



PSALM 23

Daily Reflections

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Introduction

A lot has been said in recent days and weeks about the Corona Virus pandemic. While the official government message is aimed at helping, reassuring and protecting us – a message of washing hands and isolation for those who may have contracted the virus or who are at added risk from the virus – a by-product of this message is fear.

This does not mean we should not heed government advice, it is the best advice available to us and I have no doubt the first priority of any government is to protect the people, so please do heed the advice in all circumstances.

The role of the church is not to find ways of curing or rendering Covid-19 impotent. The role of the church is to address the fear and concern that Covid-19 has brought to so many. This is the reason for these short reflections on Psalm 23. To lift our eyes of what frightens us towards the one who has promised to walk with us through this difficult time, *'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me.'* (Psalm 23:4)

The Lord is my Shepherd

The Lord is my shepherd (Psalm 23:1)

I love walking the roads of Aghadowey at this time of year. They are filled with so many signs of hope, new life and new beginnings. The days are brighter and longer, there is a hint of spring in the air. Daffodils and Gorse bushes begin to sprinkle the countryside with colour and of course the fields are starting to fill with new lambs.

There is something wonderfully vulnerable about a new lamb. It lacks any sign of a winter coat; it is dependent on its mother and of course we know how hard shepherds work at this time of year making sure each lamb is safe and well.

Many feel vulnerable today because of the Covid-19 virus. We feel like the lambs in the field, exposed and reliant on others to ensure our safety. Yet just like the lambs in the field we do have a shepherd. Psalm 23 tells us **the Lord is my shepherd**. Familiar words but I wonder have we stopped to think just how significant these words are?

In the book of Ezekiel, God tells the prophet that because of how those who were supposed to care for his people, the priests and religious leaders, had failed so completely that he himself would shepherd them. **I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord.**

(Ezekiel 34:15) It is comforting amid the fear and the sorrow to know that the LORD himself has promised to tend us.

In John chapter 10 we discover exactly how God fulfilled this promise. Jesus, answering questions about his identity uses

the picture of the **good shepherd** to explain who he is. In this chapter Jesus contrasts himself as the good shepherd who enters by the gate with the one who would steal and destroy who climbs over the gate. He talks about how he brings life and how he knows his sheep and they know him. To know that **...the Lord is my shepherd...** is to know that we are known by Jesus. We are not a statistic or anonymous, we are known. **'He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out'** (John 10:3)

It is not just that we are known by Jesus, the Good Shepherd, it is that we are secure with Jesus the Good Shepherd. Jesus said in John 10:27 that his sheep listen to his voice, they know him and that they follow him. In verse 28 he talks of how he gives his sheep eternal life and so they shall never perish and then he said this. **'...no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand...'** (John 10:28-29)

To know that **the Lord is my shepherd** is also to know that we are secure in Christ. Covid-19 cannot change who we are. Covid-19 is not greater than our Father in heaven and so it is not greater than Jesus our saviour because Jesus and the Father are one. (John 10:30)

The Lord is my shepherd... we are known by Jesus and we are secure in Jesus because nothing is greater than our Father in Heaven...

Prayer

Father thank you that you are my Shepherd. Thank you this means you have promised to watch over me during this crisis and that you have promised to protect who I am in Christ during this crisis. Lord, help me to focus not on what might happen with Covid-19 but to dwell on what has happened in Jesus Christ. He has become my shepherd and I have become his sheep.

I lack nothing

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing...
(Psalm 23:1)

No doubt we have noticed that our supermarket shelves do not look the same as they normally do. Everything from toilet roll to pasta to chicken seems to be bought up as quickly as it can be placed on the shelves.

Undoubtedly fear is driving this panic buying. What will happen if we can't get out of the house, what will we do if the shops are no longer able to restock the shelves!

In answer to the first question, the folks of Moneydig Presbyterian Church and Second Kilrea Presbyterian church have signed up to helping those who are forced to self-isolate by ensuring they receive shopping and prescriptions etc. I know the community association in Moneydig are also working to help those who live within their bounds.

