

THE FULL FAMILY CHURCH

DATE : 1 JUNE 2008

SERMON : THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Today's reading comes from Psalm 23:1-6

Sheep are interesting animals. Their Latin classification is *Ovis aries*. Sheep were some of the first animals ever to be tamed. They have great value especially for their wool, meat, and general farming.

The male sheep is a ram, whereas the female is a ewe. Baby sheep are called lambs.

Sheep are also frequently found in mythology. In Greek mythology we read about a Golden Fleece where the wool of this particular sheep was of gold and contained great magical powers.

In Biblical times sheep were also important. They became one of the central symbols of Christianity.

Another one of their many characteristics would be their various races. You would for example not only find white and black sheep but also many varieties, varying in size and appearance.

An adult sheep usually has 32 teeth. Some have short horns while the larger rams would have impressive, sometimes curled horns.

The normal life expectancy of sheep would be 10 to 12 years. From their fourth year their condition starts to deteriorate.

They are herbivores and drink water. They usually prefer still, clean water. You will hardly ever see a sheep drinking from a river or from a container with algae in it.

They have good hearing, eyesight and smell, but poor depth perception. In other words they cannot estimate distance and dimensions. Neither is their night vision good.

Sheep often fall prey to beast of prey such as jackal and larger cats. Their only defense is to flee. They also prefer it to flog together.

Sheep show stress when are separated from the flock which cause them to wither.

They recognise human voices as well as faces. Those memories can remain for years.

We know that sheep are not the most intelligent animals in the animal kingdom and that they are vulnerable when in danger.

Research has shown that 8% of all sheep have a same gender preference.

A ewe is pregnant for four months after which she gives birth to either a single lamb or sometimes twins.

Sheep play a huge roll throughout the Bible. In Exodus and Leviticus we read about sheep that were offered to God as sacrifices. But then we also read in the Bible that Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God who takes away sin of the world. This confirms that He was the last sacrificial lamb.

Then there was the rams horn [the Shofar] the Levites blew on to announce the Shabbat. Also at the closing of it.

Yes it is important that we should realise why Jesus was so touched by the image of the sheep.

In the ancient Israel, and even among the nomadic people today, the function of a shepherd is highly regarded. Being a shepherd implies a highly responsible job because the person had to care for the sheep: the total wealth of those people. This is why a shepherd would know the characters, ways and habits of their sheep very well. Shepherds were also responsible for the safety of their sheep and would not spare themselves to see to it that a flock is safe, in good condition, fertile, and been taken to the best water and grazing. The status of a shepherd depends on the condition of his flock. When the sheep are well kept, it goes well with the shepherd and the whole community respects him. That is his pride and joy, because he keeps him busy with his passion.

Why do I speak about the characteristics of sheep?

It is significant because when we read about sheep in Psalm 23, we should regard ourselves as sheep that are lead by our shepherd, the Lord. This is why one can recognise many sheep characteristics in us human beings. Even the great King David, who wrote most of the Psalms, refers to himself as one of God's sheep. He acknowledges God as his Caretaker, his Shepherd, and his Pastor.

King David had every right to have a chip on his shoulder because God appointed him as King above King Saul to rule over Israel. He also had more success on the

battle field and consequently he became Israel's flavour of the month more than once.

David realised that all this fame and success would have been of no value if he did not place himself in the hands of the Lord. He understood that the One that lead him gave him an advantage over his enemies, tended to him, rescued him from dangerous situations well in advance, protected him whenever no one else were around. This One was his Shepherd, His God, the God of Israel, the God of you and me.

In Psalm 23 we read how David kneels down and says to God: "The Lord..." In other words the Supreme Authority over my life, "... is my shepherd", my Leader, the One whom I follow because I know His voice.

The David continues by telling this Shepherd of him about the wonderful characteristics He has. He says: "He makes my lie down in green pastures...", the place of rest and sufficient food after he had to walk over great distances to new heights. Places of plenty.

