

## **Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!**

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**The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>**

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020 – “The Lord is My Shepherd”**

### **Introduction**

Hello and welcome to this Podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church. Before I say anything else can I first of all express my gratitude to those who have been listening to (or even reading) these podcasts in recent weeks for their kind words of support and appreciation.

I've heard of various people throughout East Lothian listening to them and know of folk in Renfrewshire and Ayrshire who are also listening in. One of my elders even told me the other day that her dog uses the time she listens to this podcast for a wee snooze. Alfie, the King Charles sleeps as you listen!

I wonder where you've been finding your spiritual support in these times? Since the lockdown was put in place a whole plethora of worship choices have opened up to us. We are finding anything from simple devotions placed on websites all the way through to lavishly produced webcasts and video streams, all of which are all playing their part in helping us connect with God – and even with each other – during these longer days.

It's been a regular topic of conversation with many I have spoken with in recent days – the reality is that we are truly finding out what it is like to put into practice our belief that the Church is always about the people and not so much about the building. We love our buildings and can't wait to get back to them but for just now we are worshipping God every bit as much as if we were in our usual pew on a Sunday – and that can only be good!

Today, on what is the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter we mark what is known as “*Good Shepherd Sunday*”. Traditionally, that day is marked by looking at the passage from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel where Jesus declares himself to be the “*good shepherd*”.

One of the other readings, however, that is set for this day comes from the Psalms – the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, to be precise and that reading will be our main focus today.

But first of all, shall we pray? Let us pray...

### **Prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Our loving God, today we come before you because we are seeking that you would be with us and that we would experience that same faithfulness of which those who first encountered you spoke of.

You were there in the journeys of your first followers – like Abraham - leaving for lands yet unknown; and you journeyed with Moses in pillars of fire and cloud as your people were led to safety. You were there when a humble shepherd boy – David – took on the mantle of being King... and you were there when your prophets spoke of injustice and called your people to obedience.

But most of all you were there and seen in the life and work of your Son, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who demonstrated how we were known just as a Shepherd knows all their flock.

Enable us to experience that same guiding presence in our worship at this time. Lead us gently through the journey of these days. Speak a tender word of reassurance to us that would bring calm to our hearts and minds.

Father, we confess that we have not been easy sheep to herd... tending to head off on our direction at the first sign of something unusual...

Like Sheep we have been set to alert mode by the sound of strange things... voices we do not know and situations that are out with our control.

Forgive us, we pray and centre our lives back on him who is the Good Shepherd, allowing him to do within us and for us what the Good Shepherd always does... never failing nor forgetting us.

Hear us then as we further pray the words which Jesus has taught us to pray saying:

*Our Father*

*Which art in heaven*

*Hallowed be thy name*

*Thy kingdom come*

*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread*

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power*

*and the glory, for ever, Amen*

### **Bible Reading – Psalm 23**

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.*

*He guides me along the right path for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,*

*I will fear no evil, for you are with me;*

*your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows.*

*Surely your goodness and love will follow me*

*all the days of my life*

*and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

***Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.***

### **Reflection**

*“The Lord is my shepherd” ...*

Those words are as familiar, writes one preacher, as singing *Happy Birthday!* As embedded in our minds as the old Valentine’s day saying – *“Roses are red and Violets are blue, Sugar is sweet and so are you”* ... or the opening words of Shakespeare’s 18<sup>th</sup> Sonnet: *“Shall I compare thee to a summers day?”*

That, I am afraid, is about much of that particular sonnet that I know... after all, anything I know about Shakespeare was learnt at High School – and that was a few years back now, and what was learnt was just enough to write something in an end of term exam!

To get back to the point, however, there are certain phrases and sayings that just seem - somehow - to have worked their way into our minds. We are not sure even where we learnt them... We are dumbfounded about how they got stuck in the back of our minds the way that they did but, somewhere - and at some point - we became familiar with them.

Maybe it was after years of sending (and if you are lucky even receiving) valentines’ cards or sitting around the dinner table at Birthdays chanting the words of that old birthday song again...

