

PSALM 23  
THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Jessie Seymour Irvine was the daughter of a minister in North East Scotland nearly 200 years ago, in the Peterhead and Aberdeen area. In her teens, she was apparently attending a music class, learning to play the organ and as part of that class she was asked to compose a piece of music as a psalm tune. The piece that she composed was named after one of the villages in the North East where father has been minister, the village is called Crimond; the tune appeared in the 1870's set to the words of Psalm 23 and has become world-famous. It is the tune that has given many Christians voice to these powerful, evocative words. There are others: there is a powerful tune called Orlington, another is Wiltshire; more recently John Rutter has set these words to music, as has Howard Goodall in the music used for *The Vicar of Dibley* though it is much more than a theme for a sitcom; the version we sang this morning by Stuart Townend, is now nearly 20 years old and has become something of a modern classic. Each piece of music gives these words a different feel, brings out something different in Psalm 23; they all take us back to something about God that both reassures and challenges us. These people have given the church an immense treasure – they have given us a voice to these powerful words and allowed us to express our faith by their music and by David's words.

Psalm 23 is a reassuring piece: it reminds us of something of God that strikes a chord in our hearts and minds; these are words from which we take courage and strength. We'll see something more of that in a moment. Psalm 23 also presents a challenging picture; it demands something back from us when we listen to it properly and fully. When we put it alongside Jesus' words in John 10 these senses of reassurance and challenge are simply reinforced! At its heart, Psalm 23 is about a relationship with God: it describes David's relationship with God and it draws us into something of that same relationship with God. It is a two-sided relationship: here is what God is like, what God has done, what God promises; here is what we are like and what God wants of us and from us. We are drawn into this personal relationship with God and we find life that is deeper, richer, finer, and stronger. We are so much better for reading, understanding, and appreciating Psalm 23.

Being a shepherd - that was David's job. He spent his early days looking after his father's sheep; he was out on the hills when Samuel came to call looking for a new king; we said then that perhaps looking after the sheep was seen as the place where the youngest brother could do least damage; it was the lowest job. It shaped his understanding of what God is like. 'Shepherd' was also a word used to talk of the leaders in Israel: the priests and the kings were the shepherds of their people, supposed to look after them and care for their well-being, but so often the prophets talk about shepherds who fail to do their job, who look after themselves rather than look after the people, the nation. God is shepherd of His people, the one who looks after them and that picture is taken a step further by Jesus, who talks about Himself as the Good shepherd, who looks after the sheep and makes the ultimate sacrifice on their behalf by laying down His life for the sheep.

George Adam Smith was the Free Church minister in Aberdeen; he was also Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Glasgow University; in 1891 he toured Palestine and out of that trip wrote a book which was to become a classic in its time; he gives us insight into the Bible by understanding the people and the places in which the stories were set. He gives a fabulous description of the Palestinian shepherd: "On some high moor, across which at night hyenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, armed, leaning on his staff, and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one on his heart, you understand why the

shepherd of Judea sprang to the front in his people's history; why they gave his name to their king, and made him the symbol of God; why Christ took him as the type of His self-sacrifice." *"The Lord..." (Psalm 23:1)* That sentence declares the whole theme of Psalm 23: Here is what God is like; God gives us everything we need; then David paints a picture of what that means from his experience of looking after his sheep. The shepherd's job is to provide food and water, to let the sheep rest; to protect the sheep from danger. He does that by walking with them everywhere; the sheep are not left to wander, but the shepherd leads them, walks with them and brings them to pasture; he leads them to water, he restores their life.

This is what God is like. Here's the headline: *"The Lord..." (Psalm 23:1)* Because God is who He is, we will have everything we need. That single sentence sets the scene for the rest of the Psalm: *"I shall..."* is filled out in so many different ways. God provides for us in every way that we need: *green pastures* - there is food for us, provided by God, food for our bodies, food for our spirits; *quiet waters* - God gives water to the world so that our bodies are refreshed and there is living water for us, for our spirits to be refreshed. *"Even though..." (Psalm 23:4)* God walks with us through difficult and dangerous parts of our lives, watching over us, protecting us. God blesses us with rich blessings: *"Surely..." (Psalm 23:6)* Each of these lines could be opened up and traced through the Bible because each of these lines is a way in which we are blessed by God. We have all of this because God looks after His people, because God loves and cares for us and watches out for us; we belong to Him and He cares for us.

