La Côte Anglican Church

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Sermon from Clare Amos

21 April 2024 – Holy Communion in Gingins

'I am the Good Shepherd'

The earliest artistic attempts by Christians to depict Jesus show him as a shepherd. In the catacombs in Rome there are wall paintings which date from the 3rd and even possibly the late 2nd Christian century which portray him as a shepherd carrying a lamb over his shoulders. In February this year Alan and I were in Rome accompanying a group of young people who are interning in the chaplaincies of our diocese. We visited the Catacomb of Priscilla and saw this fresco in the Catacomb of Priscilla. It probably dates from near the end of the 3rd century. Examples of Jesus as a shepherd from other Catacombs - the Catacomb of Callixtos and Domitilla may be even older.

It is interesting to realise that at this early period representations of Jesus did not normally link him to a cross. Christ's death on a cross was somehow seen as shameful in Roman society – even by some Christians. It would not be for another couple of centuries that the cross, either by itself, or associated with the figure of Jesus would become such a central symbol for Christians. Christ as the Good Shepherd was both reassuring, and superficially less contentious. It spoke into the culture of the era in which sometimes Roman and Greek deities might also be pictured as a shepherd. Perhaps it was the victory of Constantine – attributed by him to a vision of the cross-like ChiRho symbol – which led to the beginning of the Christian period in Rome – that gradually displaced the shepherd in favour of the Cross. But even a couple of centuries later mosaics and statues often chose to depict Jesus as a shepherd.

As I was reflecting on this, I remembered the wonderful mosaic from the Church of St Apollinaire in Ravenna which we shared with you a few weeks ago. It comes from the 6th century – perhaps around the time that shepherds were being displaced by crosses in Christian art. It is interesting how the mosaic combines the two motifs: the disciples are clearly pictured as sheep, but Jesus himself is present in the face placed at the very heart of the cross in the centre of the picture. The implicit shepherd is also the crucified one: as indeed we have been reminded in the words from today's Gospel: the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep.

Why did the image of Christ as Shepherd in particular so catch the imagination of those early Christians? Partly of course because it was an image rooted in every day life, even if in a somewhat idealised way. But

partly because it so clearly echoed the language of 'shepherd' which runs throughout the Old Testament. Moses, Abraham and David were all shepherds. Kings in the ancient world were seen as shepherds of their people – although as Ezekiel makes clear they did not always live up to the caring role to which they were called. So then God himself becomes understood to be the true shepherd of Israel, acting in this role par excellence in the story of the Exodus from Egypt. There are some wonderfully poetic parts of the prophetic books that make this clear: I cannot read 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd, and gently gather the lambs in his arms' without starting to hum the music of Handel's Messiah. And of course there is Psalm 23, probably the most loved psalm of all among Christians. 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want'.

It feels very appropriate here, near Geneva, to focus for a few minutes on the Psalms, and this psalm in particular. I say appropriate because the 16th century Reformer John Calvin, so vital to Geneva's history, cherished the Psalms very deeply. Calvin famously commented, 'The Book of Psalms is "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul"… There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror'.

In the light of Calvin's comment, perhaps one thing I would ask you to reflect on is whether the psalms are God's words to us, or our words to God.

The Psalms, or at least some of them, probably began their life story as part of the worship of the Jerusalem Temple. They were sung, accompanied by musical instruments, they may even have been danced. They were the community's, our human words to God. And yet, here they are now in our Old Testament, part of our Christian Holy Scripture, our Bible which is often described as God's word to us. So in some way the Psalms are both our words to God and God's words to us. In this respect they may be unique within the body of Scripture, yet perhaps they also offer us a model for how we as people of Scripture are being invited to engage with it; not as a series of dictats, but as an invitation to a conversation, or even a relationship. Indeed I suspect that is how over the centuries generations of Jews and Christians have instinctively felt about Psalm 23 itself.

A comment by the great Roman Catholic writer Thomas Merton expresses well this dual sense of the Psalms. Merton wrote, 'This is the secret of the Psalms. Our identity is hidden in them. In them we find ourselves, and God. In these fragments he has revealed not only himself to us but ourselves to him.'

