

Frank Cooke's explanation of 23rd Psalm

Today is All Saints Day and tomorrow is All Souls Day.

Normally around All Souls Day we would have a special service in church for the friends and families of those in our Benefice who have died in the past year to come together for a service of remembrance and thanksgiving. Because of all that has happened during these past months, we thought we would change the service from All Saints to All Souls.

As a minister in the Benefice, and living, as I do, in Harwell, I am often asked to take funerals here in St Matthew's Church.

I have been coming with my family to visit relatives here since I was 2 and eventually my parents bought some ground at the top of the village and all my school holidays were spent here. Eventually my parents retired here and when they passed away my husband and I came to live in their house.

Over the years I have come to know many families in the village and often have the privilege of taking the funeral of someone I have known since my childhood. It is something that I regard as a real honour to help a family through their grief and to celebrate someone's life and give thanks to God for all that they did in their lifetime.

This year has been very different. For some funerals people have come out from their houses and lined the High Street and beyond to watch as the funeral cortege passes and to honour the person who has died.

Some of you may know people who have died, and you have not been able to attend the funeral because of the restriction on numbers. Some of you, like me, may have lost a friend or relative who has died as a result of the virus.

Over the years that I have been taking funerals, the hymn or reading that the family often ask to be included in the service is the 23rd Psalm it is also one of the readings for the principle service for All Souls Day.

When I was in my early 20's I met the well-known BBC Radio 4 broadcaster Frank Cooke and he explained the Psalm to me in a way that has lived with me ever since and I want to share it with you this morning.

We remember that the boy David was a shepherd and men have reconstructed the imagery of this Psalm in that way. Secular rulers styled themselves as shepherds. So while David's experience as a youth might have fuelled his use of imagery, it was neither novel nor unique.

Imagine a shepherd boy out under the sky at night keeping watch over his flock gazing at the stars and wondering and here the shepherd boy is talking 'How do I picture God the great mystery the great master behind the entire universe? Why, the Lord is my Shepherd just as I care for my sheep so God cares for me. My sheep lack nothing and neither do I'. Just as my sheep are worth everything to me their shepherd so I am worth everything to God.

Grazing for sheep is a social behaviour like sheltering and camping. Sheep tend to have two main grazing periods, during the early morning and again late in the afternoon. The early

morning grazing time tends to be a lesser active grazing time than the later period. Grazing can last from 5 - 10 hours per day depending on the breed of sheep and available pasture and water.

Just as I lead my flock out in the morning to graze on the high hills and rough grasses, by noon I bring them into the lower but lush pastures beside the still waters so that the sheep may drink because the fearful silly things will not drink from cascading mountain streams but prefer the calmer still waters of a brook or stream.

So rather than argue with them I lead them to where the water is quiet and fresh because I know they will refuse to drink water that is covered in scum or algae. When they're contented and full they can rest chewing the cud.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He leads me besides still waters.

I can call them to me by name and each one comes to put his nose into my hand to be patted and talked to. It restores their confident trust in me then they will follow me anywhere because they know that where I lead them will not end in a precipice. I won't take them into danger and God does this for me because he wills me only good.

When I come to cross to the high grazing lands, to shorten an otherwise long journey which would involve going around the mountain, I go through a hazardous gash in the mountains called the gorge of deep shadows. It's so steep on either side that it's dark at the bottom where the path runs and it crosses over a crevice half way through.

Mountain lions sometimes try to attack the stragglers. As I might be there bestriding the path over the crevice to help the flock over they need not fear because I have a crook which can lift them up from the crevice if they slip and fall in.

I have a club, a rod weighted and one end which I have practised throwing so much that I can snap the neck of a predator going for my sheep with a single throw of the club.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.

When I bring them out onto the high table lands where the grass is fresh and good, I go on before them with my long stick digging out, uprooting dangerous clovers which would slowly kill them as their stomachs fill with air causing strangulating seizures a kind of enemy to the sheep. So I put these dangerous plants on stone piers out of the sheep's reach so that they can safely graze.

I literally prepare the table before them in the presence of their enemies.

At night I take them to a communal sheep fold built like a letter C if you were looking down on it and I admit them one at a time laying my rod across the opening.

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

I exam each one of them pulling out any thorns from their wool to anoint any runny eyes from the oil or ointment I carry with me to clear away any sores.

Once inside they each go to the stone water trough which was filled by the last visitor and I will fill it up in the morning before I leave but as the sheep put their heads in to drink of course it overflows.

He anoints my head with oil. My Cup runneth over.

Then they settle down for the night contented as I sit across the entrance and think and muse, I even sleep across the doorway because I become the door into the sheep, and no one enters but by me.

If I had two sheep dogs to help me I would not use some savage blood hounds but two great hearted sheep dogs one called goodness and the mercy and they would follow me and guard every one of my flock by my orders so that my sheep could be kept in security and peace.

God's spiritual care and new life is expressed through these pastoral scenes and its imagery reminds us that everything we have comes from God.

I hope that as we remember again today the lives of those we have lost in this past year and as we face an uncertain future the words of this Psalm will comfort us and build us up again along with the promise from the second reading which reminds us that for the believer death is not the end.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you and for me.