

**“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” (Psalm 23)**

Dear Friends,

These are some of the most familiar words in the English language and one of the greatest pieces of poetry ever written. Undoubtedly one of the most well-known pieces of Scripture. But I wonder why? Why do we like it so much? How do we identify with it? After all, it was written 3000 years ago, in a foreign language, in a Middle Eastern Country, with an agricultural economy, by a poetic, musical shepherd boy who somehow became King. You could not make it up.

The words are calming and full of assurance, yet far from naïve. They speak of life’s difficult times but from a place of faith which will not countenance being overwhelmed by darkness. Perhaps that is why they are the words most frequently read at funeral and thanksgiving services. There are full of hope.

But when you stop to think about what David has written, you realise that he makes some staggering claims. Remember, David faced giants, armies, betrayal by his own family. He was hunted by the King he loved and spent much of his life, not in the royal palace but in caves because he was a wanted man. He was a person who knew a thing or two about the valley of the shadow of death. And yet he wrote, *“I shall not want,”* and, *“I fear no evil.”* Who of us can say that we want for nothing and that we have no fear? Yet David seems to say, despite the difficulties of life, that it is possible to live a contented, fear-free life.

St Paul writes something similar in his letter to the Philippians – the letter of joy! He too, faced trials and tribulations but was able to write words such as: *“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”* (Phil. 4: 11-12) How could they live lives of such care-free abandon, seemingly without a worry in all the world? It was certainly not by ignoring the circumstances that they faced. It was rather be recognising that they did not face those circumstances alone. It was not down to them to provide the answers for themselves. They shared a common faith in their Shepherd. As Paul writes in the very next sentence of Philippians 4: *“I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.”* (4:13)

David is reflecting in his Psalm on the character of his Shepherd. The One he names as his Shepherd is ‘Yahweh’ – *“I AM THAT I AM”* – the name of God revealed to Moses at the Burning Bush, the name so often used by John in his Gospel of Jesus himself. Dallas Willard writes of this name: *“This is not just a name like Charlie or Bill or Mary or Tanya. ‘I AM’ is a statement of the nature of God as being – self-sustaining, self-sufficing, all-powerful, self-determined being.*

'I am that I am' means, "My being sustains My being." It is something that only God can say. Jesus affirmed this when he declared, 'As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself.'" (Jn. 5: 26) (from *Life without Lack*, P.18) Another way of saying this is that God is the perfect energy that creates all matter.

Allow me to quote one more theologian, the 19th Century Methodist Bible Scholar Adam Clarke. As you read these words try and give them time to sink in!:

"The eternal, independent, and self-existent Being: The Being whose purposes and actions spring from himself, without foreign motive or influence: He who is absolute in dominion; the most pure, the most simple, the most spiritual of all essences; infinitely benevolent, beneficent, true and holy: The cause of all being, the upholder of all things; infinitely happy, because infinitely perfect; and eternally self-sufficient, needing nothing that he has made; illimitable in his immensity, inconceivable in his mode of existence, and indescribable in his essence, known fully only by himself, because an infinite mind can only be comprehended by itself. In a word, a Being who, from his infinite wisdom, cannot err or be deceived; and, from his infinite goodness, can do nothing but what is eternally just, right, and kind." (from *Christian Theology*, P. 66)

That is the nature of David's Shepherd. It is the nature of Paul's Christ. If that is the nature of our God, then we can offer to God all our needs and fears and find that God's love and kindness will meet our needs and drive away our fears. The more we are able to allow these words to fill our minds and our hearts the more they will transform our understanding and experience of the goodness of God, and the more we will be able to say with St Paul: *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."*

That sense of contentment over-riding all our needs and all our fears is something we are all going to need as we begin to consider the future of our churches. I know that many of you are aching to gather once more in your church buildings for worship. I know too, that many of you will rightly be concerned about whether it is safe to do so. My colleagues and I are actively working with our church stewards, leadership teams and church councils to consider when and how it might be possible to do so.

But I need to let you know that it is not an easy or straight-forward decision. It is one that we cannot afford to rush. Once risk-assessments are in place, and whilst social distancing measures need to be met, the capacity of our church buildings will be greatly reduced. Congregations will not be able to sing. There will be no physical contact with others. People will have to sit apart. Everyone will have to sign in and then wash their hands. We will not be able to use Bibles, Worship Books or Hymn Books unless we bring our own from home. We will not be able to use pew cushions! There will be no refreshments. We will have to be incredibly careful in the handling of money. Communion will be possible but extremely complicated. And our services will have to last no more than 30 – 45 minutes with people leaving immediately afterwards. And all that is only if we actually have enough available preachers to lead services. To put it simply, it will feel very alien. It may not feel much like worship as we know it at all. And due to limited numbers, the risk is that many will miss out entirely.

Church Councils will need to think carefully about the pastoral needs of their congregations and the missional needs of their communities. They will need to reflect on the creative ways in which we have engaged in worship over the last four months and consider what can be carried forward alongside what we might want to return to. So, I ask for your patience and your trust. I ask you to continue in your worship at home. I ask you to pray for guidance and wisdom for all those involved in these difficult decisions. And I pray that God will meet you in your needs and fears and bring you peace and contentment.

Every Blessing

Rev Tim Perkins