

# St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 8th November 2009

## Remembrance Sunday – Abiding in Christ

### Psalm 23 and Philippians 4:4-9

#### Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

**Ps 23** is a psalm most of us will remember from the past – I had to memorise it as a child for my grandmother – and it is a familiar story of how God looks after us through the dark times. It doesn't try to pretend the dark times are not there, but gives us the promise that God will be with us in them. It's all about the relationship we have with God and about our living closely with Him, abiding in Him.

The 1<sup>st</sup> line speaks of a wonderful relationship – God is not just a shepherd, he is **my** shepherd, and because he is, because of that relationship, everything else that the psalm describes follows. A shepherd in those days lived with his flock and was a constant presence, companion and protector. A shepherd knew all there was to know about his sheep, their strengths and their weaknesses and, most importantly, why and where they might need extra protection.

How does God restore your soul, or my soul? It can be a lifting up out of our own troubles or pre-occupations and placing us back firmly under his protection, giving back joy and hope. There's a song with the line, *He lifts me up*, which also speaks of the restoration we feel when God gives us healing from weariness or illness or loneliness, or whatever we are feeling afflicted by. God our shepherd is leading us away from turbulence back to green pastures and quiet waters. But in a wider sense, this phrase could refer to the restoration experienced after a time of spiritual dryness or even after a spiritual battle, when we feel that God has stepped in and rescued us from forces that are evil. And in addition the author is being prophetic, looking to New Testament times, as he anticipates the ultimate victory against the forces of sin and evil won by Jesus through the cross and resurrection. God has restored my soul, your soul, through His saving grace, to its rightful condition of fellowship with Him.

And it's because of our relationship with God through Jesus that we are able to say with the psalmist *“even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me”*. We are able to acknowledge even when times are dark that God blesses us – He anoints us and our cup overflows. Because God doesn't just help us *get through* the bad times: he will, if we allow Him to, turn these times into His victories. He *prepares a table in the presence of our enemies* – we *feast*, even though our enemies are there right with us. God invites us to eat with Him at His table, as part of His household. This takes us back to the beginning of the psalm – the Lord is our shepherd, the one with whom we live. The bad things don't go away but we can nevertheless have the Holy Spirit's fruit of joy.

**Phil 4:** Another scripture I memorised when young (through studying Purcell's *Bell Anthem*). The opening phrase, *Rejoice in the Lord always*, is not a simple exhortation to cheer up. The church was in trouble and so was Paul – see Ch 1:13: Paul was in prison for his faith. Ch 1:28 tells us that the Philippian church was undergoing some kind of opposition and was frightened. In ch 2:15, St Paul calls that generation “crooked and depraved”. So this letter was written in a context of persecution, wrongful imprisonment and evil, all of which had made the Philippians fearful.

The key to understanding and being able to put this rejoicing into practice is the same as in Psalm 23: we are to rejoice *in the Lord*. This is a call to a deeper faith in God, in Jesus our Lord. In Ps 23 we saw that we are to live with our shepherd; only by abiding with Him are we able to rejoice, to experience true joy. Read JOHN 15:5 & 9-11 Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. We can only bear fruit such as joy if we abide in Christ.

That does not mean we are never tempted to feel anxious. Just as psalm 23 painted a picture of troubles or enemies, St Paul also acknowledges difficulties. See v. 6: clearly there were plenty of things the church could be anxious about! But, St Paul continues in v 6.....*present your requests to God!* We are not to forget that our shepherd and king longs for us tell Him how we are feeling and what we think we need. And the result – v. 7. *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* God's peace, available through Christ, transcends all understanding. This peace is unique, not of this world; it's illogical – but marvellous.

Verses 8-9 make me smile because it's pure Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, self-help if you like! v 8 *Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.* We are to put our understanding into practice in a positive and practical way on a daily basis – we are to change our thoughts to whatever is true and right and pure and lovely, refusing to dwell on the negative, and then our attitudes will also change for the better. And, St Paul says, God's peace will stay with us.

#### Witness: questions to discuss

**Before discussion, read the Bible passages and ask God to help you discern what the Spirit wants to say to your group. Consider one or two questions below – don't feel you have to use them all. Make sure there's plenty of room for prayer and ministry.**

1. **Ice-breaker:** what are some of your earliest memories?
2. Which scriptures might you have memorised as a child, or might you encourage young Christians to memorise, and why?
3. How does Remembrance Sunday remain relevant for you and those whom you know? Why is it important?
4. What does the phrase *He restores my soul* mean for you? Can you relate a time when you felt this strongly?
5. Look at 2 Corinth 12:1-10. How does this passage relate to Psalm 23:5a? Share how God might prepare a feast for you in the presence of things that trouble you (your enemies).
6. Read John 15: 5-11. In what ways does this ring true for you? What spiritual disciplines might we need in order to abide in Christ and remain in His love? How easy is it to think positive thoughts when times are tough? (Phil 4:8-9)
7. Pray for each other with regard to John 15 and/or Eph 3:14-19.