**3rd April 2011**

**Psalm 23**

Preparing for this Mothering Sunday I came across the following pieces reflecting on the role of parents:

A vest is something a boy wears when his mother feels cold.

If you have any advice to pass on to your children, do it while they’re still young enough to think you know what you’re talking about.

There are three ways of getting something done: do it yourself, hire someone, or forbid your kids to do it.

You know your children are growing up when they stop asking you where they came from and start refusing to tell you were they’re going.

Those of us who are parents especially the mothers among us will I’m sure recoginse soem truths in those pithy sayings. It is not easy bringin children up and knowing how much you should priotect and guide them in life.

Last weekend my family and i had a trip to London. We weren’t part of the riots – although the youth hostel we stayed had members of the Tartan Army, Scottish football fans in town for the Brazil Scotland game who started singin the Flower of Scotland at 2am in the dormitory opposite ours – that nearly started a riot! One of the places we visitied was Kensington Palace and we learnt about the stories of seven princesses who had lived there, Princess Diana of course being the most recent.

We learnt about the story of Queen Victoria. Her father was [Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and Strathearn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_Edward%2C_Duke_of_Kent_and_Strathearn), the fourth son of the reigning King [George III](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_III_of_the_United_Kingdom%22%20%5Co%20%22George%20III%20of%20the%20United%20Kingdom). She inherited the throne at the age of 18 after her father's three elder brothers died without surviving legitimate children. Victoria’s father died a year after Victoria was born and so she was brought up by her mother The Duchess of Kent.

The [Regency Act 1830](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regency_Act_1830) made special provision for the Duchess of Kent to act as regent in case King William died while Victoria was still a minor.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Victoria#cite_note-4) King William distrusted the Duchess's capacity to be regent, and in 1836 declared in her presence that he wanted to live until Victoria's 18th birthday, so that a regency could be avoided.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Victoria#cite_note-5)

Victoria later described her childhood as "rather melancholy".[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Victoria#cite_note-6) Her mother was extremely protective and controlling and known as a bit of a money grabber. Victoria was raised largely isolated from other children under the so called "[Kensington System](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kensington_System)", an elaborate set of rules and protocols devised by the Duchess and her ambitious and domineering companion, Sir [John Conroy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Conroy). The system prevented the princess from meeting people whom her mother and Conroy deemed undesirable (including most of her father's family), and was designed to render her weak and dependent upon them. Victoria shared a bedroom with her mother every night, studied with private tutors to a regular timetable, and couldn’t even walk down the stairs without someone accompanying her.

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Victoria turned 18 on 24 May 1837, and a regency was avoided. Only a month later [William IV](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_IV_of_the_United_Kingdom) died and Victoria became Queen of the United Kingdom. Her own diary reports how she was woken at 6 o'clock by her mother who told her [the Archbishop of Canterbury](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Howley) and [Lord Conyngham](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Conyngham%2C_2nd_Marquess_Conyngham) were here and wished to see her. She walked into her sitting-room, and saw them kneeling. She immediately knew that she was queen and straight away shut the door behind her to stop her mother entering the room. From that moment on Victoria was her own woman, and her mother was effectively, and in this story literally, shut out from interfering any more in her life. Victoria relegated the Duchess to separate accommodations, away from her own. Prince Albert was credited with facilitating some reconciliation later in life, especially when Victoria had children.

A mother's relationship with her children will change in character as they grow up, and she begins to respect them for achievements that are entirely their own. The story of Victoria and her mother is perhaps a lesson about over protective and controlling models of parent hood. How protective should we be as parents?

The main Bible text for today is the well loved 23rd Psalm. It starts with the phrase ‘the Lord is my Shepherd’. The shepherd image is rich and pervasive in the church and of leadership within God’s people.

During this Season of Lent, we have been tracing the story of God’s saving love through the events that shaped God’s people. The people of Israel asked God for a King. God reluctantly made Saul the first king of Israel. He didn’t turn out good and so God chose David – the young shepherd boy. David of course is traditionally credited with being the author of many of the psalms including this one.

Israel’s king is often described as shepherd to the people. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd.

But many of the writings in the Old Testament are critical of the shepherds of Israel and how they abuse their position. David of course abused his power and committed adultery and murder

Power can corrupt. Religion can corrupt. It can become controlling, manipulative, oppressive. There can be an abuse of power. ‘Heavy shepherding’ practices in some churches have church leaders trying to control their followers by ensuring they believe the right things, live in the right way, and are protected from what they deem to be evil influences. All of that can lead to stories of abuse and financial and sexual scandals and an unhealthy dependency. The long term damage of those affected is hard to estimate. Sometimes its irreversible. Trust at its very core has been shattered.

Instances of harm and abuse in religious contexts do not of course, demonstrate that religion as a whole is harmful or abusive as instances of abuse in care homes or playgroups doesn’t condemn all care homes or playgroups. Churches, like ours, hopefully have learnt, often by painful experience to develop helpful organizational structures that check power and thereby prevent some forms of religious abuse. We hope that in this church you are free to believe, to question, to search, to share, to give what you want and when you want.

But what about protection? When should the shepherd step in to protect? What about dependency on each other and on God?

