

It is good to be back! Thank you all who prayed for us during this time. Last Sunday we were in Berlin with Ranjeet and Sue, enjoying clear blue skies, bright sunshine and 38C!

We start a series to examine, the **Shepherd**: who is a shepherd and what makes a good shepherd. A fortnight ago, we examined briefly, the familiar Psalm 23 written by David, who is known as the Shepherd-King, who in this Psalm, describes the person of God!

The Lord ... He lets ... He leads ... He gives ... He protects, He comforts ... He prepares and feeds ... He pours ... He fills to overflowing ... He pursues me with His goodness and love, until I make my home with Him in His house forever!

David discovers the person of God as he grows in his relationship, and makes three personal declarations:

***I shall not want (I WILL lack nothing to live life)***

***I WILL walk ahead with confidence and not in fear***

***I WILL dwell in my Father's house, forever.***

David understands why God acts in the way He does; it is because of who **HE** is. We will never understand why God does certain things, why He allows things to happen, **UNTIL** we learn more about **WHO** He is.

Human history starts with a shepherd: Abel, the first son of Adam and Eve was a shepherd. 14 generations later, we meet Noah, shut in a boat with his family and an assortment of animals for well over a year, who goes back to being a farmer and a shepherd. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were shepherds; Jacob bred sheep using principles of genetic engineering!

The notion of a "good" shepherd starts with David. God says of David, *I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 13:22 (cited from Psalm 89:20)

The Hebrew phrase is actually “a man *according to God’s heart*”—one whose heart, mind and soul are in step with God. So God places His confidence in David to be the right king for Israel. David does not put on airs and pretensions about being a king, demanding to be treated as divine, nor does he take for himself, priestly powers. Despite all his failings and failures, David’s heart was set on doing what God wanted done, not what he David wanted to do.

Today we move on to the life of Jeremiah, who speaks to the people of his time, a message we hear after every election, *Every nation gets the government it deserves*<sup>2</sup>. This was true of the Hebrew nation during Jeremiah’s time, when God’s chosen *evangelists*, the Hebrew people, had broken their covenant relationship with God by worshipping idols and practising a lifestyle that violated God’s laws. God speaks through uses Jeremiah, His determination to restore an international people for himself, in an all-inclusive covenant.

The *Shepherds* are a recurring theme in Jeremiah’s message<sup>3</sup>. In the middle of the book, Jeremiah confronts Judah’s kings (the bad shepherds who did not care of God’s flock), the false prophets (who led people astray), the people themselves, and their false beliefs<sup>4</sup>.

At the time of writing these eight verses at the start of chapter 23, Jeremiah is under house arrest. There were reports that he was suspended in a cavern, and denied personal freedom. He had every reason to despair. At times like these it is natural for a person to reminisce on familiar themes and remember happier times. Jeremiah comforts himself with David’s reflection on the person of God in Psalm which shapes his message to the kings. Themes of *the lost being found, gathering and returning, removing fear, dwelling securely*, are found in both, Psalm 23 and in these eight verses of chapter 23.

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<sup>2</sup> “*Toute nation a le gouvernement qu'elle mérite*”, Joseph de Maistre, Albert Blanc (ed.) *Correspondance diplomatique*, tome 2. Paris : Michel Lévy frères libraires éditeurs, 1860, p.196.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 2:2:8; 3:15; 10:21; 23:1-4; 50:6

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 21:1-29:32

We can draw some very important lessons for our lives from Jeremiah's message.

Jeremiah starts by identifying the **bad** shepherds who have allowed the flock to be scattered by not looking after them, by not leading them to green pastures. *You have been delinquent in your duty of care toward those entrusted to you and not taken care of them, therefore I will take care of you, as you deserve,* is God's message to the bad shepherds.

But God does not focus on punishment. In God is life and blessings, not death and suffering. God's focus is on saving, gathering to Himself those who accept Him and His love. God says, *I will gather ... I will bring them back to where they belong ... to a place without fear ... and none shall be missing!*

God's message to His people, to us, is a message of **HOPE**

First, God says a good shepherd is coming who will pursue you with my love and affection, and bring you to my house to live with me forever.<sup>5</sup> We know this Good Shepherd as God's Son, He is Jesus the Christ.

Our lesson lies in two verses which are puzzling: *A time will come when, in your worship, you will no longer call me the Living God who rescued Israel from Egypt. Instead, you will call me the Living God who rescued you from the land in the north and from all the other countries where you were forced to go.*<sup>6</sup>

The rescue the Hebrew people from Egypt where they were slaves under Pharaoh, was monumental. They were nothing and they had nothing because they were slaves, but they left with the wealth of Egypt, because the people of Egypt gave them their wealth! They were delivered safe and sound onto dry ground, not only by the parting of sea waves, but by walking on the ocean floor which was made dry by a strong wind, and they witnessed the destruction of the Pharaoh's great army. Imagine for a moment you were among the millions who were rescued in this way! You would talk about it for the rest of your life and make sure, your

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 23:5-6

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 23:7-8

generations after you would be grateful and thankful to God for this great act, without which there would be no generations after you!

It is said, *We are what we remember*. Imagine for a moment a family in a serious car accident involving a drunk driver.

Some members of the family die instantly as a result of the accident. A total stranger, at risk to herself, stops and calls 999, and takes the walking wounded to the nearest hospital, saving the lives other members of the family. The family's loss will never be forgotten, but which will **dominate** their memories as a family: the horrors of the accident and the foolish actions of the drunk driver, or the extraordinary grace of the "good samaritan"?

Their choice of memory will influence who they become, for the rest of their lives; their choice of memory will guide and shape their attitude towards life; their choice of memory will make them either brood over their loss, thinking all the time of what life **could have been**, blaming others for changing the course of what **might have been** their perfect lives, **OR** they could choose to remember the "good samaritan" who saved their lives, and live in a spirit of gratitude, expressing their gratitude to others in acts of compassion and care towards others.

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian has a book appropriately titled "*The End of Memory - Remembering rightly in a violent world*" in which he says, *We will not "forget" so as to be able to rejoice; we will rejoice and therefore let those memories slip out of our minds. The reason for our non-remembrance of wrongs will be same as its cause: our minds will be rapt in the goodness of God and in the goodness of God's new world, and the memory of wrong will wither away like plants without water.*<sup>7</sup>

Jeremiah describes the "good" shepherd as the one who saves and gives hope; who gives life and confidence in a future over which He has control.

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<sup>7</sup> Volf, Miroslav. *The End of Memory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) p. 214

Jeremiah's encouragement to his listeners, is our lesson today: focus your minds on the grace of God in your life, not on human sin, and devastation which brings death.

***You are what you remember.*** God wants you to remember that His grace and love you have enjoyed until now, is nothing in comparison to what He is about to do, for you, for us and for everyone in the world. There is no time to nurse grievances, there is no time to remember hurts, there is no time to hold back forgiveness. The good shepherd offers you a real and tangible hope of the future. Will you accept it?

**AMEN**