

Date: 17/04/2005

Day: Easter 4

Congregation: Anglican Church: Geoff Chadwick

Scripture reference: John 10:1-10

Topic: The Lord is my shepherd; The Lord is your shepherd; The Lord is our shepherd; and the Lord is their shepherd.

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Today's psalm, the 23rd is probably the top of the pops when it comes to the Psalm hit parade. In musical terms we might call it an "evergreen" (although I might be getting confused with the pastures in verse 2!) One reason for this is that it has been in the funeral liturgy for so long that many have heard it. Another, of course, is its popular sentiment. I'll look at that in a minute. But first, I thought you might be interested in some of the background.

The Psalms form a hymn-book for the Hebrew worshipping community. There are 150 individual Psalms which can be catalogued in various ways. It is now common to use the following:

- 1) Hymns or Descriptive Praises
- 2) Laments
- 3) Royal Psalms
- 4) Minor Types

Furthermore, popular theology has tended to attribute the authorship of all the Psalms to David. This, however, is not sustainable on the basis of evidence. Some of the Psalms make references to events that occurred after David's life, and the title "A Psalm of David" often given to a psalm (72 of the 150 in the RSV) can, in the original Hebrew mean a Psalm by David or a Psalm in honor of David.

Sure he may have written some of them but not all.

Dating the psalms is also very difficult. What we can say is that they were collected together at the time of the Second Temple – when the people returned home from exile. (538BC following 60 years of Exile in Babylon. The foundations of the 2nd Temple were laid in 537BC) One Scholar, Anderson, refers to them as “The Hymnbook of the Second Temple” (Anderson BW, 1988, The Living World of the Old Testament, Longman, Burnt Mill, p506) This title also helps us to put them in context. The Psalms were chiefly used as an aid to worship in the Temple cult. It’s like our hymn books – they are used chiefly in worship.

Being post exilic is important because it means they were gathered together after surviving the horrors of exile. Most of them are flavoured by this history. For example, you will find that even the darkest of Psalm laments concludes with praises to the goodness of God.

Such is the flavouring added to our Psalm today.

Psalm 23 is cut into two halves. The first half uses the metaphor of shepherd and the second half uses the metaphor of banquet. Following an episode with enemies, the writer rejoices in his final good fortune.

In the text the literary “voices” are also split. The first 4 verses emphasise the 1st and 3rd Person. First person being “I” or “my”, and Third Person being “He/she/it”. In verses 5 & 6 the emphasis is on the Second person.

Those with a literary bent will find this interesting!

Maybe this accounts for the “evergreen” nature of the psalm. It begins personally and ends telling about the good things God does. Let’s have a look:

Psalm: Ps 23

*1 The Lord is **my** shepherd:*

*therefore can **I** lack nothing.*

*2 **He** will make **me** lie down in green pastures:*

*and lead **me** beside still waters.*

*3 **He** will refresh **my** soul:*

*and guide **me** in right pathways for **his** name's sake.*

*4 Though **I** walk through the valley of the shadow of death, **I** will fear no evil:*

Here the psalm is intensely personal. The writer's own fears and longings are clearly expressed. The language points to a personal relationship with God. In a way, this shows something new in the religion of the Hebrews. Up until the Exile, faith in YHWH God had more of a community feel than an individual feel about it. Worship was more about communal actions than personal piety. But in this psalm, post exile, a new emphasis on personal faith is beginning to emerge.

We Australians won't find this idea very strange. For whatever reason, Australians are encouraged to keep their faith personal. When it spills over into public debate or policy we are often told to keep our faith in its so-called rightful, "private" place.

Now, in the second half of verse 4 and following, the Person changes to 2nd (ie "you"). The change represents a new direction. The writer is no longer concerned about his own internal affairs but is now looking outward. "You" points attention away from self to God.

Let's have a look.

*for **you** are with **me**, **your** rod and your staff comfort **me**.*

*5 **You** spread a table before **me** in the face of those who trouble **me**:*

***you** have anointed **my** head with oil, and **my** cup shall be full.*

*6 Surely **your** goodness and loving-kindness will follow **me** all the days of **my** life:*

*and **I** shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

Of course there still remains an element of self. "Me" and "my" occur often enough, but there is something deeper here than simple self indulgence. There is gratefulness to God for his provision. We've moved from the shepherd metaphor to the banquet metaphor. The writer is now guest at a royal/divine meal where God is the host! This is an image of great power because in the Middle East the subservient were not served by those above them. Here is God doing a remarkably strange thing! No wonder the writer expresses such great thanks!

I think the language of this Psalm has got something to tell us about spirituality. Its use of 1st, 2nd and 3rd person "voices" tells us to be well balanced in our relationship with God. Without intending a bad pun I think it's telling us to worship God with our whole person. That is, to worship God with the "I/we" part of me; to talk to God using the "You" part of us; and to tell about God with the "He/she/it/they" part of us.

Yes, my faith is about “God and me”, but its about so much more - “God and us”,
“God and You”, and “God and them”.

The Lord is my shepherd; The Lord is your shepherd; The Lord is our shepherd; Lord
is their shepherd.

The Lord be with you, me and us and them!