

Searched by the Psalms Series at Brentwood

April 25, 2010

The Psalm of Psalms

**Ps 23 & John 10:22-30
(Hymns – 476, 11, 389, 698)**

What accounts for the unique popularity of the Psalm
within the Christian world,
both now and historically,
is simple.

It conveys an incomparable image
of the beauty of God's presence with and for us.

The beauty of the picture this Psalm paints in its words
reaches down to the depths of our beings
and infuses them with assurance
that we are loved, protected, and encouraged.
With God in Jesus Christ through the workings of the Holy Spirit,
goodness and mercy
will be the core reality for us,
will be the context in which we live and move and have our being
through all eternity.

Every basic aspiration and need is met for us
so that we can be God's companions
in providing the space and grace
in which others can achieve their aspirations and meet their needs.

I spent yesterday morning doing a workshop
for the board of a remarkable group out in Surrey.
They govern a recovery house called Luke 15.
It provides an supportive environment
for men recovering from a variety of addictions.
These are prodigal sons,
men who have taken the gifts that God has given them
and wasted them in destructive behaviour.
The house welcomes them home and helps them flourish.
These are the lost sheep,
men who have wandered away and lost touch
with the presence of God as the Chief Shepherd in their lives.
The house puts them back in touch with that presence
and encourages them to choose to rejoice
in a conscious walk with God.

In preparation for the workshop,
I spent a Thursday evening at the house,
eating dinner and chatting with the residents and volunteers
and listening to the testimonial of a recovering addict.

One of the volunteers told me
about something called the Restitution Approach.

She is involved in using it in the schools.

According to those who developed this approach,
there are four basic aspirations or needs within human beings that must be met
in order for them to take responsibility for flourishing in their lives.

They are control/power, freedom, belonging, and fun.

When appropriately met in an interactive system,
they create the conditions for self-esteem, respect, connection, and enjoyment.
In other words, they create an environment in which people thrive in community.

I think the beauty and power of Psalm 23
lies in its eloquence in speaking
about the ways in which companionship with God
satisfies these aspirations and meets these needs.

What happened when the prodigal returned to the loving father
was that the conditions were provided in which he could once again flourish.

When the lost sheep was brought back to the flock,
the conditions were once again there for it to flourish.

The questions these ideas search and challenge us with is this:

When people come to this congregation,
to this flock of the followers of Jesus Christ,
will they find the simple but profound conditions
that invite and encourage them to flourish
as the beloved friends of God

they really are in the depths of their beings?

Will they find respect, connection, self-esteem and enjoyment

at the heart of who we are as a community?

Will they find us living the faith of Psalm 23?

I think they will.

I certainly have.

But I also think we need to remain vigilant,
constantly evaluating ourselves with understanding and grace
to discover ways of doing what God calls us to do better.

We need to welcome encouraging comments
designed to help us continually improve
our faithfulness to the Gospel,

our effectiveness in our context,
and our wisdom in relationships.

So, what can we learn from Psalm 23
about the faith that creates these kinds of conditions of flourishing?
Because that's what God's desires for us –
a flourishing friendship with him
that strengthens us to work with him for his kingdom,
for his reign of *shalom* and well-being,
of goodness and mercy.

While on holidays over these past 10 days
visiting with friends in Mexico,
I read a wonderful book by Dallas Willard
entitled *Hearing God*.

He had a couple of interesting things to say
about the biblical image of God as a shepherd.

First, he drew the distinction between the shepherd and the sheep dogs.
Astutely, he suggested that many of church leaders
act more like sheep dogs than undershepherds in the service of Christ.
Here's the way Willard differentiates the two approaches:

*To manipulate, drive or manage people is not the same thing as to lead them.
The sheepdog forcibly maneuvers the sheep,
whereas the biblical shepherd simply calls
as he calmly walks ahead of the sheep. (81)*

Willard goes on to suggest that a healthy relationship
between a congregation and its minister
is one in which together they search and are searched by
God's word in Christ witnessed to most clearly in the Scriptures.
They work together and collaborate to create the conditions
in which the whole flock can flourish,
constantly being guided by what they hear from God.

In Psalm 23, I think we hear at least two things loud and clear.

First, we hear that God is the primary presence in our lives.
With God as our companion and guide,
we will want for nothing.

Self-esteem, respect, connection, and enjoyment are all ours
right now in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

We are led into beautiful, quiet places
where we can hear God.

We are shown the ways to live good and useful lives.
Even in the face of enmity and death, we find hope in God's promise
of eternal companionship and nourishment.
All of this happens regularly and consistently in the presence of God.

Willard does an instructive play of words.
For him, the Christian faith is not so much about the *presents* God gives us
but about the *presence* through which God accompanies us.

And that brings us to the second thing I think we hear loud and clear
in this Psalm of Psalms.
With our soul restored through companionship with Christ,
we are free, strengthened, and encouraged
to be mature in the faith,
flourishing as followers and friends of God.
The faith witnessed to in the 23rd Psalm is not one
of childish dependence,
but of adult enjoyment.
It is a discipline of walking with God
through every eventuality in life
and seeing there the *presence* that makes life meaningful and enjoyable.

I can't think of a better way to end this sermon
than to invite you to listen again for the Word of God,
for the Voice of God calling us from the words of the 23rd Psalm
and inviting us to follow as flourishing adults.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall want for nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I 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 mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole long life.*

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