Perhaps it was Granny who aye seem to have had a way with those old traditional phrases and the way she put things that captured your imagination...

Or an inspiring teacher who made us sit up and take notice of that which would normally have simply passed us by.

As I was preparing these thoughts, I even tried to work out where I would have encountered the words of Psalm 23 for this first time and I’ve come to the conclusion that, in all likelihood, that it wasn’t through reading a Bible but, almost certainly, in hearing the Psalm as it is set to music. There were two tunes that – as a boy - I remember it being sung to...

One of those tunes is called Orlington – a tune written in 1807 by a Paisley Man by the name of John Campbell. It’s elegant but powerful... sweeping and emotional – though it’s not the tune that we use most commonly.

That honour is given to the tune Crimond. It’s that tune that we usually sing it to at funeral services but equally we’ve heard it often enough in Church on a Sunday morning or even on TV’s Song’s of Praise!

As a child I particularly remember it being sung by the former Glasgow Orpheus Choir under the direction of their choirmaster Hugh Roberton. There was an album of their singing in the family home of my childhood and, now and again, I’d hear the recording being played. I am not old enough to have heard them in person!

The Orpheus choir were famous for being composed of people from all walks of life and Psalm 23 set to Crimond, along with the hymn *By Cool Siloam’s Shady Rill* set to the tune Belmont, *O God of Bethel* sung interestingly to Orlington – along with *All in an Aprils Evening* – became almost their signature songs.

They sing Crimond more slowly than we do nowadays... in fact so low and slow that the words seem to stretch farther and farther with the tune seeming to almost melt into place rather than be formed in strict rhythm... However, it's meant to be that way... After all it's an act of devotion... It's designed to draw you in... hook you with the slowly evolving melody line, even if to modern ears it might seem a little slow.

But then again, we've all got a bit of extra time on our hands these days – 3 minutes and 29 seconds of which hardly seems to be expecting too much in order to experience the sense of calm they bring to the words and melody line.

I mention 3 minutes and 29 seconds simply because that is how long it takes them to sing it and I invite you – if you can – after listening to this podcast to search on YouTube for the Glasgow Orpheus Choir singing the hymn tune Crimond. It will be 3 minutes and 29 seconds well spent. Guaranteed!

I mention the devotional sense that the Orpheus Choir bring to the words of Psalm 23. By taking time... by keeping things smooth and low and slow, they allow the words to have the impact and that allows us – the hearer – to be moved again and again even by words that have become incredibly familiar to us.

So, what is it that makes these words mean so much to us?

Well, at one level we might simply note how they have helped us at key points in our lives, perhaps especially at times of loss.

In other words, these words have become helpful to us because they have become so intensely personal.

This, after all, is how the Psalmist – David – means them to be understood.

Here he is using one of the most familiar images from his own childhood – when he was a simple Shepherd boy – to describe something about his relationship to God... something that has become incredibly special and personal to him.

*“The Lord is MY Shepherd” ...*

The first five words set the whole tone of the rest of the Psalm...

To its proverbial fingertips we are in the spiritual arena here of personal devotion.

David isn't writing a piece of abstract theology. He's not dissecting the doctrine of this or that or even of the next thing.

Here we are taken on a guided tour of his heart and his faith life.

Of course, if we stop to think about it, speaking of the things of our heart and speaking of the things of our faith is far from an easy thing to do.

Most of us could talk for a fair amount of time about the things we have been doing – or not doing in these days...

We can relay stories about conversations... encounters... places we've visited and places we'd love to visit...

We can share something about the work we do or the work we used to do...

Discuss in animated fashion the world of politics... even of religion...

So long, of course, as it is done at arm's reach.

It's easier to speak about things that mean something when we are keeping the emotional equivalent of a "*social distance*" from what we are saying.

On the other hand, speaking of things that are important to us – deeply important to us – that ain't so easy... and can even be a bit awkward... a bit like the first time you told someone that you loved them... or that you had fallen in love with them...

The second time you say it isn't so difficult... but the first time is harder to get the words out....

Will this, we ponder, sound a bit cheesy?