He elaborates about the great traits of his Shepherd: "He leads me beside still waters..." David had no need to look over his shoulder to know that the Leader in charge of his life was still there. He watched over David, protected him, and he could focus on what his mission was.

He provided in all David's needs. All that he had to do was to open his eyes, recognise it, and receive it.

The most wonderful thing is that he needn't have to look for it. His Shepherd led him to it. To quiet, peaceful waters. Those are the areas in our relationships where there is no stress or effort; that place in our business lives where things fall into place and we prosper daily.

And when we have arrived there, he says: "He restores my energy..." He replenished my soul". He removes the stress, tiredness and fatigue. He recharges our battery and refreshes our souls with new energy, new creative ideas and a great desire to keep going.

Then David continues with the positive character traits of this great Shepherd. He says: "He leads me on the right ways, in honour of His Name."

This Shepherd knows how important His reputation is among other shepherds. He knows he does not want anyone of His sheep to go lost from the flock. Therefore He leads His sheep on the right way so that He be recognised and receives His due honour.

How does the Lord accomplish this in our lives?

He gives us His Word. This is His road map to us; the guidance from our Lord. In this Word He gives us the exact route to where the grazing and water holes are, the dangerous precipices we should look out for, where wild animals sneak around and which kinds you will bump into.

And with the Holy Spirit in our hearts together with our road map, the Bible, the Holy Spirit interprets the route on our behalf and prompts us which ones to take and how we should behave.

This is the Holy Spirit, our Shepherd; David refers to in the Old Testament. This is the same Holy Spirit who acts as the witness and advocate in our team. If you do not listen to Him, you will miss it, and then the Shepherd can do nothing further.

He continues regarding this good Shepherd. He says, "Even though I go through dark depths, I will not be afraid, for You are with me. In Your hands I am safe."

Sheep that have to migrate from one place to another sometimes have to do it during the night and it becomes more dangerous. In the dark they cannot see well. The danger exists that they may fall from cliffs and precipices. When it is dark they cannot see wild animals. That can mean death to them.

Now David says, even when it is dark and dangerous we do not have to be scared. Even if distress, disappointments, depression or heaviness come our way, we should not doubt. We will not give up or say, "Now I am my own", because even through the sheep cannot see Him in the dark; they can still hear His voice.

How do we hear His voice? By obeying what He tells us in His Word. We read it in the Bible; see it through an unexpected sms from a friend or someone, a telephone call, a hug, a note, whatever. We experience God's love in the arms and care of our neighbours, people. This is how we can see and experience God's guidance and direction in His Word, the Bible, and people who care.

David continues by saying, "You make me sit down at a festive table while my opponents look on."

In the previous part, from the beginning, David describes how the Lord, who is His shepherd, takes care of him the way He takes care of a sheep. In other words on the most basic level.

But now David does an interesting thing. He now humanise the sheep. All of a sudden the Shepherd becomes a Potentate and Great Ruler.

But in order to understand this I have to briefly give you some cultural background.

During the Biblical times, when two armies made war against one another, the whole conflict was often settled even before an arrow was shot.

They usually evaluated the opposition and tried to determine whether they had a chance against the enemy. When the enemy had too much weaponry and numbers, they usually surrendered. Then a certain penalty or ransom was applicable to be paid by those who surrender.

One of the acts of defeat was that the conquering army prepared a meal for their generals and leaders in the face of the losers. In other words they had a banquet, a party in front of the defeated opponents while the losing army had to watch it.

In the same way David also says, we achieve the victory over our enemies, the devil and his crowd ... never human beings! When we have conquered the devil at these battlefields, the Lord prepares a victory feast for us in the devil's face. God forces the devil to watch this victory feast so that we can celebrate the victory in His Name. God gives us a sweet victory. Have you ever heard the expression: "Strength following a cross?" This is what happens here. We receive new energy. God rewards us with victorious energy to get on with our lives.

Then David continues and speaks about this Shepherd's character traits towards His sheep in a human way.

