

Chat with the Children

- Something about analogies - their explanatory power... some examples...
 - brick... lion... ruler... ice... on fire...
- Have to be careful with your analogies:
 - elephant and blind-men trying to describe it!
- *Wanting to get our picture of who God is, so looking at some biblical analogies and exploring what they show us...*

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 respond in thanksgiving as we sing.... [The Lord's my shepherd, David Mitchell version](#)