When we turn on the radio or the news, one of the good news stories coming out of this crisis is how people are pulling together in order to help one another out. This is good and so we should be encouraged not to panic buy, not to hoard... and how much toilet roll can one-person use!

The Psalmist tells us to look beyond the material. The Lord is our shepherd, he knows us by name, we are secure in him (yesterday's reflection) and so we have everything we need.

In Moneydig and Second Kilrea we have been teaching our children the Lord's Prayer,

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. **Give us this day our daily bread** and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom the power and the glory, for ever and ever, amen.*

If we truly believe **the LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing**, and if we believe in a God who answers prayer, **give us this day our daily bread**, then why would we feel the need to panic buy.

Let's not allow this virus to take our compassion, our concern and love for one another. Jesus taught us to **'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'** (Luke 10:27)

We show one another that we believe we lack nothing and that we love God and one another in the way we choose to shop during this crisis.

Prayer

Father forgive us for when we have allowed fear and panic to foster greed and a lack of concern for others. As we shop in the coming days and weeks teach us love and generosity. Remind us to buy only what we need, to leave enough on the shelves for all and to be generous in our giving to foodbanks.

Thank you that we lack for nothing because you are our shepherd.

He makes me lie down in green pastures

*He makes me lie down in green pastures
(Psalm 23:2)*

Anyone in Moneydig will tell you that what I know about farming you could write on the back of a postage stamp. It stands to reason then what I know about sheep wouldn't fill the back of a postage stamp. Yet what I do know about sheep is that they are incredibly skittish. When I go out for a walk and pass a field of sheep, they run from the sound of my footsteps.

To lie down brings contentment, it is a sign of safety at peace with the world.

The Psalmist is reminding us that because *the Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures.* We can be at peace with the world, we can be at peace with the news so many more of us will have to self-isolate, because we know the Lord is our shepherd, we lack nothing in him and so we can be still before him.

When we must take so many precautions against this virus it is easy to think that it has the upper hand, that somehow, we, or worse God, are fighting a rear-guard action. This is not the case. We can lie down in peace knowing God is our shepherd.

*Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the
beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth*

*was founded?
He sits enthroned above the circle of the
earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a
canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live
in. Isaiah 40:21-22*

The psalmist in Psalm 46 goes further, he not only reminds us that we can be still before God, but he commands that we be still before God.

*Be still and know that I am God; I will be
exalted among the nations; I will be
exalted in the earth. The Lord almighty is
with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.
Psalm 46:10 – 11*

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures... Let us remember today the confidence we have in God.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for who you are. That you are God and that you will be exalted among the nations. Thank you this means even amid this Corona Virus outbreak that we can have confidence that you will indeed lead us to green pastures where we can lie down in peace. We pray today for all who are worried, for all who fear the future, asking that you would lead them to that place of peace and security. Amen

He leads me beside quiet waters...

...he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. (Psalm 23:2-3)

This is a picture of the river Agivey which flows beside the manse where I live. Part of the manse garden forms the bank of the river and I can walk along the bank for quite some distance through the fields. This river is one of the things that makes where I live an incredible place to live. It really does refresh the soul.

I can only imagine what it must have been like for the Psalmist in a hot a dusty land to be led by the Lord, his shepherd, to a place of quiet waters, a place to rest, drink and be refreshed. I'm guessing when all the restrictions are finally eased and people across the Europe and the world get back to normal, we will experience something of the refreshment the Psalmist is talking about.

Yet even this won't do justice to what Psalm 23 is describing. In many ways the things we are having to give up such as cinema, meals out, sporting occasions they are all fleeting. They come and go; we will get used to life without them and who knows maybe we won't want to go back to the old way of life anyway.

The refreshment that comes from God is deep seated, it is that peace that allows us to lie down in green pastures. This refreshment is not something that comes after this crisis is past. It is a refreshment that allows us to face Covid-19 safe in the knowledge that God has and is refreshing us, equipping

us not to protect us from all that must be faced, but enabling us to face it.

