

SHEPHERD KING

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Jeremiah 23: 1-6 - The good shepherd, gathering the scattered flock

Psalm 23 - The shepherd psalm

Mark 6: 53-56 - Healing the sick in Gennesaret

This is one of those messages that put several things together, and it's hard to know which one to start with. It's kind of a chicken-and-egg sort of thing. Let's start at the story of the healing at Gennesaret. I'm trying to imagine someone who was there--someone who had been sick and in some pain for years, and who came that day and was healed by Jesus. What happened took on a much greater meaning than just being healed, because there were other healers in Jesus' time; Jesus' healing took on a much greater meaning.

The background of healing from the time of Jesus and immediately preceding was a controversy. It was a time when sickness and disease were understood as a punishment from God, and so in a sense to heal someone was to contradict God's will. The idea of healing as being consistent with the will of God--the idea of healers, people similar to what we would today call physicians--was therefore a newly emerging concept. So I imagine someone who was there that day with Jesus had lived with the pain for a long time and had perhaps gone to the priests in the temple who had instructed him to make sacrifices of one kind or another with the intention of expiating his sins. But it didn't work, and perhaps the priests explained, "Oh, your sin must be too deep; God can't forgive you." It left people with this deep sense of hopelessness and negativity. And maybe it was even hard to persuade someone like that to go that day to this Jesus. But there was an excitement in the air and people were going. And why not? Why not try it? What else was there to get excited about these days? And so he went. What he experienced in Jesus was much more than just a healing, just a healer. It was a change, a transformation of the whole understanding of God's ways with the people.

These were people who had lost hope in other ways as well. There is that ancient picture of the king who would protect the people. That's the origin of the meaning of "salvation"--to save us from our enemies. There needs to be a king who unites the people and assembles armies and maintains military defence against the enemies that are all around. That's what it means to "save." That's why a king was necessary. The word for "king" was "messiah" or *mashiyach*, "the anointed one." There had been so many years, decades, centuries, since a king had been on the throne of Israel, and people longed for a time when God would re-establish a king, send a messiah to save them, to protect them. But decidedly that hadn't happened. They were living humiliated and under the oppression of the Romans, and the hope of a real king had all but died.

Another image, another picture from the Hebrew tradition, was that of this shepherd, the good shepherd, a way of understanding one who would lead the people. And the

hopelessness was even deeper because there had been leaders, messiahs, kings, shepherds, who were not acting in the best interests of the people. And so there was such a depth of discouragement that even if there had been a king it might have been the wrong kind--one who was just as severe and condemning as the priests portrayed God in relation to illness.

Something was transformed profoundly that day when those sick people came to Jesus and experienced not only healing, but also much more than the healing. They started to realize that in some way the promise of a messiah was being fulfilled through this person. It was not the old picture of a king on a chariot with swords and leading a military defence. Somehow that picture of a king was being blended with some other of their traditional pictures such as that of a shepherd--not just any shepherd, not just a lazy old shepherd who runs away when the wolves comes, but the good shepherd who would even lay down his life. There was a picture of the good shepherd who would lay down his life over here, a picture of the king and chariots keeping us secure from our enemies over there. Somehow those were blending and transforming each other into a shepherd, a king, and a healer, all in one. How do we even name this new image that we saw before us? And so in a way that's the mystery of our faith--how to name, how to grasp, that transformed, combined, blended, picture of a whole tradition that Jesus ingeniously offers through his life and his teachings.

One of my all-time favourite expressions of that blending, of that transforming, of the images is rooted in the 23rd Psalm which captures so much of the tradition. It has the king, it has the shepherd, and it has that nurturing, healing, feeding kind of picture. So much is blended in the 23rd Psalm. And then it becomes transformed into Christian imagery in one of my all-time favourite hymns called "The King of Love." The author of that hymn has taken the imagery of that Psalm and rewritten it in Christian images. I want to explore with you some of these beautiful pictures and how they are transformed. If you want to follow along, it's the hymn we are going to sing next--"The King of Love."

Verse 1: "The king of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never; I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine for ever." "The king of love my shepherd is" replaces the Psalm's "The Lord is my shepherd." You see how subtly we move from "Lord" meaning "Yahweh" to the king image combined with the power of love that is in the gospel. In one simple expression, love and kingship are transformed by being blended together into "king of love"--the image of Christ gathering up all the richness of tradition into a new picture, a new image, a new way of naming how God is present with us in the world. "The king of love my shepherd is," and right there is the picture of the good shepherd, of the true messiah that comes to us wielding love rather than swords.

