

Readings Ps 23: John 9; 1 – 41

Hymns: 14 ‘The Lord’s my shepherd; 528 ‘Make me a channel of your peace’; 255 ‘Father hear the prayers we offer’; 462 ‘The King of Love my Shepherd is’

‘The Lord’s is my shepherd, I shall not want’ The start of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. The words of the Psalm are so familiar to us, so much loved by us. Sometimes, perhaps, as with all very well - known words, they slip over our tongues without us really noticing or wondering or pausing. Read them aloud to yourself today and each day this week and you might be amazed at how things will strike you afresh.

Why is this psalm so popular, why is its popularity so long lived? Why is it, that even today, when the shepherd image is not key to our culture, that these words are still so loved, so valued. There is nothing very new I can say about this psalm, there is no novel angle from which to view it. We love it as it is. It is the very familiarity of its lines and cadences that speaks to our souls. But perhaps, most of all, it we love it because it names some of our deepest yearnings, our greatest longings.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack for nothing. Truly, if we lived that out, our whole culture would fall apart. We live in a society that assumes we lack things. And we have seen that acted out recently in the spate of panic buying and hoarding. What does it say about us as a society in this time of crisis, that people are placing their faith in toilet rolls!! What would it mean to say instead. ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I lack for nothing’

I have in the house, a card, sent to me by one of my colleagues which says ‘Lord, I’m really looking forward to the bit where I get to lie down in green pastures!’ Today when many people have been asked to stay indoors for an

extended period is it any wonder that the notion of having being able to lie down in a green field with a lovely stream running by is so appealing! But perhaps the most profound of our longings and the real reason for our affection for this Psalm comes in the middle. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. This is the point in the Psalm where the writer moves from talking about God, to talking to God – in the face of our bleakest times, our times of bereavement, the times in the valley of deepest darkness, we cannot talk about God, we can only call to him. The Psalmist expresses his trust – that no matter what, God is with him. And it is that trust shown by the Psalmist which we find reassuring, comforting in our own deepest darkness. We have an advantage over the Psalmist, because we have the further reassurance of knowing Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection we understand completely that God is with us. He is Immanuel, God with us. We see it acted out in the drama of the gospel story given for today. A man, born blind, lifted from the stigma of being a sinner and given sight. He becomes the focus of a dispute about Jesus, even his parents are drawn into the argument and finally he is cast out from his community. Shunned by his neighbours and friends, Jesus is there for him and having given him back his physical sight before, Jesus now opens his eyes to the reality of God and God's presence in the world. This week, let's try to keep our eyes open and watch for the signs of God's presence in our troubled world.

And so we will find the story unfolding over the next few weeks. The story we know so well and yet need to hear again and again – for it is just too amazing to take in. The story of Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, who once and for all entered the valley of the deepest darkness, the valley of pain, of betrayal, of death, so that we would never face these things alone, so that we would always be able to say to God 'You are with me.'