

Sermon

Sunday 25 April 2021

Lesson

Psalm 23

Last Saturday, Hester Ford died at the age of 116. She had been the oldest citizen of the United States. An African-American, Hester's home was in Charlotte, North Carolina. Born in 1904 when Theodore Roosevelt was President, she lived through two pandemics. Hester had 12 children, 68 grandchildren, 125 great-grandchildren and 120 great-great-grandchildren. On her birthday in August, she was asked by one of her granddaughters, 'How are you?' In wonderfully rich tones, Hester replied, 'I am living for the Lord'. Each day she listened to words from the Gospel of John and offered *The Lord's Prayer*. Hester's favourite piece of Scripture was Psalm 23: 'The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want'.

Out of 150 psalms, Psalm 23 is perhaps the best known. According to tradition, the six short verses were penned by the 'sweet psalmist of Israel': David, the shepherd boy who became king. Treasured by Jews and Christians, its simplicity and concreteness have spoken to

millions across two millennia. In our tradition, though the psalm can be set to a number of tunes, it is the work of Jessie Seymour Irvine, daughter of the parish minister of Crimond in Aberdeenshire, who composed the familiar tune of that name.

In many ways the life of a shepherd has not changed over the centuries. In rural France, Gaetan Meme (Getan Memme) is a young shepherd who each season moves 1300 livestock, from the lowlands in winter to the highlands in summer, to allow the sheep to graze on the rich alpine pastures. Journeying through high mountain passes, Meme must always be on his guard. Though he says he can imagine no better life, he has to sleep at night fully dressed, always ready to repel attacks by wolves on the sheep. Amidst the green velvet mountains and rocky outcrops, he cares for his sheep providing treatment for a broken leg, tending to damaged hooves and guiding tired mothers to safety.

On one occasion, he recalls coming face-to-face with a wolf which he had to fight off. The biggest concern for the shepherd is fog: it is

then that the sheep spread out and can easily become lost.

Effortlessly, the clouds float down from the peaks.

This earthed reality, of living with the sheep, day and night, of caring for each one, protecting them and walking with them is foundational to our understanding of God. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and David were all shepherds. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus said, 'He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who doesn't own the sheep, sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and flees'.

There was a time in the life of David when he had to flee for his life.

Saul, the King of Israel, sought to murder him. In the wilderness of *Ein Gedi*, David hid in a cave. He knew Saul was coming for him.

David had been a shepherd boy: he knew the loneliness of the hillside and what it meant to be a guardian and carer. Was it in the darkness of the cave, when he feared for his life, his ego collapsing, and his world crashing down around him, that he composed his first psalm?

The Eternal, my shepherd, restores my soul; in the valley of death's

shadow, in the deepest darkness, thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort and guide me. The silent, elusive notes of Psalm 23 echo; resonate, in human darkness.

Darkness comes in many forms. Helen Pike, a personal carer in Livingston, reimagined the twenty-third psalm as speaking for those living with dementia. Sometime after she wrote it, her husband developed the condition and ‘her’ psalm took on a new poignancy.

The psalm reads:

The Lord is my care-giver
He understands my needs

When my mind is confused
And I am anxious
He is there beside me;
He brings me peace.

Though my mind and body grow frail
I do not fear the darkness
For the light of His presence comforts me.

He sends moments of clarity and enjoyment
That fill me with delight.
He enters the dark recesses of my mind
Where others cannot reach.

Surely goodness and mercy travel with me
And one day I will awake with Him

And all will be right.

Psalm 23 conveys tenderly God's unfailing friendship. The flow of its sensual poetry gently evokes peace and peacefulness. Years ago, I sat at a bedside in a hospice with a family, and a mother who lay dying. It seemed to me that reading the pastoral psalm brought serenity: it was a moment of sacredness and healing. *Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

On Holocaust Memorial Day 2019, Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner told the story of her family's suffering at the hands of the Nazis. Though she is English and has grown up in England, her family were from a small town in Lithuania, where once there was a thriving Jewish community. She said that she loved Psalm 23: '*Adonai roie*, God is my shepherd'. These ancient words connect deeply with the *Shoah*, the Holocaust and, for Rabbi Laura, she and her family still walk in that dark shadow. During one day of the *Shoah*, Nazis and Lithuanian collaborators rounded up 2000 Jewish residents in her town. The prisoners were hurled into the synagogue, the doors were

locked, and it was burned to the ground. While this cruellest darkness still shapes Rabbi Laura and her family, she says:

My life - my existence, even just breathing - is such a blessing. Whilst it may be lived in the valley of the shadows of the past, I know that other words of Psalm 23 are also true – in Hebrew, *kosi revayah*, my cup overflows. My life overflows with blessings and it is my duty to appreciate every one of them ...

The psalm begins and ends with metaphors of tranquillity. *In grass meadows, He makes me lie down. He leads me to water in places of repose. He restores my soul.* I wonder what the psalm means for you? Internalise it; breathe it; let it penetrate the sinews of your soul. I think again of Hester Ford, aged 116, whose long life was shaped by her intuitive sense of the Shepherd watching over her. So familiar were the words, she felt herself to be at one with God.

Amen.