1-11-20 Sermon for St James Bolton by Rev Steve Lees. Psalm 23 & Revelation 7:9-end

This Sunday is a time when Churches traditionally remember those, we have loved but are no longer with us. 1st November is All Saints Day, and 2nd November is All Souls Day (or by its other name ‘the Commemoration of the faithful departed’.) This year, like all others many of us have faced the death of loved ones, friends, neighbours…some of us have attended funerals, some at St James or at local crematoriums. But this year, as we all know has had additionally difficulties; some of you have lost loved ones to Covid-19, the virus which is still a such great threat to us. Some of you have suffered through not being able to attend a funeral, because of restrictions or because you were shielding. Some of you may have lost loved ones as a consequence of them not being able to receive treatment they would otherwise have received, as a consequence of the virus. It has been a painful time. I quote from the C of E website: ‘Last year the Church of England was involved in 115,000 funerals, around 25% of all funerals, and an average attendance at a funeral is around 50 people, meaning about 6 million people got to pay respects, show solidarity and mourn someone who has been part of their life. This year, those numbers are drastically reduced as since March there have been around 300,000 funerals taking place with restricted attendance. This means that many people have been unable to process their thoughts and feelings at a funeral.’

We may have experienced loss in other ways too; a loss of social contact, a loss of freedom, a loss of joy, a loss of peace. Many, especially in the NHS, have paid great costs, in terms of health, in increased work hours, & increased stress.

Today we remember as we have done in recent years BUT there seems to be added weight this year. Of course, this year we have also witnessed some amazing acts of kindness, and of community coming together. We celebrate these…but today is when we particularly remember those who have died. I hope this service brings you comfort & peace as we remember those who shaped us & impacted our lives…and as we thank God for them.

The 23rd Psalm is one of the best-known passages in the Bible. It was very probably read at the funeral of the loved one you are remembering. It is often used for endings but it is such a positive life-affirming Psalm that we do well to ponder it for a few minutes. ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’, you are no doubt familiar with these words…many of us ‘know’ this Psalm…we may be so familiar with it that it has lost some of the amazing deep beauty and truth it conveys. I don’t know any shepherds…I did meet an ex-shepherd once but their description of their job was not what I was expecting. They used a quadbike! …and yet we instinctively know what this Psalm is saying to us…God is the shepherd who cares for us; the sheep! Eugene Peterson writes, ‘God is good and present. Life is a miracle and brims with beauty & love. But in the exact centre (of the Psalm) (v4) we see a great shadow of all that is wrong with the world, which threatens to blot out the good and merciful presence of the Shepherd.’ *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”* The shadow is death…or perhaps more specifically the danger of Covid-19, or dementia, cancer, depression, poverty, homelessness, hunger, abuse. We live in the company of both the Shepherd and the shadow.

The first half of the Psalm pictures God as the shepherd and we as the sheep. Sheep are known for their stupidity…they wander off into danger, they are easily led. We need a shepherd! We need the shepherd’s rod and staff to guide us away from dark chasms that are obscured by bright sunshine; to protect us from the wild beasts of prey; the lions & wolves. With God’s guidance, the sheep find themselves led to still, safe water and pleasant grass.

The second half of the Psalm switches the image from a sheep to a fugitive. “You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.” (v5) In the ancient middle east a fugitive would escape to the desert, a dangerous place. The fugitive would be hunted down but culture dictated that he could find safety in a shepherd’s tent. This was dangerous for the shepherd though; he would have to think twice before offering hospitality…was it worth it? For God the shepherd, yes, it is worth it. Jesus identifies himself and claims the title ‘The Good shepherd’. Jesus takes the risk, faces danger, lays down his life for the sheep…even telling us he would go looking for the one lost sheep, leaving the 99 who are safe. Jesus lived out Psalm 23…he is with us as we walk through the dangerous valleys of life, leading us on paths of righteousness, anointing us with his Holy Spirit…facing death on a cross for us…to win for us eternal life. *“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” (v6)*

Life is filled with shadows but the shepherd is never absent. Turn to him, turn to Jesus…to guide you in the deep and dangerous valley (whatever that means specifically for you). Turn to Jesus to be a protective host when enemies seem to pursue you. His rod and his staff promise you his love and his companionship. His Shepherd’s table and cup remind you of his protection and sacrificial life of grace. As we take Communion, we come to the Good Shepherd’s table… remember Christ’s body was given for you, his blood shed was for you.

Our second reading presented us an amazing picture of heaven,*’…a great multitude…from every nation, tribe and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb (Jesus)…and they worshipped’* (Rev 7:9-12, paraphrased). They worshipped in the place where God *‘spread his tent over them, never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst…the Lamb will be their shepherd, he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes*.’ (v15-17 paraphrased). Did you recognise the language from Psalm 23? Wow, I want to be in that place…and I want all those I have loved and lost to be in that place too. The way to that place? Turn to Jesus, turn from anything you know to be wrong, and let the shepherd be your guide and receive his grace for now and for eternity.

I close with the words of our prayer earlier: **Loving God, thank you for all those who have shaped our lives, but whom we no longer see. Help us to remember them well, and trust that they are at peace with you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen**

*Some notices…Please take home a knitted flower to remember your loved ones. Sunday 8th November 10.30am Service for Remembrance Day. Then from 2pm the next instalment of SHINE, worship for young families will be available on the church website.*

*Sunday 15th November, we celebrate CAP Sunday. Tuesday 17th November 7.30pm our Annual Meeting (postponed from April) will take place online via Zoom (the invite will be sent soon. NB if you don’t have access to the internet you will be able to dial in from your landline). 2 vacancies remain for PCC.*