

Jesus is always in the valley with us

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the 4th Sunday of Easter. Traditionally it's known as Good Shepherd Sunday, because we hear the famous reading we've just heard from John's gospel, where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. Behind me we have this beautiful painting of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, which is particularly resonant today.

It's also the day when traditionally we sing Psalm 23 - "The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing." It's perhaps the most famous of all the psalms. For many people in this country, including being frank myself and I'm sure others here, the first thing that springs to mind about Psalm 23 is the theme tune of that well-loved tv show The Vicar of Dibley. Rolling hills, green pastures, and a vicar and church council that don't know which way is up. Not at all representative of course of a real Church of England parish.

So for some people, Psalm 23 might feel familiar, comfortable, sentimental even.

But for others, it's got more of a punch. It might remind us of the funeral of a loved one. It might make us think of the times we have felt in the valley of the shadow of death – the times we have suffered, or lost, or felt alone. Some of us here might feel like we're in our own valley today.

We are still in Eastertide; so in the Church we're still in joy mode. Yet sometimes it can be hard to feel the Easter joy when we're in pain; or when we look around and see so much pain around the world. It can feel like we're out of sync. What does it mean for us to proclaim the good news of Jesus when so many people are deep in the valley of the shadow of death?

Our psalm and gospel reading have something to say to all this.

Psalm 23, like all the psalms, is one of the songs of the ancient Israelites. Many of these songs are over 2,500 years old. They're the songs that the Israelites carried with them when they were taken into captivity by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC. They're the songs that sustained them when they were oppressed. When we sing them, as we do each week here wonderfully led by Ryan, we're tapping into that history, of 2,500 years,

where suffering people around the world have used these words to express their feelings of longing, sorrow, joy, and hope.

Now Psalm 23 is a joyful song – but it's written from the perspective of someone who has faced deep suffering. This is someone who really knows what it is like to walk through the valley of pain and despair. But in the depths of the valley, the psalmist has found that God is there.

“The Lord is my shepherd”, he sings; “therefore can I lack nothing. 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 comfort me. You have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full.”

When we're in the depths of the valley; when we find it hard to feel that God is with us – we can take encouragement from this psalm. Here is someone who was at the bottom of the pit, and realised that God was with him; and this realisation gave him the strength to endure. Every time we sing this psalm, we declare to ourselves, and each other, and the world, that God is always with us in our suffering; that God can be trusted.

And it is this that Jesus points to in our gospel reading. The psalms were Jesus' songbook; when we sing the psalms we're singing the songs that Jesus sang.

When he describes himself as the “Good Shepherd”, he's revealing something about who he is. *He* is the one the psalmist was singing about. *He* is the divine shepherd who guides people through the valley of death to green pastures. He has not just come *from* God, but *is* God, come to be with us. Jesus is always in the valley with us.

And at the same time, by calling himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus is revealing what God is really like. Because in a way, the psalm only gets half the story. In the psalm the shepherd walks through the valley of death but is untouched by it, unfazed.

But Jesus presents the image in a new, shocking way. “I am the Good Shepherd”, he says, “and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Shepherds would fight off robbers and wolves – but they wouldn't willingly lay down their lives for their sheep. That would be madness. But that, Jesus says, is what he is like – is what God is like.

Jesus is telling his listeners what the Good Shepherd will do. The Good Shepherd goes into the valley of death and willingly takes that death into himself. The shepherd who is our protector does not protect himself.

On Good Friday, Jesus walked through his own valley of the shadow of death. But he was not led to green pastures and still waters.

He did not have a rod and staff to protect and guide him; instead rods and staffs were used to beat him and break him.

His head was not anointed with oil; instead his head received a crown of thorns.

He was not given a cup of life to drink; instead he drank a cup of suffering.

This is what God is really like. God is not standing apart from our suffering. God holds nothing back, but gives everything of himself for us, out of his love. Jesus is always in the valley with us, and suffers for us.

This is also a sign about what we are called to do. The Christian life is about following the way of the Good Shepherd, and sometimes that means following him *into* the valley. We're called to go into the places where other people are suffering. We're called to walk alongside them, guiding them and carrying them. And as Jesus did, sometimes we're called to sacrifice for them. We're called to pour out ourselves for others; to put them first; to try and love even when it's hard. This is the difficult road of discipleship, and it is the only way that the world can be healed. Jesus is always in the valley with us, and suffers for us, and calls us.

Yet we are promised that the valley of the shadow of death will not last forever.

Jesus says "I lay down my life for the sheep", and "I take it up again". Through Jesus' resurrection, God gives us a sign that one day things will be different. The psalmist sings: "You spread a table before me"; "you have anointed my head with oil and my cup shall be full." It's a vision of God's banquet that will come at the end of time, to which we are all invited.

We get a taste of it when we share the Eucharist together. When we receive the bread broken for us and the wine outpoured for us, we go back down into that valley of death. We go back to the cross, where the Good Shepherd who

guides us dies for us. And then we're raised up out of the valley, out the other side.

At Easter, we proclaim that one day the pain and tears and suffering of this world will be wiped away, and all things will be made new. We proclaim that Jesus the Good Shepherd is always in the valley with us; that he suffers for us, calls us, and promises us new life with him.

Amen.