

Sermon for CW* Lent 4 – 22nd March 2020

PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,[a]

I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

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

As one preacher has said, “There are some places in scripture that are powerful, so deep, so rich with meaning that to even recite them, to hear them, to read them is to experience them. Psalm 23 is one such place.”

It is as though the psalm itself is a green pasture; the psalm itself is still water; the psalm itself restores our souls.

We find ourselves in troubling times, the psalmist would say we are walking through the darkest valley. And yet this psalm beautifully expresses a God who refreshes the soul, a God who comforts us when there is great fear.

Even greater still is the psalm's ending. The psalmist in receiving great goodness and love from God expresses a joy in their desire to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, which literally means making one's

home in God's temple. The first Christians believed that the temple had been transformed from being stone, timber, brick and mortar in to flesh and blood. Jesus' flesh and blood, where the living God truly and utterly dwelt, living and breathing in the person of Jesus Christ. Astonishingly we are now that flesh and blood, as the very Body of Christ. The psalmist leaves us with the incredible message that this power of fear is found in the Church, the body.

The question here therefore is how can the Church of God, the Body of Christ be peace, be comfort, be love and goodness toward the world today, especially at this time of great worry and fear.

Today is Mothering Sunday.

And of all the mothers in our Christian faith I could think of, today I think of Mother Julian of Norwich. A 14th century anchoress, a deeply religious and faithful servant of Christ who withdrew from the world to commit to a life of prayer. A devotional prayer life that expressed her love for God and a passionately human prayer life that expressed her desire to see the world healed.

You see, Mother Julian lived during the bubonic plague and the Peasants' Revolt. She withdrew to a cell for weeks on end to pray. At one point she was so close to death that she began to hallucinate and even received divinely inspired visions. Her mysticism fuelled her prayer and writing which for centuries since have inspired many to follow Christ.

She wrote, "God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall."

She also wrote these words, which for me have been a mantra for the last few days, she wrote "And all shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well."

I cannot imagine the sort of things that Julian would have witnessed during her life, and the fear that must have been present in her community, and yet she had the strength and faith to write these incredible words.. all shall be well.

Over the coming days and weeks, we will have to be extremely vigilant in our following of Government and Public Health England instructions, we must do everything to protect ourselves and those around us. This is not a time for dancing around wording or looking for creative loopholes in how we exercise these instructions. We are walking the darkest valley. Many people in this country over the coming weeks will become very unwell, and some will die.

But the psalmist wrote that our comfort is in the Lord. And in the words of Julian of Norwich, God loved us before he made us, and his love has never diminished and never will. It is this love that drives us on to protect those we love, and also as Christians, to protect those who are not loved.

During this period when we cannot gather for worship, and when we are encouraged to self-isolate it may feel like we are wavering from the path, that our usual milestones of faith are missing. Routine, pattern and rhythms will feel out of sync. For this time, I'd encourage us to think of two aspects of the Christian life, personal discipleship and corporate apostleship.

It is usual for these things to be considered in reverse, that discipleship is done corporately – we gather on Sunday morning to hear the word, break bread, and praise and worship our Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit. And apostleship is something that normally is deeply personal – literally meaning to be sent, it is inspired by an individual calling of the heart, to go and proclaim the good news of Christ.

Over the coming weeks discipleship will feel more deeply personal than ever, prayers will be spoken quietly at home, candles lit in the evenings, a quiet meal shared with a friend or family member. You Take each quiet moment as an opportunity to express what we would normally have done together.

The second aspect is apostleship. Over the coming weeks this will feel far more corporate as the Church collectively employs good works of kindness, goodness, compassion and love to the community around us. As we reduce our time in corporate worship, we will endeavour to increase our time for a passionate pastoral concern for the community around us.

Either way, keep neighbours, friends, and family in your prayers. Call out if you need help.

But most all, as the psalmist inspires you to do, fix your eyes on Jesus, your Good Shepherd. Stick close to Him. Trust that He knows the way through this valley and will see you safely through. Believe that He has good reasons for taking this route, even though it is hard and unfamiliar. And hold on to the truth that there is something better waiting on the other side of this valley.

Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.