

Sermon

'The Lord is my Shepherd'

17 April 2016 (Easter 3)



About ten years ago, within the space of a few days, my life changed in two significant ways. I had just become a father for the first time when I heard that my uncle had died suddenly of a heart attack. So when Ben was still just a few days old, I travelled to Hamilton to attend the funeral. My memories of that day are filled with mixed emotions. My uncle had lived a rich life, and there were plenty of poignant and funny stories told that day. But of all the words spoken, the ones I remember most are those of the twenty-third psalm. Having so recently witnessed the miraculous beginning of one life, and grieving the passing of another, the words of the psalm had a special resonance for me: 'The Lord is my shepherd, and I want to follow. Wherever he leads me. Wherever he goes. Over the mountains, the waters and byways, valleys and highways, he's waiting for me.'

Whether it was the words or the music that I remember most, I can't say for sure. The book of Psalms, after all, is the church's hymn book. Psalms are for singing, not simply for reading.

It is not surprising that this is the most famous of all the psalms. It is a psalm that speaks eloquently of the Lord's presence with us in *all* of life, from the very beginning to the very end. My uncle was a man of many achievements, but that is not what I remember most about him. What I remember was that he was a man of faith, and that the Lord was with him. Through every joy and every sorrow, every crisis and every celebration, every success and every failure. Though the dark valleys and by the still waters.

Psalm 23 comforts us. When we are sad, when we are afraid, when we are in pain, these are words that remind us—in striking, evocative language—that whatever challenge we are facing, we do not face it alone.

As I sung the words of Psalm 23 that day in Hamilton, I was aware of the enormous responsibility that suddenly lay before me, the responsibility of caring for the tiny, beautiful boy who had so recently made his way into our lives. There was, of course, great joy, but also some trepidation.

A couple of days before, as we had strapped Ben into his car seat for the first time outside St Vincent's and had driven him home to Footscray, I had felt overwhelmed. All around me commuters had made their way to work, as though this were just another day, but my life had utterly changed. I was struck by how tiny my little boy was and how big the world was. I felt a little afraid for him, and for myself. I don't think I have ever driven so carefully.

But then, at that funeral, as I sang those beautiful words, it struck me that I did not need to feel afraid. The Lord was with me, and would be with my boy too, wherever life might take us.

And so began the adventure of parenthood, an adventure made even more exciting by the arrival of Dan and then Mary.

While the children were very young, I had the great privilege of being a home dad for a couple of years. During this time, I would often join Ben and his classmates for their morning prayers in the classroom. Gathered with a group of six-year-olds on the rug, a simple cross on the wall, a candle flickering, I found this daily act of devotion enormously moving. After we had said the Lord's prayer, Ben's teacher would always close the time of prayer with a simple, profound statement: 'Remember', she would say, 'that Jesus Christ is with you, everywhere you go.'

Which is what the psalmist says to us too

At the heart of Psalm 23 is God's **presence**. Wherever we are, the Lord is with us. Wherever we go, the Lord goes with us. 'Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me.'

But at the heart of this psalm there is also a **promise**. The one who accompanies us through life is also the one who has gone through the deepest darkness, through death itself, and because of this, there is hope *for us*.

This shepherd who goes with us and leads us is not a mere friend, like the friends we have at work or at school or at church. This shepherd has overcome the world and has overthrown the night. In him, a new day has dawned.

We need this kind of shepherd to lead us because we are not capable of finding our way on our own. Humanly speaking, the trepidation that Lucy and I felt as inexperienced new parents was probably justified. Parenthood is a humbling experience. It only took a few sleepless nights for us to understand—in a way we had never really understood before—that we weren't in control, that we didn't have all, or even many, of the answers. As our children grow, this sense only deepens. As does our dependence on the one who never leaves us, who has overcome the darkness, and who gives us hope—for those we love as well as for ourselves.

To this day, when one of our children is afraid of the dark and unable to sleep, it is the 23rd psalm that comes to my lips, to comfort them and to dispel not just their fears but my own.

The Lord has made it through the night. And he is with us now, carrying us, like a shepherd carries his sheep across his broad shoulders. Through the storm. Into the calm. Through the night. Into the dawn.