Verse 2: "Where streams of living water flow my ransomed soul he leadeth, and where the verdant pastures grow with food celestial feedeth." In the Psalm: "He leadeth me beside the still waters"--still waters. This is a beautiful image in Hebrew and it means not just still waters, but stilling, calming, waters. He leads me beside the calming waters, and very subtly the hymn's author changes it to "streams of living water." Remember Jesus at the well? He said if you drink this water you will get thirsty again; but I will give you living water and if you drink it you will never thirst again. So picture that beautiful image from the Psalm. "He leadeth me beside the still waters" is transformed

into “living waters” that Christ gives and that transforms our lives--that “restoreth my soul” (as the Psalm says it) subtly changes to “my ransomed soul,” the ransom that is paid by Christ. Our ransomed souls led by the streams of living water. See how the Psalm is transformed so subtly into the beauty of Christian imagery, and how Christ transforms the imagery of the whole Hebrew tradition.

“Where the verdant pastures grow”--“verdant,” meaning green, lush, wonderful. And in the Psalm: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.” That Hebrew word “green” is much more than any old green. It’s that lush, delicate, green of the fresh leaves in the spring. I used that image in the prayer I said with the choir just before we came up to the sanctuary, and one member of the choir said “good luck finding any green grass today; it’s all just brown and crunchy.” But that’s exactly the point. The psalmist was talking to people, to shepherds who led their sheep not in lush green pastures but in semi-arid land where it was a struggle to find any edible grass let alone anything lush and green. And so the picture has this sense of God who takes us into his arms of the lamb and lays us down. It’s something far beyond the reality of our world; it’s in a lush green pasture. And that’s the picture that Christ offers us as the image of “food celestial feedeth.” It’s something beyond the grass that grows in the ground; it’s something that feeds our souls.

The Psalm then goes on to that simple little line: “He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” The hymn writer shifts that a little in verse 3, recognizing that, yes of course, he leads me in paths of righteousness, but you know something, I don’t always follow closely. Sometimes I stray--“Perverse and foolish oft I strayed.” And this shepherd doesn’t just keep walking and leave me lost; this shepherd seeks me out when I wander off and brings me back so that I continue to follow in those paths of righteousness--“yet in love he sought me.” “And on his shoulder gently laid, and home rejoicing brought me.” That is the beautiful picture of the good shepherd who keeps on gathering the flock rather than letting them be scattered.

Now we move to the picture of fear, of darkness, of death. In the Psalm: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou *art* with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” In the hymn (verse 4) this becomes “In death’s dark vale I fear no ill with thee, dear Lord, beside me; thy rod and staff [--that symbol, that picture of the shepherd--] my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.” The shepherd’s rod and staff become the cross which is set before us and gives us the life-giving, the life-transforming, comfort in the face of any danger of any threat. That is the same kind of comfort that the shepherd’s rod and staff gave to the sheep as the shepherd led them through dark places with high cliffs where wolves and lions could hide. The shepherd’s rod and staff becomes the cross.

The hymn continues in verse 5: “Thou spread’st a table in my sight; thy unction grace bestoweth; and O what transport of delight from thy pure chalice floweth!” And the Psalm: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.” The table is in the presence of the enemies. This is the reality of life, whether it’s collective as a people and the enemies are military, whether it’s individual and the enemies are all that push against us and undermine us in our lives, whether it’s personal vendettas and enemies, or whether it’s a completely spiritual thing with us living through our lives and the enemies are the turns

and changes and evil forces and demons that tempt us at every step. Whatever the enemies, this Lord, this shepherd, this messiah, this king, prepares a table right in the presence of our enemies and anoints our head.

“Unction grace,” a term that comes from Roman Catholic sacramental theology, is one we don’t often use. One of the seven sacraments is the anointing of the sick--unction or extreme unction--in preparation for death. The theology of that part of Roman Catholic sacraments is that at the time of sickness we become, our souls become, especially vulnerable. At the time of death our souls become especially vulnerable and need that extra gesture of protection of God’s grace to protect us from the evil forces that would seek to claim us at those vulnerable moments. With the anointing of the sick, the unction grace is there to guard us, to protect us, from our enemies. And so this beautiful picture of the table prepared before us and our head anointed with oil is subtly transformed into the protective unction grace of Christian sacramental theology. We are anointed in order to be to be guarded, to be protected, from the enemies. And the image of the king is right there; that’s what the king was for--to protect us. And that is now transformed into this profound grace that touches our heads so our souls will be safe.

“My cup runneth over.” The cup is poured full to the brim and overflowing with the richness and the nourishment and the thirst-quenching of God’s presence. What is subtly added in the hymn is the word “chalice” that transforms that overflowing cup into the cup of blessing we celebrate and share at the table of the Lord in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Verse 6 of the hymn begins: “And so through all the length of days thy goodness faileth never.” This is the picture of eternal life. And the Psalm: “Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” That “house of the Lord” is the house of the good shepherd, the house of the shepherd, king, healer, the one who is there to protect us and to save us and to nurture us and to hold us and to guide us--all those pictures that are so many different images and roles from the Hebrew tradition, and all ingeniously and miraculously blended together in the life and person of Christ. And with that, we not only dwell in the house of the Lord, because to dwell in the house of the Lord is also to sing praises. “Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord” becomes, in the hymn, “Good shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house forever!”

And so with that let us truly sing the praise of this amazing Psalm, and this wonderful hymn--“The King of Love.”

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor