

## Dolly, Dolly...

- I guess a few years ago we'd all have assumed **Dolly** was some kind of reference to a child's toy:
  - not so now - mention Dolly, and you are instantly into debate over the ethics of cloning, the awesome possibilities, the terrifying prospects that the whole thing has opened up
- What sometimes gets obscured in all this is just who - or what Dolly is.
- **Dolly is a sheep.**
- Sheep - as in woolly, slightly slow of brain, lots of them in New Zealand...
- Sheep need shepherds - care, guide, protect.
- Bible makes use of imagery - perhaps most famous is 23rd Psalm.
  - "hi-jacked" by funerals - though understandably!
- Perhaps time to have another look, to remind ourselves of the God who inspired the shepherd-king David to pen these words so many years ago
  - to **peel back the familiarity**, grasp hold of the character of the God thus revealed
- There are in fact 2 major sets of imagery used by David in the Psalm:
  - **shepherd (v.1-4)**
  - **host at a banquet (v.5-6)**
- Explore each in turn...

## God as Shepherd: Pilgrimage

### Verse.1

**v.1 "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."**

- "Lord" is in emphatic place - first and last word in the Psalm
  - so eyes upward to God
  - not self-obsessed introspection for troubled times
  - but our lives, hardship and joy, good and bad, rich and poor, placed in the context of God, of his character, of his nature, of his ways
- This is our starting point!
- Shepherd - our image almost certainly more shaped by "One man and his dog" than anything - whistles, obedient sheep, dogs, man standing aloof...
  - lead from front, sought out food, water, shelter. Protected. Owned - contrast hired hand (stakeholder economy!).
- **The Lord** - God of universe, creation, holy God - this God **is my shepherd**, one looks after me.
  - **intimate, personal metaphor** - contrast impersonal "rock", "shield", or distant "king", "deliverer" of earlier Psalms
- So?
  - so we shall not want - if a sheep had a shepherd, it could rely on food, water, protection...
  - so we can rely on sustenance, direction, protection

### Verse.2

**v.2 "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,"**

- Begins to explore detail of shepherds provision...
- Not just any old food, any old water:
  - green pastures implies lush, nourishing grass, water (cf. pictures of dry Palestine)
  - quiet waters, safe and easy to drink from, a restful and restorative environment.
- This shepherd provides the best for his sheep - an abundance of what is needed.
  - there is a tenderness to the image - you can feel the gentle care, the thoughtfulness for flock more than self

- God's care and provision for us - not merely materially, though he does provide what we need;
  - but also emotionally and spiritually, in our sustaining relationship with himself through the Spirit dwelling in us.

### Verse.3

**v.3 "he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."**

- "Restores my soul" - for sheep, a restoring to the right path, a guide who brings straying sheep back onto the right path.
  - also points to the spiritual renewal - restores my soul to relationship with with him and the possibility of right relationship with fellow humans
- Similarly with "paths of righteousness" - for sheep, thought is of a guide, one who with clear certainty and long experience knows the right paths.
  - for us, the paths of righteousness, the way Jesus led as he walked the ground of Palestine and mapped out in his teaching to the disciples
  - to love your neighbour as yourself, to turn the other cheek, to be meek and merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers

### Verse.4

**v.4 "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."**

- Shepherd is still with us in the dark valley:
  - we are still on the right road...
  - he leads the way through sorrow rather than pretending the valley doesn't exist and allowing us to trip and fall over the edge
  - his presence - the sure guide, the faithful guardian - drives away the fear
- Indeed, in the Psalm, God the shepherd is armed (cudgel/rod) to protect the flock, and equipped for the difficult terrain (staff) - ready and able to help!
- Here in Psalm 23 the dark valley almost certainly refers to death, and the ultimate terror it presents, as David faced death at the hands of his enemies.
  - but that is not the only reference - God is not shepherd only at death, but in all circumstances.
- Note the shift from "he" to "you" - from leader and guide up ahead, to one alongside to help, to support, to lead on.
  - often enough people meet God most closely in suffering

## God as Host: Hospitality

- First image was shepherd - and all that flowed from that.
- Second is that of a **host who welcomes David to a banquet**, to dine with him.
- Picture is of a friend, a father, welcoming a loved one to eat with them:
  - level of intimacy goes up another notch
  - we've moved from shepherd up ahead, to shepherd alongside
  - now we move to personal friend, even perhaps the warmth of a father's love

### Verse.5

**v.5 "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows."**

- Dinner on the battlefield? - somewhat bizarre picture!
  - but conquered enemies - now slaves - were forced to serve and prepare meal for conqueror
  - it was a sign of their defeated status
- The Lord is the conqueror...
  - not literally in heaven served by enemies, human or otherwise - but the vindication of a victory banquet!
  - the **"threat"** of the valley of the shadow of death has not only been survived, but turned into triumph

- Every detail points to the fullness and completeness of the vindication:
  - a well-set table, festive oil (kinda equivalent to best perfume!), brimming cup
- Beginning of a picture of the fellowship and blessings of heaven.

### Verse.6

**v.6 "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."**

- Prospect is better than a mere feast - a one-off party.
  - not just a dinner guest, but **invited to live, to dwell with God for ever**
- The pilgrimage of following the shepherd through life and death has brought the believer home to his heavenly rest, to the house of the Lord.
  - while God's house (church, community of believers) is to be his tent on earth
  - the ultimate prospect is of a permanent home - a home given and marked out by God's unbelievable love, his unbelievable goodness

### This God - Our God!

- God is... shepherd, friend, host...
  - not merely an abstract definition, but the true character of the God we worship today
- Sometimes we operate with a mental picture of God as some kind of tyrant or hard task-master:
  - always presenting us with challenges, with opportunities for witness that we don't seem able to live up to...
  - a God who leaves us with a guilty conscience for we can never live up to his standards.
- **No, we can't - but that is only a part of the picture.**
- The God we worship is tender, loving, gracious:
  - truly the God who cares, in every circumstance of life - even its ending
  - this is the Lord who will not **snuff out a smouldering wick or break a bruised reed, or reject the hurting cancer sufferer, or victim of nervous breakdown, the slave to depression or the brittle materialist with only show and outward success to sustain them.**
- This is the Lord who as the good shepherd gave up his own life for the sheep, wrapping us in his arms with his costly, costly love.
- **This is the Lord we worship - Praise God!**
  - lets take the opportunity to respond in thanksgiving as we present ourselves and our offerings to him now....