*Be still my soul the Lord is on thy side
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain
Leave to thy God to order and provide
In every change He faithful will remain
Be still my soul thy best, thy heavenly
friend*

Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end

Read again the words of Psalm 46 *Be still and know that I am God...* and meditate on what it is to be beside those still waters and to have our soul refreshed. Is this time when we are forced to slow down and do less an opportunity to reorder our lives and know God's refreshing by still waters?

Prayer Father forgive us for how busy our lives have been. Forgive us for how we have found time for so many other things and not for you. Help us to use this time of enforced isolation, quietness and peace to reflect on you, to be still before you and so know the refreshment of your still waters. Amen

He guides me along the right paths

*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.** Psalm 23 1-3*

At our last Sunday evening service in Second Kilrea Presbyterian Church we started to learn one of Matt Redman's songs.

Blessed Be Your Name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be Your name

Blessed Be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed Be Your name

Every blessing You pour out, I'll
Turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord
Still I will say

This song is a reminder that life is never straightforward. It is filled with ups and downs, celebrations and mourning, joy and tears in almost equal measure. Yet the Psalmist is reminding us that throughout it all we can be sure that **'He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.'**

Society would have us believe that everything possible should be done to minimise our pain, our suffering or maybe even our inconvenience. Is it possible God is leading us through the inconvenience of school closures, the uncertainty of exams being cancelled and actually it is how we follow him and trust him that will mark us out as his people?

Prayer Father, thank you that we can be certain of your leading. Thank you there is never a circumstance or occurrence that is outside of your control. Continue to lead us we pray, and may how we react, what we say and do demonstrate our complete trust in you: Even through these unprecedented days. Amen

Psalm 23 - Comfort me

¹ *The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*

² *He makes me lie down in green
pastures,*

he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ *he refreshes my soul.*

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

⁴ *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.***

What does it mean to fear no evil? Some would say evil cannot touch us. But when we take time to consider this it makes no sense. If evil cannot touch us then how was it the apostle Paul faced so many beatings, shipwrecks and prison terms. Job was certainly deeply affected by evil when his family and all he had were taken from him. Jesus suffered the evil of the cross.

Coronavirus has certainly been no respecter of religious conviction or belief. Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Atheist... all have been affected alike. **Another reason why it is important to heed the advice of social separation and washing hands.**

The palmist is not advocating evil will not touch us, he is stating he has no fear of evil, which is a very different thing. Next Sunday at our online church service at 12 noon we will

be thinking about the man born blind in John 9. When Jesus was asked why he was born blind, if it was his sin or his parents, he answered by saying neither. The man's blindness was to demonstrate God's glory – which was shown in how he was healed.

The psalmist fears no evil because he knows he can depend upon a demonstration of God's glory. What is that glory. Surely God's glory is in the promised return of Jesus Christ. Revelation 22:20 tells us, 'He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.'' God's glory is in Jesus promise to the thief on the cross, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'' (Luke 2:42)

Psalms 23 is all about the shepherd, the Lord, who leads his sheep and the protection he affords to them. The psalmist fears no evil because of his utter confidence in the one who leads him through the dark valley and so no matter what evil befalls him he knows that final destination of still waters and green pastures where he can lie down in peace will be his.

This is his comfort and protection.

Can we say that we fear no evil? We might well be worried about catching Covid-19, who wouldn't, but do we fear it or is our confidence in the one who leads us through, who will return and when he does it is to take us to be with him in paradise.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for the complete confidence we can have in you. A confidence that goes beyond what any illness,

circumstance or happenstance can force upon us. Thank you for the promised inheritance of 1 Peter 1:4 and so Lord we ask that today you would enable our faith in Jesus Christ, the one who keeps that inheritance, the one who leads us through the valley, the only one who can bring us true peace. This we pray in his name, amen.

Psalm 23 – The feast

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

There is a Christian film called God's not dead. It is the story of how a university lecturer who is an atheist and a Christian student interact with one another. In the film a pastor receives a visit from an African colleague who reminds him of this saying.

*God is good all the time, all the time God
is good.*

This is what the Psalmist is reminding us of as he declares you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. During the battle, when war is raging all around us, when we are distancing ourselves from one another to stop the spread of infection, when we worry about loved ones who are struggling to get home. God is good all the time, all the time God is good.