It was interesting that Psalm 23 was read today as a Scripture Lesson. For fairly obvious reasons it was the Psalm suggested by the lectionary to use on this Sunday in which our Gospel focuses on the Good Shepherd. Normally the expected pattern for such psalms when they are used in a Communion service is to read them after the first reading, whether from the Old Testament and the New, and just before the Gospel is read. In

that location we are being invited to treat the Psalm as a response by us to those earlier readings: and we would often conclude the Psalm with the words of praise, 'Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit'. But today, we asked for it to be read as the Old Testament lesson. And so, rightly, the service sheet was designed to end our reading of Psalm 23 with the normal response after a lesson, 'This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.' When I first saw that draft of the service a few days ago I was slightly jolted, and wondered if we should ask if it to be changed. But then I thought, no, it brilliantly makes that point about the psalms being both God's words to us, as well as our words to God.

Time allows me perhaps to make a couple of points about the text of Psalm 23. If you look carefully at the six short verses of the psalm you will notice that in the first half of the Psalm God is addressed in the 3rd person, 'He'. In the second half of the psalm God is addressed in the second person, 'you'. That shift into 'you' emphasises the intimacy of the relationship between God and ourselves. But it is also significant to realise the moment when that shift is made. It is in the middle of the Psalm with the phrase, 'For you are with me'. And it is the very middle: there are exactly 26 words before this phrase and 26 words after it. Middles matter in Hebrew poetry, so this is no accident. The message of the Psalm lies in the realization that God is with us and this is what allows us to move from a third person relationship to the intimacy of I and thou. I said that the middle phrase of the psalm is 'For you are with me'. And indeed that is normally how it is translated into English. But in fact it is not the simple Hebrew word for with 'Im' that is used. It is a more emphatic word 'Imadi', which is linked to the verb to 'stand'. A more precise translation might be that God, 'stands alongside me' – facing with me whatever I have to face. As I was preparing this reflection, I suddenly remembered the well known and very ancient icon of Christ with Abbot Menas, in which you see Christ alongside Menas, with his hand resting on Menas' shoulder, both consoling and strengthening him. That, I think, is precisely the sense of the 'You are with me' that we meet in Psalm 23.

I cannot resist also pointing out that when we come to the point when the psalmist affirms 'goodness and mercy shall follow me', it is helpful to realise the strength of the verb radaf, which might be better translated as 'pursue' rather than 'follow'. God's goodness and mercy are not trotting along behind us like an obedient little puppy dog on a lead, but pursing us like the hound of heaven down the days and years of our life.

I very much enjoy and have learned from discussions with Jewish friends and colleagues about their reading and understanding of the psalms, part of the Scripture that we share in common. But I also feel that for Christians the psalms can lead us intuitively deeper into the mystery of Christ. That two-way sense of our words to God, God's words to us resonates for me with my understanding of the incarnation in which God became a human being so that human beings might more fully reflect God. We know from the Gospels how

often the psalms seem to have been on the lips of Jesus Christ during his life – and his death. As Rowan Williams said, 'To read the Psalms is to make our own voice the voice of the Body of Christ in worship.'
And when for Christians the Lord who is the shepherd of this psalm takes on the features of Jesus the Good Shepherd of the Gospel I think our instincts have for us a deep truth. Gospel and Psalm act as commentary on each other, deepening our appreciation of both. Writing at the time of the Nazi period in Germany when Christian use of the Old Testament – and the Psalter – were strongly discouraged, Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented 'Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power.'

And finally. It is I think no accident that Psalm 23 comes immediately after Psalm 22. The words of Psalm 22, that powerful psalm of lament, beginning 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me' passionate and painful words with which Jesus, according to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, died upon his lips, are a necessary precursor a door – certainly for Christians – that we need to walk through before we can reach the tranquillity of Psalm 23.

Our Gospel reading suggests that there is somehow a connection between the willingness of the Good Shepherd to lay down his life for the sheep, and a search for unity and reconciliation among and between human beings. That is visually signalled by a Korean Christian artist in this picture of Jesus carrying a cross in the shape of the divided country of Korea.
`
I think in our world at the present time we find ourselves standing on that threshold between Psalm 22 and Psalm 23, being called to work for reconciliation In Korea, the Middle East, South Sudan, Ukraine, many other places as well.

It is the Good Shepherd who has laid down his life for the sheep who invites us to enter the peace and tranquillity offered by the beloved Psalm 23 by plumbing first, along with him, the depths – and heights – that are offered by its predecessor.