addressing him personally, "I will fear no evil, for YOU are with me. YOUR rod and staff will comfort me." The shepherd is no longer ahead of him, but alongside to escort him. And he's armed! The rod was like a policeman's truncheon, for defence, and the staff was the implement to prod and guide the sheep.

If we used the same Mum metaphor for these verses, they might sound like this:

"Even though I'm walking through a dark and horrible place, I'm not scared, because you're holding my hand. You'll protect me from anything nasty that comes too close! I know I'm safe with you."

The metaphor changes for the final two verse of the psalm. Instead of a Shepherd and his sheep, we now have a host and his guest.

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

The psalm now takes on a triumphant note. It's one thing to survive a threat – such as the valley of the shadow of death – but quite another to turn it into triumph. This verse anticipates a real victory celebration! The host has provided a full on feast, oil which indicates joy, and a brimming cup, despite the presence of the psalmist's enemies. The picture is one of a victory feast, with defeated rivals there as captives or reluctant guests. David has been brought from tragedy to triumph!

What an encouragement that is for us! Particularly if we are battling with something - perhaps a long term illness, or frailty. Death is simply a short patch of rough road as we approach the gates of heaven. Reminds me of that patch of road they're continually ripping up between Batemans Bay and Braidwood. It's dreadful to drive on after the smoothness of the bitumen, but it finishes, doesn't it? So does death. We pass through it – to eternal life!

This verse also speaks to us of God's deep commitment to us. Sharing a meal with someone in those days was a very significant thing. An invitation to dinner wasn't given lightly. It was a sign of friendship. It was also used to seal a covenant or agreement. In that, it also foreshadows the Lord's Supper which we will celebrate together in a little while.

The final verse is interesting. Up till now, the psalm has had very much an individual focus. It is the Shepherd and the sheep – singular. The host and the guest. But now, David says:

“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

The reference to the House of the Lord indicates that David is not alone. He is invited to dwell in “The House of the Lord” with all of God's people. The allusion is to the Temple – to the whole of the people of God.

What's more, the picture in this verse is of the host – God – inviting his guest to be present with him forever. David is now more than just an acquaintance, invited for a day – he is invited to live with his host and all of God's people, for eternity.

There is a strong reminder here for us that our faith is a communal faith. Though our relationship with God is a deeply individual and personal one, it is meant to find expression in “the House of the Lord”. We call it church. - belonging to God's family. We are in fact, related by blood – Jesus' blood.

There are some insights into psalm 23. It's not just a psalm for funerals, is it? It is brimming with life and hope and confidence in our God.

In keeping with our Mum metaphor, these final verses might go something like this:

You've given me the biggest party I've ever seen! There's wonderful music, and more much food and drink than I could possibly manage! And you've sorted out those bullies from across the road and they just have to stand there and watch!

It's going to be like this always, now, isn't it? All this richness and love, and time to enjoy all this with you and my friends forever!

May we seek to have the same trust in God that David did – trust that as we submit to God, he is there to meet our every need, in every situation and that he will bring us to live with him and his people, in his house, forever.

Let's pray