

# THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

## PSALM 23

Encountering God Series

### OPENING PRAYER

Faithful God we give you thanks that you promise to be with us and that with you we are never alone. Help us to be faithful in our discipleship and that our lives would echo to the reality of your presence in the world as we meet and engage with others.

### EXEGESIS

A number of Biblical commentaries suggest that this psalm became an important part of the liturgy of the early church, particularly around the sacraments, such as Baptism and Holy Communion. The psalmist speaks of an enduring trust and dependence upon God, one which responds to the many changes and challenges of life. Although this psalm was written long before Jesus' earthly ministry, the inclusion of the term 'shepherd' soon became synonymous with Jesus himself. Jesus after all described himself as the 'Good Shepherd' (John 10, v 11).

Throughout the psalm there is a relationship between the grace and goodness of God and the authority and Lordship of God over the life of the writer. It is as if there is a reciprocal agreement between the two. God offers security and care, but expects obedience and service. Themes that still speak to us today in our Christian discipleship. At the heart of this Psalm is the belief of the writer (reputed to be King David) that God's providence is all consuming and represents the very heart of the human need for security and being cared for. That essentially, God is the very basis of all that we know and have and need in the world – what the renowned theologian Paul Tillich called The Ground of Our Being.

The challenge for us now as we read this text is to ask whether the spiritualised assertions of the writer continue to have any relevance in a world where the actions of many Christians vis-a-vis the environment or consumerist consumption appears to be no different to that of others who do not share our faith. In spiritual terms, how are we to relate to this text? Where does our security or expectations lie? In God? In material success? In the expected rewards of life? Older generations of marginalized and poor people were seemingly able to aspire for greater rewards in life, their sense of identity and security was often located in God, and God's goodness. In our present age, despite the continuing search by many young adults and teenagers for a viable spirituality, we nonetheless, are faced with a deeply materialistic culture that often portrays the market and consumerism as king. We seem to live in a world where the material matters more than the spiritual; where lifestyle and individuality are more important than service and community.

### REFLECTION

To what extent does the relative politeness and reasonableness of much church life in the U.K. simply mask the explicit selfishness of individuals and communities across the country? Many Christians may use the language of 'doing God's will' or 'denying self in order to follow Christ'. In my more cynical moments (taking my own life and commitments as an initial starting point), I have wondered whether the noble words of such declarations are nothing more than mere romantic rhetoric?

The renowned Sri Lankan theologian, Tissa Balasuriya has argued for the need to develop a theology for the affluent. One that will challenge the tendency of comfortable Christians in the west to indulge in wholesale, collective actions of 'cheap grace' when confronted with the radicalism and potency of the Gospel. What are the links, I wonder, between the manifestly selfish and narcissistic lives many of us live in the west and the seeming contentment of the writer in Psalm 23?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If someone asked who or what was the supreme guiding presence in your life, what would be your answer? (And why?)

If you say God or Jesus, how would you demonstrate the reality of this fact to another person who did not know God or Jesus? How could you demonstrate this?

Many Christians will claim that they only aspire to do God's will. Looking at your lifestyle, what else do you think motivates you? What are the desires that drive you?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Generous God you love us fiercely and without compromise. As we receive your love, help us to move beyond the complacency that sees us bask in what you have done for us and confront us with the challenge of seeing how we translate this into love and care for others.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Katie G. Cannon Black Womanist Ethics (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988)
- Tom Beaudoin Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998)
- Tissa Balasuriya 'Liberation of the Affluent'. Black Theology: An International Journal (Vol. 1, No.1 Nov. 2002) pp.83-113