

Head and Heart

21st April 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Readings

Acts 4: 5 - 12

Psalm 23

1 John 3: 16 - 24

John 10: 11 - 18



All we need!

The murder of a teenage Palestinian shepherd boy near Ramallah last week is a story not dissimilar to incidents Jesus may have known in that area. Shepherd boys were plentiful on the plains during the dry summers. Like Benjamin they would be collecting stones for throwing to direct and protect the sheep and like him could have been mistaken in their intent by an enemy soldier. It is thought that Jesus came from a long line of shepherd families on both Joseph and Mary's sides. Nazareth and Bethlehem were the homes of many Temple priests who owned and tended flocks when free from their appointed times of religious duties. After all they were descended from David, the great shepherd king. Jesus, who was welcomed into his world by shepherds, may well have had times of stone collecting among sheep in the Nazareth hills. He would be able to look from vantage points to view Mount Carmel away to the northwest and look down to flocks and herds on the grassy plains in Spring.

King David's shepherd psalm in today's readings will have been on the lips of many in Israel and Palestine these past months. With heavy hearts, helpless hands and empty bellies, it will have been hard to have faith that *I have everything I need – pools of fresh water – a full table – no fear in the darkness – surety of God's goodness and love*. It is hard to share these people's tragic stories, but I hope and pray many of them can know, with us, the confidence of David's song. Our other scriptures today give us a greater source of confidence which I trust we could share with people of the Holy Land when in our human lives we know the loneliness of the stranded, hungry lamb, who has lost its bearings! *The Lord is my shepherd. He will supply everything I need.*

Peter and John in our Acts reading faced some of the first violent opposition to the Christian Way Mission. In the Temple where we left them last week, they had preached about Jesus and accused the religious leaders of condemning and murdering their Master. Now, the opposing forces have gathered, after the two disciples had spent a night in the Temple lock-up. The whole Sanhedrin court had been assembled under the authority of High Priest Caiaphas accompanied by Annas, his father-in-law and predecessor. They were joined by Sadducees who did not believe in a resurrection, and the Officer of the guards. They had one question – *How did you work this healing miracle?* Peter, inspired by the breath of the spirit Jesus had given him, answered, and then forestalled many other questions, with the facts of the case. *We didn't do it. Jesus Christ of Nazareth did it. That's the same Jesus you crucified. Jesus whom God raised from death! He's the Saviour of the world and you rejected him! And what is more, at least five thousand other people believe that too!*

That number of believers grew ever greater as the church expanded into a wider world. (over two billion today) Years later, John still writes with the same confidence and simplicity, to a church struggling with controversies of faith and practice. *Christ gave his life for us. He told us that's how we know what God's love is. It's the same for us - putting others before ourselves - even to the point of death when necessary. That's how Christ's people live because love is not a matter of words and debates, but of actions, loving one another in the strength and power of his love.* John goes further. *That's the truth Jesus taught us. That's how we know we belong to God. That's how we can be confident of standing in God's presence! Bound together in him who is Love.*

John may have reminded his readers of other words of Jesus, supporting what he writes. They are in the gospel reading today. *I am the good shepherd who is willing to die for the sheep.* As happened, sadly, with Benjamin in different circumstances last week. Jesus speaks of the shepherd's close relationship with every member of the flock, even when it comprises millions of sheep. *I know all my sheep by name. I'm not running away, like some hired workers do when life gets hard. And all that's not just for this life! I am Resurrection and Life! I know you here and now, in heaven and for ever!*

When David's psalm was composed, he could not have known how true it was and would be for ever, embracing the whole truth of God in Jesus. Nor would he have known how many people would use it as a daily prayer still today. Whatever our personal situation, however desperate we may be, however dark the hidden corner from which we cry out, the Lord, our forever shepherd, knows us and our needs personally. He will go on providing, loving, caring, preparing, guiding, protecting, always knowing where to find us, and at the last, standing in the open doorway, welcoming us into his fold - eternal life.

A Prayer based on Psalm 23

Lord, it's the season of new lambs.
Showing me the meaning of this well-loved psalm.
You are the real shepherd of my life.
I watch the shepherds at work.
Early morning and late-night rounds, checking the flock.
Searching hidden places,
in the hedges and ditches for strays and casualties,
digging lambs from snowdrifts,
warming the weak ones by the fire and bottle feeding them,
keeping them safe from predators in the fields
re-uniting broken, straying families,
knowing everyone as an individual with personal needs,
joyfully watching lambs at play,
responding to a mother's distant call
away from their childlike explorations into a new bright world
Watching the flock flourish;
Sad when farewell market days come round.
Thank you for this psalm,
It really is a picture of you and me, Lord.
You have and are everything I need.

