

Sunday 3rd May 2020
A sermon for the fourth Sunday of Easter by Chris Webb

Trust in the Good Shepherd

I was looking through the spring edition of one of those little magazines that charities issue. It featured a number of projects which were scheduled to take place during the year. A sponsored bike ride of, “50 or 100 miles around the beautiful Wiltshire countryside.” A travelling igloo viewing dome to show a fifteen- minute film in 360 degree photography, to up to 30 people at a time. This was due to go round towns and cities and some summer festivals in England and Wales, from May to September.

How much planning will have gone into these events and how many assumptions made, when these events were planned?

What a shadow has been cast over everyday life. That’s before you even start to contemplate the loss, the grieving, the pain, the suffering, the anguish, the loneliness and the uncertainty which the pandemic has brought to people. Not only in this country, but throughout the world.

Being the magazine of the Bible Society, it also ran a feature on a Psalm 23 garden design by Sarah Eberle which was due to be exhibited at the Chelsea Flower Show. The designer is quoted as saying, “ The psalm is quite clear in its description of landscape. Most people can understand that and get their own interpretation out of it. It’s relevant whether you are a churchgoer or not.”

With the shadow of Corona Virus hanging over the world it’s the whole atmosphere as well as the landscape described in the psalm which seems to strike such a chord. A steep valley with towering sides which perhaps exclude sunlight, can be a forbidding place to be. There’s one entrance and one exit. It can be quite claustrophobic and one might well have a sense of apprehension as one journeys onward.

During the current pandemic there is perhaps a sense of travelling through a dark valley. Yet we know that experiences vary. There is dark, very dark and then there’s pitch black; where it is impossible to see where you are going.

Have you ever had that experience of being in a deep cavern or perhaps an old coal mine when the guide -hopefully with suitable

warning, turns all lights out? You have no sense of your bearings. You cannot see the end of your nose, let alone the person next to you. You feel isolated even in the company of others.

Maybe you know what it is like and maybe you are now experiencing the feeling, of travelling through that dark valley. For you and for all of us there is a sure and certain hope. We have a good shepherd in whom we can place our complete trust.

As the garden designer suggests, Psalm 23 is easily accessible to people of faith and no faith and has gained a place in the hearts and minds of even non churchgoers; either as a reading or as that well-known hymn, 'The Lord's my shepherd'. Perhaps it even suffers from 'over exposure'.

The psalms represent an outpouring of human feelings and emotions. Some are out and out songs of praise. Some question apparent injustices. Psalm 23 is above all a song of trust and ultimately praise. It doesn't ask difficult questions about why bad things happen. It doesn't call for blame to be apportioned. It doesn't call for punishment of wrongdoers.

It expresses the joy of having one in whom we can place complete trust and not be disappointed. Not be let down. God is there with us whatever the circumstances and however dark things may seem to be. However alone, neglected or abandoned we feel.

The psalmist most likely speaks from a recent experience. He has been through and emerged from a dark valley, singing and praising at the other end.

'I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long', says the psalmist and in Acts we read of how the first Christians spent much time together in the temple, breaking bread at home and eating their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.

Here's a thought. In psalm 23 the writer seems to be taking us through a time line where bad times are past and are followed by a time of rejoicing and praise. If we have that simple and complete trust in the good shepherd, the assurance we have in our hearts and souls, may enable us to rejoice in that 'very present help in trouble' * whilst that trouble continues to rumble on. Yes, even if we feel that we are still in times of darkness let us take comfort from the love that the good

shepherd has for us; the knowledge that our trust in him will not be in vain. And give thanks.

At present we hear and read day after day of people observing things of joy or beauty that might otherwise have passed them by. We hear of people making sacrifices for others. In that wonderful story of the 99 year old, fund- raising Captain Tom we see the multiplying effect of generosity and love.

Even as we collectively travel through the dark valley let us trust in God *and* give praise for all that is good.

The way in which those early Christians we read about in Acts conducted themselves, was a powerful witness to their faith and trust in God. They adopted an attractive model of shared love, worship and generosity of spirit which many more people wanted to be a part of. We are told that day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. That multiplying effect at work again!

Many things in the world about us will never be the same when the current emergency eventually passes.

It is my hope and prayer that as Christians we use this period when many of us have more time on our hands, to examine our plans and our priorities, offering them to God and to each other in love, trust and praise.

‘Never being the same’ may then become ‘better than before.’

Amen.

**From psalm 46. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*