

## A SONG FOR TODAY

Good afternoon. Memory is the strangest thing. As I grow older I can remember a story from 40 or 50 years ago better than I can remember what I said in the last sentence. What was I just saying? Oh yes! Remembering stories from long ago.

I was brought up in Harrogate, 'the gateway to the Dales'! When I was about 11 I heard a story from way up in the Dales which was no doubt apocryphal, but which impressed me very much. It was the story of a boy who himself was about 11 and was a member of a farming family.

The family went to church one Sunday and the preacher came back to stay at the farm overnight. The preacher and the boy got talking and the boy was asked whether he had a real faith of his own. The boy said he wasn't too sure and the preacher asked him if he knew the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. "Oh," said the boy, "I know that well because I look after our sheep." "Well," said the preacher, "it's possible to know God as the shepherd of your own life, because that's what David says, "The Lord is my shepherd". If you trust your life over to God to care for you and protect you, then He will be your shepherd."

The preacher went on, "The way I remember it for myself is I count along my thumb and fingers like this. The Lord is my Shepherd. When I come to the fourth finger I hold it tightly because I remember that it isn't just that the Lord is anybody's shepherd, but He's my shepherd."

The story went on that that winter the boy was out on the hills with the sheep and there was a terrible snowstorm and the boy and his sheep were lost. After a number of days a search party found the boy and his sheep huddled under a wall and all of them were cold and dead. The boy was holding the fourth finger of his hand and nobody understood what that meant until, at the funeral, the preacher explained that the boy had discovered, at his moment of greatest need, the truth of the words at the beginning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

I remembered that story when I was planning to preach on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September at a church in the North of England. Little did I realise, as I prepared

my talk, that momentous events would happen just five days before I was due to preach, which would revolutionise what I might need to say. But in fact it was only after those events took place, in New York and Washington, that I realised that I could not have chosen a more appropriate passage from the Bible as my congregation sat in front of me shell-shocked from the television coverage of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Everything in our world had seemed pretty good up till then and that's the way it had been for David. As soon as he has said, "The Lord is my Shepherd," he says, "I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures." My farming friends tell me that sheep very rarely lie down and the only time they do is when they are completely full and satisfied.

David is saying how satisfied he has been in his spiritual life because of God's goodness. He speaks about being led beside quiet waters. So often the picture of water in the Bible is a picture of God's Spirit filling our lives and blessing us. David has known this generosity of God, and even when David has got his life wrong, he has found the wonder of God's forgiveness.

I love the honesty of the Bible and the way it doesn't paint its heroes as if they never got it wrong. Even David commits adultery and has to come back to God and ask for forgiveness and then is able to say in this 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "He restores my soul."

Cardinal Basil Hume just before he died said, "For me the most profound truth of my faith is that there is someone who loves me completely and totally, in spite of my weakness and failure." What a lovely thing to be able to say. He wasn't claiming he'd been perfect, but that he had found that God is a forgiving God.

Yes, life has been very good for David, as it has been for many of us, but now it's all gone wrong. Everything's fallen apart. But for David, the shepherd become king, this is no cause for despair, but it's rather a time when he can become even more intimate with the Lord who has always been his shepherd: and it's at this time that he changes the pronoun.

At the beginning of Psalm 23, David speaks of what the Lord does in the third person. He leads me by still waters. He restores my soul. But when life falls apart, he turns

from telling us, to speaking with the Lord who loves him. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

The harsh reality of life has hit him. Something terrible has gone wrong. Something he describes as the Valley of the Shadow of death. Has his faith in God all been in some ‘cloud cuckoo land’ which only works in good days? No, in fact his faith now proves itself by working best when all has gone wrong. So what is it David has discovered God is doing for him in this valley? How is it he can ‘fear no evil’? He says, “You are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

I have to say I’ve always found that rather difficult to understand, but four years ago I visited a remarkable country, the country of Niger in West Africa, one of the poorest countries in the world.

As I went across this barren country, it was like going back to Biblical times. Sheep were not cared for in the way they are in the North of England where I was used to seeing sheep dogs rounding up straying animals and shepherds whistling and giving the sheep a tap on the back to hurry them along. Everything was the other way round in Niger. The Bororo herdspeople do exactly what the Bible says, they lead their sheep. The sheep trust them because the shepherd knows where the good pasture is on the edge of the Sahara desert. Yes, he does have a rod. But it’s not a little cudgel, it’s two metres long. And as the shepherd walks in front of the sheep, he’s on the lookout for the wild animals who would attack his sheep and is ready, not to turn round and hit the sheep, but to throw his rod at the animal which would harm them.

For me as a Christian the most moving thing of all, is that the Bororo shepherd carries his rod across the back of his neck. He holds it with each hand outstretched to the end of the rod so that it looks to all intents and purposes as if the sheep are following a shepherd who is in the shape of a man on a cross, his hands on the wood. It’s a sight I will never forget. It was the most moving picture of the one who said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”

Jesus is the one who has gone through the valley of death in front of us, on our behalf and now, risen from the dead, comes to each one of us and says, “Let me be your

shepherd in the valley.” And that is why David does not say, “I am going through the valley of death and you are with me.” He says, “Even though I go through the valley of the *shadow* of death you are with me.” Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

In our deepest sorrows and tragedies it does seem as if we’re in a deep valley and all we see is the shadow. But it only is a shadow and He is there to comfort us. I’ve been discovering this since my family name was in the Times three weeks ago, when my father’s sudden death was announced in the obituary column. Again I’ve been finding God’s “comfort”. That itself is an interesting word because when the Psalms were translated into Greek the word comfort has the same meaning in Greek as the word encouragement. As with en-danger, where you put someone in the position of danger, when you en-courage someone you put them in the position of being able to have courage.

It’s lovely to know that God is wanting to comfort us in our times of difficulty and trouble, but it’s actually more wonderful to realise that He is wanting to give us courage to face the difficulties and the dangers and to look up rather than down. So David is able to say that God is with Him even in the presence of his enemies. As a result he feels that his cup overflows. Here is a man who is living life with confidence. Whatever the problems, whatever the difficulties, however tough the enemy may be, he knows that there is real purpose to his life and ultimately he will dwell in the House of the Lord forever. Isn’t that great!

The Times and the Daily Telegraph have at least one good thing in common. Their Leader Writers occasionally take a religious subject and deal with it very well. As you can imagine, as I’ve been preparing for this afternoon, I have been looking for a good quote from the Times and regret that my chances of winning will now be nil as I tell you that I found a better quote from an editorial in the Daily Telegraph where these words appeared. ‘We live in an age of disillusionment. We need not new illusions, but ancient realities.’ We must all decide, in these difficult days, from which “realities” we will draw our strength. I’ve gone back 3000 years to ally myself with a man who said, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” It may be, as we all walk through a valley of shadow, that you would wish to do the same.