The question we are faced with when confronted with this part of Psalm 23, is will we trust God enough to sit down and eat at the table he has prepared, will we commit loved ones, worrying situations and fear of infection into God's hands believing he will prepare a table for them just as much as he does for us?

This is a much shorter reflection, because it really does require time and space for us to think. Will we trust God and so eat of the table or will we miss out on the table because we won't trust God?

God is good all the time, all the time God is good.

Prayer Father forgive our arrogance when we believe we have a better understanding of what needs to be done than you. Teach us through the worry and anxiety of these days to trust you not just with our salvation, but with our loved ones. Elderly relatives we can no longer visit, son's and daughters who can't come to us. Lord, into your hands we commit their wellbeing, at your table we take rest from worry. In Jesus name, amen.

You anoint my head with oil

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

Yesterday we thought about how even in the middle of all the chaos that is going on around us, God prepares a table for us. We can trust God; we can rest at his table in the confidence that the Lord is my shepherd and so he will lead us to those good pastures and quite waters.

It was common at grand banquets for the well to do for the guests to have their heads anointed with oil. In Mark 14:3-9 we read the story of Jesus head being anointed with very expensive perfume. In Luke's gospel Jesus points out this woman honoured him in a way his host did not.

It is not just that God provides for us in the face of our enemies, it is that he honours us with incredible abundance. The compassion and care of God is not just equal to our enemies it is greater than our enemies. So much so my cup overflows. God is more than can be contained.

Yesterday we took time to think about how we trust in God, if we trust God enough to entrust family and friends into his care. Today we are being challenged to trust in God's abundant care, to know that when we leave our family with him, he is more than able.

To be clear this is not a promise that the current crisis will somehow miraculously vanish, whether that crisis is COvov-19, family hardships, grief, illness or persecution. It is a

promise that through the crisis of life God's care is more than enough.

Prayer Heavenly Father we thank you for your incredible, abundant care for your people. We thank you that for you to be our shepherd means that you watch over us, always. Father teach us to trust in your care, to rest in how you are always watching over us. Amen

Psalm 23 – Dwelling in the house of the Lord

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

So, we have come to the end of our reflection of Psalm 23. Normally when a story ends, we reach the end. There is no more to discover. The bad guy is defeated and the good guy lives happily ever after. The sheriff defeats the evil gunslinger and the old western town goes back to normal, life gets back to how it always was.

As we come to the end of Psalm 23 life hasn't even begun to get back to normal and in truth it is more likely to become a lot more abnormal before it gets better. In many ways this is how Psalm 23 also ends.

Remember the Psalmist has been talking about walking through the dark valley he has talked of the table prepared in the presence of his enemies. There is no sense in how he ends this Psalm that those enemies or that dark tunnel has ended. We know from David's life (the author of the Psalm) that his life continued to be one battle after another. One hardship, betrayal or sorrow followed one after the other, some his doing some because of family jealousy.

Covid-19 is still with us and will continue to be with us. We continue to live separated from the ones we love, we continue to live with the fear of catching the virus or loved ones catching the virus.

Yet the Psalm doesn't want us to focus on what is, but what will be.

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

Psalm 23 has constantly reminded us of God's care, his provision in the face of our enemy. The Psalm has asked us trust in God, to rest in God to believe God will lead us through. The Psalm now ends with a plea to focus not on our enemy, COvid-19 or anything else, to not even focus on the table he has set before us, or the green pastures and still waters. Focus on the Lord as our shepherd himself. His promise that his goodness and love will always follow us, surround us and that we will dwell in his house for ever.

God's promise in Jesus Christ, that all who believe shall not perish but have eternal life, that they will have the God's goodness and love forever, that they will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever is not affected by any circumstance.

So our reflection on this Psalm ends with the plea to hope by focusing on God and his promise of Jesus Christ.

Prayer Heavenly Father forgive us for focusing on what is happening to us. Forgive us for being preoccupied by the here and now. Lift our eyes upward and forward. Lift our eyes onto the Jesus, the cross and the heavenly promises you have made to each one of us. Lord, we trust in you, we hope in you. Amen