He says, "You receive me as a guest of honour and I am loaded with cordiality."

A guest of honour, the best place at the table. I am being introduced to everybody, a place of favour, I am allowed to help myself first, I have the attention of everybody, everybody notices me and regards me with honour. They regard it as an honour to have me in their midst. With honesty and no hidden agendas.

Not in the way it happens here on earth because the motto is, "There is no such thing as a free meal!" Almost a matter of, "what's in it for me!" We all know those kinds of invites.

Not with our Good Shepherd. He receives us with heartiness because it gives Him great joy to have us with Him. He knows us and cares about us. He wants to give it to us; not sell something to us or abuse our involvement with Him. He means well and intends us to prosper.

Have a look at verse 6. "Your goodness and favour will stay with me for the rest of my life."

This is also the way our Shepherd feels about us. David declares it without doubt. He experiences it first hand; also when his beloved Jonathan dies on the battle

field. He was broken. As well as when he made a mistake with Bathsheba, God remained his Shepherd.

David realised, in the same way we can also know today, that our Good Shepherd's goodness and favour are also meant for us.

But for how long? For today, this week, this month, this year perhaps? No. David uses an eternal word or phrase here, "for the rest of my life." That is awesome!

Have you noticed how many people just use eternity words when they speak in general?

"You NEVER do ANYTHING right!"

"Never" and "anything". In other words **nothing** you do can **ever** be right!

"You are always in my way!"

"Always"! Without beginning or end!

Those are eternal words. Be careful when you use them in your communication. People cannot withstand the power of eternity. This will cause them to become dishearten. And because we do not know what the future holds, we do not know in which way that person can surprise us with something new.

Yet, David knew that he could safely use eternal words here because He knew the eternal quality of his Shepherd. This Shepherd is in charge of the past, the present and the future. He is the Author of David's life.

Therefore David can safely declare, "Your goodness and favour will stay with me ... all of my life."

And then this human sheep closes this remarkable Psalm with his preferred address; a place of reference he would not want to move from.

He says, "And I will be at home in the house of the Lord, all my life."

Again David does not waver to use eternal language. He may do it because he knows he is referring to the One who declared in His Word, "I am with you day and night." "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." "I will stick to you; closer than a brother." "I am the same: yesterday, today and forever." "I never lie ... for I am your God."

This is the Shepherd David refers to here.

He feels at home in the presence of the Lord; there where the saints, the brothers and sisters (you and I), God's flock gather. That is his place of safety.

Where do you find your rest today?

Where is your house?

Who sits with you when you have won the battle? God or the devil?

How well do you know the road map of your life? How often do you plan the road ahead?

How often do you read your Bible? Now and then? Never? Then no wonder you cannot hear the voice of your Shepherd. How can you recognise the voice of your Shepherd if you do not know what His voice sounds like?

Strange that we often prefer to listen to the negative voices of people who would like to take us out: wolves in sheep's clothes. Satan works through those people to bring us to a fall because we allow our ignorance to bring those things on our way.

And when the stormy clouds move in in your life? When you often find yourself alone during difficult times, feeling lonely; when you feel you are only treading water and there is no solid base to step on? Do you know that your Shepherd is still looking after you? That He is there with you? That He reaches out to you to support you and wants to lead you to peaceful green pastures where you can find rest? Or do you rather prefer the song, "I did it my way?"

"I will get through this by myself. Just leave me alone. I don't need anybody's help. I will be ok by myself."

The Lord wants to be your Shepherd because He knows you. You are one of His flock. He knows what you need and when you need it. After all, He made all of us.

Do you know the voice of your Shepherd? Do you know what the green pastures and the waters of rest where he wants to lead you to look like? Would you like to go there?

If your answer is, yes, then GREAT! Then give Him a chance. He cannot wait to take you there.

If you have never made the decision to allow this Shepherd (Jesus Christ) to enter your heart and be the Shepherd of your life, then invite Him in right now so that He can take charge of everything. Only He can really do it.

Amen.

Pastor Anton Smith