

21 July 2024 - 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

## The Lord Is My Shepherd (and Other Names for God)

Jeremiah 23.1-16, Psalm 23, Ephesians 2.11-22, Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

Our Gospel reading today begins with some great advice and instruction from Jesus to his disciples. This advice can apply to all of us too. His disciples had been busy with things that really mattered, but they had had no chance to eat or rest and were just exhausted.

Does Jesus say, “Great work. You’re on a roll. Let’s see you get back out there and do even more”? No, he tells them to come to a quiet place and take some quiet time, to rest, relax, eat, pray, recharge and renew their spirit. Jesus’ care of his disciples was just as important as the task he had given them. We need rest as well as activity; contemplation as well as active service. We need to live out the love of God as well as love for our neighbour and ourselves.

But what happened then? They were followed, and crowds of people in need of healing flocked after Jesus, and ahead of Jesus, to meet him wherever he went. Jesus and his followers needed rest, but they had compassion for those who suffered. They did not put their own needs above the needs of others, but they did continue to regularly seek quiet time and an opportunity to rest and pray. We see Jesus caring for the people in need **and** caring for his disciples and himself. His compassion is described as one who sees those in need as sheep without a shepherd. We are going to explore this shepherd imagery a little further.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.” John 10.16

When we talk of them and us, we need to remember that we were not the original “us” but the “them”, the outsiders, the other sheep, the “them” that Jesus made to also be “us”. We were the uncircumcised, the Gentiles, the aliens and strangers. But that is no longer who we are. When we claim solidarity with other followers of Christ, it is because Paul and others went out and shared the good news with those who were outsiders, so that we might all be one in Christ. We are reconciled to God and so the rules and laws, the customary ways for insiders to do things, have all faded in importance. As Christians, we are not all alike,

and we do not all do things in the same ways, but we are one in Christ. We are one in His spirit, one in his love and in love for one another.

We are one in our role as the living temple of the Lord with Christ as the cornerstone, each in our own place and doing what we can.

The reading from Jeremiah speaks of the Lord's sheep who have been scattered, mistreated, deluded, deceived, used and abused, but who will be cared for and restored to strength and brought together. They had bad shepherds, but they will have good shepherds and dwell in safety and security.

In Psalm 23, we hear of a good shepherd, the good shepherd. We often encounter this psalm on Good Shepherd Sunday, and we relate it very much to Jesus. That is a good way to read it, but there is much more to this psalm. Today we can relate it to the Old Testament image of shepherds.

Before we do that, let me tell you about a modern Australian shepherd. He was a good man who knew a lot about sheep and ran a very successful property. For a few short years, we lived next door to him and occasionally an animal of one sort or another would manage to find its way onto our place. Sometimes it was something as big as a horse, but one year it was a very persistent young lamb, not a new-born but just big enough to start exploring the world.

This same lamb found its way through the fence several times. We would put it back over the fence or otherwise return it. Sometimes its owner would drop by and pick it up. After this happened a few times, the shepherd looked at it thoughtfully and said, "Clever little b\*\*\*\*\*, we'll have to hang that one in the freezer."

Good shepherd though he was, his interest was not so much in the lamb having a good life (although that was still a part of his care of it) but in its ultimate use. In this case, it was now going to become a meat provider rather than having a longer life as a wool provider. The incident also says something about selective breeding to increase compliance rather than initiative and ingenuity in sheep. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be like those sheep that accept their current limitations.

Old Testament sheep might sometimes be penned overnight to help keep them safe but during the day they enjoyed green pastures, roaming widely with their caring shepherd. I want to be like the martyred St Lambert of the freezer (Metaphor alert. Not a real saint!), adventuring

and encouraging others in all their diversity to cross the boundaries and obstacles that keep us from the green pastures the good shepherd leads us towards.

The shepherd was a common metaphor in Old Testament times for a god, a king, or anyone in authority. Like the Australian farmer, their shepherding was only for the welfare of the sheep to the extent that the sheep served the purposes of the shepherd. However, the good shepherd in Psalm 23 is not like those self-interested shepherds. The focus of the good shepherd is the well-being of the sheep, not what the sheep can contribute to the well-being of the shepherd. Let's put some good pasture up for the sheep.

The psalm speaks of the Lord. Let's look at who is called the Lord in this psalm. Just as there are many words for Jesus and for the Holy Spirit, there are many words for God in the Old Testament, often words that describe the characteristics or actions of God. For example, Almighty God, Father God, God of Healing, Gracious God, Eternal God, the God Who Sees. There are many more. Can you share one that you might sometimes use or hear used in prayer? [Examples]

The 3 most common general terms for God in the Old Testament are these.

**Elohim** is usually translated as **God** and is particularly associated with creation. "In the beginning God (Elohim) created the heavens and the earth." **Adonai** is the word for God doing things, managing things, or supervising things. Adonai is usually translated as **Lord**, with an upper-case L and lower-case ord. Adonai can mean Lord or my Lord. That is the word in our Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd" – God actively supervising and caring for God's people. The remaining term is the name revealed to Moses, usually written with upper case letters like this **YHWH**. This is the name revealed to Moses and is the self-existent God, the God who was, is and will be. This is the God who is in relationship with God's people. This word is usually not literally translated but written and read as **LORD**.

There were no vowels in this name as written in Hebrew. This was not unusual for written Hebrew. Those who read aloud were expected to know the words and put in the vowels as they read. Writing the consonants but leaving out the vowels also became a reminder, in both

Hebrew and English, for those who choose as a mark of respect to not speak this name.

We also follow this custom at times. If you were introduced to the King or the Prime Minister, you would probably not address them familiarly by their name, especially their first name, unless invited to do so. You might remember the two BBC tv series, *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*. These two series could have been called *Yes Jim*. But they were not.

Because of the custom of vowel insertion, we didn't know the exact pronunciation in ancient times, but it may have varied a little as it does these days.

This name YHWH is sometimes written as Jehovah. There is a whole story about the history of how that came about and why it is not done so often these days, but that is a story for another time. The standard representation is LORD, all uppercase. LORD sounds the same as when Adonai is translated as Lord, but the upper-case letters indicate which name for God this is.

So, returning to Psalm 23, Adonai is the word in the Hebrew that was used in this Psalm for the one who takes care of us in all circumstances. (Adonai = Lord)

If you look at Psalm 23, it begins and ends with the Lord and all things good. When we think in New Testament terms, we tend to say, "The Lord is my **shepherd**." In Old Testament terms it is more likely, "**The Lord is my shepherd**." So, not those others in earthly authority who are called shepherds, but the Lord.

The first 3 verses are a picture of God's care in every way. The guidance in right pathways in verse 3 links to verse 4, where there is guidance even in hard places. Verse 5 picks this up with God giving good things even when we are beset by enemies or difficulties, and verse 6 sees God's care and provision extending for the whole of our lives and beyond, until we are dwelling with him.

May we always be able to say, "The **Lord** is **my** shepherd ... I shall dwell in the house of the **Lord** forever." **Amen.**