This is a picture that is deeply reassuring. Christians in every generation have read these words, have sung these words and these words have lifted our spirits. We have enjoyed these words because they tell us something deep and important about God and about the way God cares for us; we have been reassured by these words; we have found courage from these words. When we have taken them further in Jesus' picture in John 10 that sense of reassurance and courage has been deepened even more because we see the Good Shepherd willing to lay down His life for sheep, to die for us. This is what God is like; this is who we are. "When the Palestinian shepherd did die in defence of his sheep that was an accident. He planned to live for them, not die for them... the death of the Palestinian shepherd meant disaster for his sheep. The death of the Good Shepherd means life for His sheep." (Morris) Praise God for the greatness of His love for us, that our needs are on His heart and are on His heart so much that Jesus should give His life. This is reassuring; this gives us courage.

But there is also a challenge in these words. Let's go back to George Adam Smith: he describes a visit to a well in the desert as part of his 1891 trip: "three or four shepherds come down with their flocks. The flocks mixed with each other and we wondered how each shepherd would get his own again. But after the watering and the playing were over, the shepherds one by one went up different sides of the valley and each called out his peculiar call; and the sheep of each drew out of the crowd to their own shepherd and the flocks went away as orderly as they came." (p.210) *"when he..." (John 10:4)* It is fascinating to watch a shepherd work the field with his dog today; the dog does what the shepherd wants for a whistle or a command; the sheep really want to go off in all sorts of directions, but the dog drives them in the direction the shepherd wants them to go. The Bible has a different picture: the shepherd is walking out in front, is going on ahead of the sheep, is leading them and is calling out to them so that they follow; they know his voice and they recognise voice of *their* shepherd over against the voices of the other shepherds; they follow *their* shepherd where he leads.

Jesus says "Follow me!" We're not sure that we want to do that; something in us wants to do our own thing, go our own way; we're not sure we want to be 'constricted' by Jesus; we want to be free to go where we want and to be the kind of people that suits us. It is for people like us that Jesus came, the lost sheep who have wandered off! Read the Bible and listen for the voice of Jesus; come to Church and listen for the voice of Jesus; pray and listen for Jesus guiding and leading us, telling us what He wants in us and from us. The challenge for us is to be people who are learning to be the kind of people that Jesus wants us to be, learning to have our lives shaped by the teachings of Jesus, by the example of Jesus; to be people who are learning to follow Jesus rather than follow our own instincts. This is where we find life, where we find freedom, where we find the blessing of God, in following Jesus. The challenge for us as individuals is to be the people that Jesus wants us to be; the challenge for us as Church to be the kind of Church that Jesus wants us to be, looking for God to guide us and lead us in the decisions we make and in the way we shape church life.

Let me give you an example: someone once asked Jesus what He thought was the most important thing about life. Two things, He said: "love God, love your neighbour". If we are to follow Jesus, we need to interact with these words. First of all, we need to try to understand what Jesus meant when He said these words, that He's talking about relationships being of greatest importance. Our relationship with God and our relationships with other people are of first importance; everything else falls in comparison. But then, we have to put these words into practice: to follow Jesus means that we become people who, first and foremost, love God with heart and soul and who love our neighbour as ourselves. We need to be people like that, people who have these qualities in our lives; we may not get it right all of the time and we may not love God and others perfectly, but to follow Jesus, these must be our top priorities - love God, loved others. Follow Jesus; be the kind of people He wants us to be; rise to that challenge; discover the values and qualities of life as Jesus sees them.

David's faith shaped his life. One day he would be King; He would complete the calling of God and arguably be Israel's greatest king. It was not easy: there would be difficult days to negotiate, some of his own making, some forced upon him. As King, he found reassurance in God: God was his refuge, God was his shepherd and he lacked nothing. As king, he listened for God's word; listening for God shaped his faith, and shaped his kingship; as king he tried to be the man God wanted him to be. David's faith shaped his life. How much does faith shape our life? Is faith allowed to shape our life, the way we think, the way we speak, the way we behave? Or is faith kept in a box, only allowed out for Church-time on Sunday? Does faith shape the way we are family-members? Or the way we go to work? Or the way we conduct our business? Or the way we treat the people we meet in the shops or in the streets? Does faith shape our lives? We find reassurance and courage here to live life to full; rise to the challenge to follow Jesus and listen for His word. "*The Lord...*" (Psalm 23:1)