

## Jesus the Good Shepherd

When we read the psalms, they often make us think of passages in the New Testament. This shouldn't be surprising. After all, the New Testament writers would have known the psalms very well, just as we know many of our hymns almost off by heart. The psalter echoes throughout the Gospels.

In St John's Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. Perhaps he recognised in Psalm 23 what his own vocation was? To pastor and protect people, to lead them to good and safe pasture; to give them the living waters, springing up for eternal life; to restore lost souls and to lead people in the paths of righteousness.

Because Jesus would have known the Psalms back to front. They would have been a completely instinctive part of his life and of his language of prayer. Scholars believe that the psalms were songs that were sung in the Temple in Jerusalem.

They are appropriate for use by large numbers of people together and by individuals on their own. Jesus used them in the synagogue with others and himself in the isolation of the Cross, when he said just before his death, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'.

## The Psalms and the Church

We read or sing a psalm (with a response) at every Mass and you will get to know the psalms really well if you come to Morning Prayer. Even though the psalms are very ancient, they continue to speak to us about God and to enable us to speak to God about ourselves. The psalms are an essential and permanent element of the prayer of the Church.

This is what St Ambrose (339-397 AD) says about the psalms:

*What is more pleasing than a psalm? David expresses it well: "Praise the Lord, for a psalm is good: let there be praise of our God with gladness and grace!" Yes, a psalm is a blessing on the lips of the people, praise of God, the assembly's homage, a general acclamation, a word that speaks for all, the voice of the Church, a confession of faith in song.*

## Holy Innocents & Holy Trinity



## BEAUTY FROM THE BIBLE

First Week of Lent: Psalm 23

## Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;  
he makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley  
of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with  
me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest 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 for ever.



This is probably the most familiar of all the psalms. In it, God is likened both to a shepherd and to the host of a gracious banquet. The shepherd is one who guides his flock in good and right ways and protects the sheep from danger.

The generous host is one who lavishes good things upon his guests, who satisfies their hunger and thirst, who welcomes them and shows them hospitality and honour.

When you think about these themes from Psalm 23, do they ring any bells with you? Do you think God is in any way like this?

Why do you think Psalm 23 is so popular?

## A Word About The Psalms

The Book of Psalms contains 150 psalms (or praises). Many of them are described in the Bible as being '*psalms of David*' and the traditional view was that King David wrote them all. Nowadays, scholars do not believe that. But many of the psalms do seem to date from the time of King David.

There are various different types of psalm. Some are hymns of praise, exalting God for his blessings. Then there are psalms of lament. This is the largest category, asking God for help in distress. They can also contain heartfelt expressions of trust in God (such as in Psalm 23, for example) and thanks for God's protection. Other psalms speak of God's wisdom, of history, of the life of the king.

Many of our popular hymns today are based on the words of psalms. Can you think of any?

## Who is Psalm 23 about?

David's psalm is obviously about God. Notice that in the first half of the psalm, the psalmist *describes* God (the Lord is my shepherd; he leads me; he restores my soul etc...) and then in the second half he actually *addresses* God directly (thou prepares a table before me; though anointest my head etc...)

But Christians have always been quick to understand the Psalms as referring to Jesus as well, even though they were written before he was born, and to life together in the Church.

This is what St Augustine (354-430 AD) says about Psalm 23:

*The Lord [Jesus Christ](#) is my Shepherd, and I shall lack nothing. In a place of pasture there has He placed me. In a place of fresh pasture, leading me to [faith](#), there has He placed me to be nourished. By the water of refreshing has He brought me up. By the water of [baptism](#), whereby they are refreshed who have lost health and strength, has He brought me up.*