

St Ives Free Church 11th October

Welcome and introduction:

Good morning everyone. I am Penny Flynn, member of Downing Place URC in Cambridge and a lay preacher. We don't know each other, you and I. I haven't been to St Ives to lead worship, although I am familiar with the building as I've been here a number of times over the years. So, thank you for the invitation for today, and greetings to you from Downing Place, the relatively newly-formed congregation of Emmanuel and St Columba's former churches.

We begin by listening to a setting of Psalm 23, one of today's bible readings.

Listen: 'The Lord's my shepherd' [Howard Goodall]

the choir of Wells Cathedral, director Matthew Owens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLxdb3ov-zE>

Reading

Psalm 23 - The Divine Shepherd - A Psalm of David - NRSV

¹ The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ 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.

Meditation

As we don't know each other, and won't have much chance to begin to do so in these peculiar circumstances with all the restrictions, I don't know how the past months have been for you in terms of lockdown and easing out of it, your own health and that of those you love and know well, the undoubted challenges and changes to the former patterns of daily living that you've had to deal with. But I'm sure that, without exception, all have been affected some way or another – some good and some less good. We may have been, and continue to be, concerned for the welfare of another; we may have been affected by changes in the workplace, and we surely have all felt the weirdness and anxiety of the

wider world beyond our doors. I wonder if the psalm we have just read together, and which we heard in a musical setting earlier, has been one you have turned to when seeking comfort and a reminder of God's reassuring presence? It is undoubtedly the best-known psalm, and probably many of us could say it or sing it from memory. If I didn't pick your favourite setting, I'm sorry, but although Howard Goodall's piece may remind us of the silliness and fun of 'The Vicar of Dibley', I think it is a good setting, and good to listen to in its entirety, in worship.

'The Lord is my shepherd' – this psalm is very personal, although relevant for all who know the Lord. Shepherd-like, the Lord watches over us, guides and protects every one, and, as Jesus said, knows each by name. The relationship is really that personal. This is the God of heaven and earth, being present in the individual lives of His people, knowing each one better than we know ourselves.

'He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me by still waters; He restores my soul' – imagine saying these words for yourself, or later on say the psalm out loud, stressing the personal 'me' and 'my' as I am doing; perhaps you have missed a holiday this year, a chance for a change of scene and a rest, time to revive the body and recharge the mind; maybe these words encourage us to find the same result we might find physically in nature, but instead imagining such places as we rest with the Lord, lying down in green pastures, in our mind if not literally.

'He leads me in right paths for his name's sake' – It is the Lord who leads each one in places, on paths, that are right for each individual, with him. The right path for me won't necessarily be the right path for you, or you, or you. Hear yourself saying it: 'He leads me in right paths', so no comparing our path with another's, as it may lead us astray. 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding' says Proverbs 3 verse 5, and it continues in verse 6 – 'in all your ways submit to Him and he will make your paths straight.' But in this psalm, there are no conditions given – The Lord just leads us – not pointing a finger to show the path, but going ahead of us.

'Even though I walk through the darkest valley (sometimes the phrase is 'the shadow of death'), I fear no evil; for you are with me' – in contrast with the joy of the first verses, where the sheep are led by the shepherd, the psalmist realises that people have to face hardship of various degrees on their path through life; for some, the valley(s) may become very deep, and of course the deeper the valley, the darker it will become, as the sunlight cannot reach into the bottom of it for very long – if at all in certain seasons. Still there's a personal, positive statement, which is very brave – 'I fear no evil' or I will fear no evil, meaning I won't be afraid – and why? because the Lord 'is with me'. So perhaps it's not brave, but confident and trusting in the Lord's promises.

Notice how in the earlier verses it is 'he' who is spoken of – 'he makes me lie down ..' but now as need arises it becomes even more personal – 'you are with me'; 'you are with me'. The personal relationship we have with the Lord, now with Jesus Christ, our shepherd, yes, but also our brother and friend – 'you are with me' in my greatest need, alongside me, even within. 'The darker the shadow, the closer the Lord', I read.

'Your rod and your staff – they comfort me' – it's like saying Jesus is our rock and our support, solid ground right here when we need him most. We can lean on Jesus and trust him to hold us and not let us down.

‘You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies’ – psalm 23 is a psalm of David – David had real enemies, and real friends too. For example, in 2 Samuel 17 vv27-29 we read of one who brought ‘beds, basins, earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, arched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat; for they said, “ The troops are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness.”’ David would have thanked the Lord for this provision, for the table prepared in the face of his enemies.

I daresay you’ve been aware of a lot of community spirit during recent months, of people going out of their way to help others by shopping, cooking, phoning, driving, donating goods and money, showing myriad ways of caring, of bringing love to those in need, and they too can say ‘you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.’ The anointed head speaks of the Lord’s welcome; the overflowing cup of the Lord’s lavish provision.

‘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.’ – the goodness and mercy, or love, will continue as long as life lasts and beyond there lies the house of the Lord for ever. The Hebrew word where ‘dwell’ is used here literally means ‘return to the house’, so we can understand that when earth’s paths, valleys and threats are over, there comes the real return home. [NBC p501]

Jesus used the shepherding image of himself according to John’s gospel: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own know me.” Jesus also spoke of the people being sheep without a shepherd – that was one reason God sent Jesus, to gather and lead God’s people. And we know that Jesus did what he said a good shepherd would do: lay down his life for his sheep. Because of that obedience to his calling, and because of God’s raising Jesus from the dead, we live.

However life is for us at present, however many concerns we have, however much we may not feel like saying or even believing the positives of psalm 23, they remain – and perhaps if we take them one sentence or phrase at a time, one a day this coming week, if we repeat the phrase through the day, and recall it as we lie down to sleep, I pray we will find its truth for each one of us, and find our spirit restored through the ever present Spirit of God. Amen.

Therefore we can sing words from the psalm with confidence:

Song: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days, all the days of my life.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days, all the days of my life
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever,
And I shall feast at the table spread for me;
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

A prayer from the Iona community:

God of life, do not darken your light to us,
O God of life, do not close your joy to us,
O God of life, do not shut your door to us,
O God of life, do not refuse your mercy on us,
and, God of life, crown us with your gladness.
In the name of Jesus Christ, our shepherd and friend, Amen.

Hymn: ‘Now thank we all our God’