

Sermon July 19th 2015 St Matthews Westminster

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:11-end

St Mark 6:30-34, 53-end

Way back in the mists of time of the 1940s, I was a choirboy. One of my best memories of that role was learning to sing the 23rd Psalm to the then-unfamiliar tune of Crimond. Its words and music had recently been rescued from the obscurity of the Scottish Psalter by being performed as an anthem at the marriage service of the then Princess Elizabeth and Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten, in 1947.

After the royal wedding, every choir in the land had to master the suddenly popular Crimond.

As we trebles in Norwich choir struggled to hit the elongated high C in the last line of the descant, so beautifully sung by Maria today, I remember our Welsh choir master exhorting us:

“Come on boys, raise your voices and sing it as if you had just arrived in the dwelling place of God’s house!”

Since I remember his exhortation some 65 years later, I think the choir master must have caught my imagination, even if I didn’t have much clue what he was on about.

But perhaps what he was on about can be better understood after pondering on today’s readings which like the 23rd psalm focus on sheep, shepherds and peace with God.

Sheep, in both modern and biblical times, send out mixed messages. Paradoxically, they can be thought of as serene or stupid,

Beautiful or brainless.

There was once a New Yorker strip cartoon which depicted a wife doing the crossword as she asked her husband:

“Darling, what’s a female sheep in three letters?”

From behind his newspaper the husband replied, “Ewe”.

The wife took this as a mortal insult and a row promptly started!

The prophet Jeremiah wanted to make a row – or in his language “a woe” – about sheep who had been scattered by negligent shepherds. And this is a theme taken up more lovingly by Jesus in today’s passage from Mark’s gospel. He cannot bear to turn the huge crowd surrounding him away:

Sermon July 19th 2015 St Matthews Westminster

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:11-end

St Mark 6:30-34, 53-end

"And he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd" writes Mark, "and he began to teach them many things."

This image of Jesus the compassionate shepherd. Jesus the teacher.

And Jesus who has in the previous verse told his tired disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile," point us towards some of the familiar symbols of spiritual tranquillity.

Among them are: rest, solitude, compassion, peace, and walking with God along the paths of his grace.

"Come away and rest awhile" is a call most of us need to hear more often in our busy, noisy, pressurised lives.

Seeking this rest in a deserted place can be important. "Nothing is so like God as stillness", said the 15th century German mystic Meister Eckhart. Where better to find that deep stillness than amidst the beauty of nature in all its gloriously peaceful silence?

When great poets and musicians evoke idyllic scenes of rustic beauty, it is surprising how often sheep and shepherds appear in them. Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Whittier, Tennyson and the writers of The Psalms use this imagery a great deal. The title of Beethoven's 6th – *The Pastoral Symphony* is a reminder that the original meaning of the word 'pastor' was 'shepherd'; hence the church terms pastoral staff, pastoral duties, pastoral letters, and so on.

Although in our urbanised society shepherds have largely faded from view, they and their flocks still have a powerful resonance for our imagination.

I have been reading one of this summer's most surprising best sellers; *The Shepherds Life* by

James Rebanks.

It is the autobiography of a young man who, after getting a first at Oxford, chose to return to the Lake District farm where his family have raised and cared for Herdwick Sheep for over 600 years.

On the first page of the book the author introduces his readers to an unusual word – "HEFTED".

Hefted is a word unknown to most of us, but used by hill farmers and shepherds in Northern Britain. It applies to a flock of sheep. It means according to the dictionary "to become accustomed and attached to an

Sermon July 19th 2015 St Matthews Westminster

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:11-end

St Mark 6:30-34, 53-end

area of upland pasture". The author explains that the reason why sheep stay on the same unfenced fells in the Lake District and do not wander off to other places because they are 'hefted' to the land. He says they have learned a sense of belonging to the same land as lambs from their mothers, in an unbroken chain of learning that goes back thousands of years.

What a profound meaning that shepherds' word 'hefted' has, if you make it cross over from the agricultural to the spiritual.

It prompts me to put the question to the flock assembled here in St Matthews:

"Should we be hefted to God's pastures? And if so, why and how?"

Today's readings provide some answers to these questions.

The Good Shepherd of the 23rd Psalm;

The Jesus who had compassion on the crowds in Mark 6;

The God who offers us "the immeasurable riches of his grace" in Ephesians 2...combine into wonderfully attractive figures in the landscape of scripture.

Even if all we, like sheep, have gone astray, nevertheless instinctively deep in most of us there is a spiritual hunger which makes us want to respond to this shepherd's call, which makes us willing to follow his paths towards quiet waters and green pastures.

We feel this even when we can't explain it. Our spiritual instincts make us "hefted" to His Kingdom, perhaps because, Augustine said, "In His Will we find our peace."

One of the many popular versions of the 23rd Psalm begins:

The King of Love my Shepherd is
Whose Goodness faileth never

I nothing lack if I am His And He is mine forever.

There are treasures of theology in those lines which grow richer and deeper when we analyse the key messages:

The love of the Good Shepherd has many dimensions. He is compassionate. He calls us by our names. He rescues us when we stray. He lays down His Life for his sheep.

Sermon July 19th 2015 St Matthews Westminster

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:11-end

St Mark 6:30-34, 53-end

Two weeks ago Father Peter, in his Petertide sermon, explored this theology, using the famous sheep and shepherd passages in John 10, and asked the question; "What exactly is a priest for?"

It's almost as difficult to tackle the question; "What exactly is a sheep for – in the Christian context?"

"What should our response be to the call of the Good Shepherd?"

We know from both scripture and spiritual instinct that we should

Listen to him

Follow him

Obey him

And imitate him

We also know from his teachings and example where he is leading us

Towards Peace – Peace with God

As St Paul put it in today's reading from EPHESIANS

"Christ is our Peace – He came and proclaimed peace to you who are far off and peace to those who are near".

Yet travelling towards Christ's peace is not always an easy journey.

The 23rd Psalm reminds us that after restoring our souls the Good Shepherd calls us to walk, for his sake, within his paths of righteousness. This can be a challenging uphill climb. We sheep don't always have an easy time of it. Particularly perhaps towards the end of our journeys as we head toward the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Yet even in that valley we receive the divine reassurance that the good Shepherd will stay with us – comforting us with his rod and staff until we enter and dwell in God's house.

It is not surprising that the 23rd Psalm enjoys a unique status within Christian devotion.

The beautiful bucolic imagery of green pastures, still waters, sheep and shepherd are sublime poetic sign posts.

Guiding us towards the rock solid conclusion

That peace with God comes from trusting in God.

Sermon July 19th 2015 St Matthews Westminster

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:11-end

St Mark 6:30-34, 53-end

This is not some futuristic dream. It is for us to live out here and now.

Staying “hefted” to God’s pasture requires spiritual obedience and prayerful discipline.

On my own journey from 7 year old Choirboy to Septuagenarian – Member of St Matthew’s Flock, I have to understand that the paths to peace with God require working and praying. In Archbishop Cranmer’s words:

“That we may evermore dwell in him and he in us”. Amen

Jonathan Aitken
St Matthew’s, Westminster
19 July 2015