

## 30/4/23 - Ormond Uniting Church – Sermon by Brad Denniston

*Psalm 23*

*John 10:1-18*

May the meditation of our hearts and our minds be always acceptable in your sight. God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

‘The Lord is my shepherd’ - these have been memorable and reassuring words for millions of people across the centuries. Indeed, the author of the psalm speaks of the Lord’s rod and staff being a “comfort”. But today I want to come at this Psalm from a slightly different angle. In conjunction with Jesus’ words in John 10, I want to show that the role of shepherd in the Bible is actually about kingship. Yet Jesus flips what it is to be a king or political leader through his nonviolent self-sacrifice. Far from this apparent surrender being a failure, it is by such means that Christ is victorious over sin and death.

In Psalm 23 ‘Lord’ is the English translation of ‘Yahweh’ - This is the same Yahweh who walks in the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the one who frees Israel from slavery in Egypt. Scripture teaches us through these stories that Yahweh is a God who is with us and for us.

But what did being a *shepherd* mean to the people of Israel? Well, perhaps the most famous shepherd in the Old Testament is David. In Psalm 78 we read ‘*He chose his servant David and took him from the sheepfolds; from tending the nursing ewes he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel, his inheritance.*’ So when David was made king of Israel he didn’t stop being a shepherd, he became a shepherd of people. This often required conquering enemy nations through warfare. The Israelites needed the shepherd to protect them as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death. In Psalm 23 Yahweh the Shepherd is a king.

In John 10, Jesus is the shepherd. He says so. He says “I am the good shepherd”. But here’s a remarkable thing - In the book of Exodus Moses asks God what he should tell the Israelites when they ask him who God is. God answers that he is Yahweh. And what is the literal translation of Yahweh. It is ‘I am who I am’.

Why is that remarkable? Let's look again at what Jesus says in John 10 - He says "*I am* the gate", "*I am* the good shepherd" . He makes these 'I am' statements many times in John's gospel. I am the Bread of Life. I am the Light of the World. I am the Resurrection and the Life. I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. I am the Vine. This culminates when the soldiers come to execute Jesus. They ask for 'Jesus of Nazareth' and Jesus says 'I am he'. We are then told that 'When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground'. That's so strange. Why would the soldiers fall to the ground because he said the words "I am he."? Well falling to the ground was what happened in the Old Testament when people were struck by the presence of God. What we are learning here is that Jesus is the great "I am". How amazing is that? Jesus is Yahweh in human form. Jesus is the God of Israel made flesh. The *Lord Jesus* is our good shepherd.

But then we learn something else remarkable. In John 10:11 Jesus says "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." What kind of Lord lays down his life? The old kings of Israel fought wars with other nations to guide and protect their flocks. It would've been preposterous to the Israelites to think that their lord Yahweh could die. But something very different has happened in the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus fights a cosmic war against sin and death. But his power and authority, remarkably, are expressed in non-violence, love and sacrifice. That is fundamentally different to how the kings and empires of the world achieve their victories. Indeed, when Pilate asks the crowd to release Jesus the crowds reply "If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against Caesar." To which us Christians reply "Yes. That's our God. The one who sets himself against caesar."

So this is the gospel, the good news: Jesus Christ is victorious over sin and death through his own death and resurrection. When the man who becomes God dies and rises from the tomb he leaves death behind and takes us all with him.

But it sure doesn't feel like we live in a world where Christ is victorious. War and pollution ravage the planet. We get sick and we die. Those we love get sick and die. We find ourselves doing over and over again what we

told ourselves we wouldn't do. We find ourselves avoiding over and over again that which we know we ought to do. Where is the victory?

Well, the victory is in the promise that none of these things - none of them - is the end of the matter. For in Christ's resurrection we need no longer fear death or sin or anything else that once separated us from God. He is the shepherd who dies and rises victorious to rescue his sheep from death. Think of the opening refrain from that rousing hymn 'Thine be the glory':

'Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,  
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won'.

I want to leave you with the hope expressed in the book of Revelation, the final book of the bible. An elder of the church describes a vision for what awaits those who have been martyred for their faith in Christ. The martyrs were members of the early church who were persecuted and died for following Jesus rather than meeting violence with violence. We may never need to pay for our beliefs with our lives but we may find following Christ entails sacrifice and perhaps even rejection by those who, for good reasons and bad, despise the church. These martyrs walked through the valley of the shadow of death with confidence - confidence to the point of laying down their lives like their good shepherd - in Christ's victory over death. As I read this I want you to notice the echoes of Psalm 23 and Jesus as the good shepherd. Revelation tells us that

*"For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

That's a vision of heaven on earth that, if we have faith, we can see on the horizon. We can now say that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for Lord Jesus, our shepherd, is with us.

Amen.