And what if – after I have dredged my heart to find such love and strength to say the words – that the person I say them to looks embarrassed... or doesn't seem to get it...

Should I have held off to another day... another moment?

Have I spoiled what was already there by diving in head first?

Well, suffice to say that David – the King who was once a Shepherd boy – had well and truly passed that stage of initial embarrassment about opening up his emotional side to God.

By the time he writes these amazing words, he has surely told God on numerous occasions how much he loves him.

But what does he love him for?

What about God has caused him to speak of him being like a Shepherd to him?

Well, that's where David starts to expand his thoughts by opening up the different ways in which God has shown care to him.

The first of those ways that God has shown care to him is through the way that God has ensured that David lacks for nothing...

As one preacher points out that may seem a pretty vague statement, at first sight...

What is the content, they ask, of the word "*nothing*"?

What does "*nothing*" even mean?

There is a clue as to what David means here, however, writes another commentator were we to turn to verses 15 and 16 of the 48<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Genesis where an ageing Jacob blesses his children with the words, "*May the God before whom my father's Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my **shepherd** all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm —may he bless these boys*".

That is how the New International Version of the Bible puts it. Here now is how the Authorised Version puts those same words – listen out for the one word that is different here... "*God, before whom my father's Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which **fed** me all my life long unto this day, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads*"

Did you notice that one word that is different in the second version of the reading?

Instead of the word "*Shepherd*" the Authorised version uses the word "*fed*". In the original Hebrew, we are told, the word "*Shepherd*" and the word "*fed*" were almost one and the same... drawn from the same word root...

In 1983 the preacher Douglas MacMillan – who was himself a Shepherd for 12 years of his life (from the age of 13 to 25) says this in his book that is simply entitled “*The Lord our Shepherd*” – “*You see (he writes) this is the central task of the Shepherd - to feed his sheep. Away back there (he concludes) as he was praying God’s blessing on his children’s children, Jacob wanted nothing more than that they should know the God who had shepherded him*” ...

That’s wonderful, isn’t it? He wanted them to know the God who had fed him...

He wanted them to know God who, like the Good Shepherd always knows where the best places for food are to be found - whether around a table or on the hillsides...

He wanted them to know the God who knew how to guide him through the rough and the hard experiences of life...

As well as the God who would keep doing that, as the Psalmist says, “*all the days of my life*”.

*“The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing”*

### **Closing prayer**

Loving God – Shepherd of the Sheep – you are goodness... you are mercy. You are sure footed. You know the way and you care for your flock. For this, today, we give you thanks and praise.

As we have been reflecting, however, on the Shepherd of which the Psalmist speaks we are aware of the needs and those in need around us who need the care, the guidance and the protection of the Good Shepherd today.

We bring before you those who are finding the path of their life difficult at this time. Lord, it is hard when so much around us is different and uncertain to determine the path that we should follow. Assure us this day, however, that the Shepherd guides his flock... that you have a way of leading us, even if at the time we are not sure where that journey will end.

Lord, we rejoice in the Good Shepherd who ensures that their flock are fed as we remember today those from our own land and around the world who may be struggling to find the physical nourishment that they need. We give thanks for the amazing work of so many local groups around the country who have risen to the challenge to help others who are finding these days hard – local food banks, resilience groups, kindly neighbours, family members – all who help those who are vulnerable in these days.

Lord, the Shepherd has to ensure the welfare and well being of their flock. We rejoice that Jesus does this for his people, just as the Shepherd tends the sheep of the field and hillside. Bless all who, in these days, who tend the sick... who go the extra mile for those who need a helping hand at this time.

And bless those who have lost someone close to them and who deal with the grief that such loss brings. May they be assured that you are a Shepherd who guides all throughout the days of their life and into eternity. Hear our prayers now as we bring them to you in Jesus’ name, Amen.

### **Benediction**

*Jesus, our Good Shepherd always loves us, always takes care of us and always listens to us when we are led by him. Go now in his care. Trust him, follow him and listen to him.*

*And may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – be with you and all whom you love this and forevermore, Amen.*