

Crathie Kirk

Sermon

11<sup>th</sup> September 2022

*Readings: Psalm 23; Luke 15: 1-10*

**‘Light in the darkest valley’**

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

In Psalm 23, earlier read to us, David the poet wrote (v. 4):

**‘I will fear no evil, for you are with me.’**

On Thursday evening, the world received the heavy and sad tidings of the passing of our beloved Queen, Elizabeth, bringing to a peaceful close a long, extraordinary life of devotion to the service of God, our country and the Commonwealth of nations. There is so much this morning that could be said about this truly great lady we were privileged to have as our monarch for so long. Her remarkable life of commitment to faith, service and country will be spoken of for years – centuries – to come. At this time I wish simply to highlight the fact that she was a person of sincere and deeply held Christian faith. Earlier this year, she said herself: ‘Throughout my life, the message and teachings of Christ have been my guide and in them I find hope.’ We have been privileged to witness this, some at particularly close quarters, as our sovereign lived out her faith with such grace, joy, wisdom and peace. The love and light of Christ shone brightly in her life.

Today we mourn her going hence. We feel that our world has somehow completely changed, that things can never be quite the same again. It is difficult to measure the greatness of our loss.

I wonder what the Queen herself would say to us today. Reflecting on that, I remembered being told once that the Psalm we read this

morning was Her Majesty's favourite. In that regard, it is maybe significant that it was sung, to the tune Crimond, at her marriage to the Duke of Edinburgh, all these years ago. I think she would have approved that in the BBC Gaelic radio service earlier today, which I had the privilege of conducting, it was sung to that tune.

I just wonder, were Queen here today, recognising our united grief, if she might say to us, 'Remember Psalm 23 and its message of faith and hope.' For in such a beautiful manner this Psalm gives expression to the faith that was at the foundation of her life. That is doubtless why she valued it so much. Here too we might find renewed strength and trust and hope at a difficult time.

Of course, even without the death of the Queen, there is much sorrow and anxiety and pain around. Problems and challenges press in upon us from many quarters. I think that is one reason why we feel her passing so acutely – for in all the changes and changes and troubles of these times, she was for many of us a rock and a solid, fixed point of reference.

But our Psalm, as she would point out, holds before us an even greater and more solid point of reference. It was her own. I mean the all-important matter of our relationship to God. 'The Lord is my shepherd.' It's the mind-blowing truth that God our Creator who sustains the whole universe he has made in being wants to be in a relationship of love with each one of us. He wants to replace fear with faith in our troubled hearts. He invites us to cast all our cares on him, for he cares for us.

That meant so much to this poet. 'The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down, he refreshes me, he leads me, he guides me. His care, as Shepherd, for his individual sheep is astonishing and extends to every aspect of their life. How beautifully that was brought out in our gospel reading. This is the kind of shepherd who when he discovers that just one of his many sheep is missing, has strayed, leaves the rest and goes in search of the missing one, never resting until he finds it and brings it home rejoicing.

Many people have been remarking on how the Queen made them feel as if they had her complete and undivided attention when she spoke to them as an individual. It was a remarkable gift and I think we may know where she learned it.

This is a remarkably personal Psalm. There are no plural pronouns but only singular pronouns – me, my, you. The Psalm is an outflowing of David's personal relationship with God. And I think that one of the reasons this Psalm remains so attractive to so many people, sung as it is in all sorts of contexts, happy and sad, is that deep in the human heart there is a homesickness for God. As St Augustine famously expressed it, 'You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.'

From a Christian perspective, the psalmist's God would one day become a character in the drama he himself scripted and in the person of Jesus live die and rise again for our redemption and that of the world he loves. Jesus would say, I am the Good Shepherd. His love for his sheep is unqualified and for them he gave his all. I give to them eternal life, he says. No one can ever remove them from my care or that of my Father. Here, in the Good Shepherd's words is indeed a solid basis for our faith and hope in challenging days. 'He knows, he loves, he cares; nothing this truth can dim.'

Can I call your attention also to something deeply interesting and significant in the shape of the Psalm. It begins, as you know, with David speaking about God as his shepherd in the third person, telling others what he has done and is doing for him. But when, in verse four, he comes to the dark valley of the shadow, there is a striking change of direction. No longer is he speaking *about* God, in this difficult place he is speaking directly *to* God. And this is what he says: 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.'

It's a reminder that our wisdom in difficult times lies less in speaking about God and more in coming near to him in prayer. 'Try praying' says the famous slogan. 'Good advice,' says David. For when the light grows dark and the shadows lengthen, the Good Shepherd in his love and grace and compassion is right there. 'I will fear no evil,' he says,

‘for you are with me.’ And if he is with us then in Lady Julian of Norwich’s words, ‘All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.’

Even in the face of death itself, the gospel of Christ gives us a sure and certain hope. Because he rose, death has lost its power. It is not a closed but an open door. In believing in Jesus we are confident that the best is yet to be, with joyful reunions in a new heavens and a new earth in which God will wipe away every tear from every eye.

‘We know,’ wrote Paul, that ‘neither death, nor life nor anything else at all will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

This was central to the faith and hope of our departed, beloved Queen.

In difficult days, as David did, as Elizabeth did, let’s fix our eyes on the Good Shepherd, and we too shall discover the truth of the ancient words that form the climax of our Psalm: ‘Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.’

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.*