This Psalm is all about the care and protection of God. The Lord is my Shpeherd who leads, restores, guides, protects and feeds.

Two viewpoints dominate the psalm: the shepherding God as protector and as host. Philip Keller in his book (*A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*) suggested that verse 5 ‘thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies’ could link both ideas of the Shepherding God as protector and as a host.

In the Middle East “tables” were flat, well-pastured areas in the hills of Judea used for grazing. The task of the shepherds, however, was not merely to lead the flock from one “table” of pasture to another. Rather, in preparation for leading the flock there, the shepherd would have the responsibility of protecting the sheep from noxious plants that they might otherwise eat and also from snakes. To deal with the threat posed by serpents, some shepherd would pour thick oil around the holes of the snakes that would make it far more difficult for them to emerge. Secondly, and in keeping with the second half of verse 5, the shepherd would anoint the heads of the sheep with aromatic oils so their smell was a further deterrent. The injured or sickly ones were separated from the others and treated with oil and a curative drink made of fermented material and herbs sweetened with honey"

The more traditional view of verse 5 involves shepherding as hospitality. Those who would seek to make sharp distinctions between the images of shepherd and host overlook the natural link between those images. As a host saw to the needs and particularly

feeding of one’s guests, so, too, did the shepherd have the responsibility of feeding of the flock. In fact, the same Hebrew word *raah* can mean both “shepherd” and “feed.” The image of the psalm thus underscores the providential nature of God’s care whereby we are fed in God’s shepherding care.

Even these two interpretations of God as “protector” and God as “host” need not be seen as mutually exclusive. There was a story I read about a Presbyterian missionary and scholar from the Middle East. He related an episode from his ministry in Egypt. He had been

summoned to appear before a hostile government board in southern Egypt. This was at a time when the Islamic fundamentalist movement was asserting itself, particularly in the region to which he had been ordered to go. When he arrived in the town where the

hearing was to be, he was met at the train station by a local Egyptian pastor. The pastor, who was well known and respected in the community, insisted on taking the missionary out to lunch in a very public place. The pastor’s act was not only hospitable in sharing

food, but in making the clear statement that he stood by this individual. In the missionary’s mind, this act of hospitality saved his freedom and perhaps his life. He specifically referenced Psalm 23:5 in the telling. That Egyptian pastor had prepared a table before him in the presence of his enemies.

Our tradition gives us a metaphor for ourselves that puts us in such a powerless position, a sheep that cannot do much at all for itself? A sheep that needs a powerful protector and provider. How do you think that image fits us particularly well in our day and age?

In our individualist culture we tend to see dependence as a sign of weakness. Yet in worship we are invited to lay down our burdens and responsibilities and rest in a caring God. Does it clash with our sense of self-determination, or does it touch our most vulnerable and fearful places?

There are two types of dependency. There can be an unhealthy dependence we can have on people and things and substances from drugs to alcohol. This dependency is enslaving and oppressive. There is a healthy dependence we can have when we realise that no man is an island, we are in relationship with others, we can mutually help one another. Ultimately we have to deal with God, our Creator and sustainer, the origin and the destiny of our lives, who wants to be our loving shepherd.

This psalm brings us back to where we belong in relation to God.  God didn’t want the people of Israel to have Kings. Read 1 Samuel 8 (maybe as you watch the Royal Wedding later this month) and you will read thate the Lord says to the prophet Samuel that the people reject God and want an earthly ruler – but his earthly ruler will exploit them and lead them into war.

The 23rd Psalm is a corrective. We may have been the victims of abusive leadership and the breakdown in trust of those who we looked up to; whether our managers at work, our partners in love, even the parental figures in our families. Psalm 23 points us back to a loving God behind all that masquerades as a false substitute for protective, supportive authority figures. Can we believe, and trust and find healing in knowing that there is one whose voice we can know and trust, one who knows each one of us by name.  In a dangerous world, the assurance that the shepherd is there and will never leave the sheep to fend for itself allows the sheep to graze and rest in peace.

We preach this text right in the middle of the long season of Lent, a time of preparation for Easter and the celebration of new life in the Resurrection of Jesus, the Light of the world. While Christians look forward to, and even love, the promise of the empty tomb as much as the image of a gentle shepherd, a tomb is not just a happy, sunshine kind of place but one of death and hopelessness. It's the "empty" part that matters, the promise of resurrection and new life even in an image of death. Perhaps, then, this psalm is so loved precisely because it doesn't paint a rosy picture of reality. The psalmist faced dangers and threats, as Jesus did and as we do, but it was God's presence at all times, good and bad, that's being celebrated in this psalm. At the centre of the psalm are the words, ‘for you are with me.' That is the central dependence of all.

This psalm encourages us, whatever our present troubles may we not to be distracted from the paths of obedience and trust. God is with us always.

A Peanuts cartoon from many years ago has Charlie Brown asked what "security" means. He describes the experience of riding in the back seat, while your parents are in the front seat, driving. You can sleep worry-free, because they're taking care of everything, Charlie Brown explains to Peppermint Patty. That might be another way, in our culture, to describe the feeling of utter trust and security provided by a reliable, loving, all-powerful figure. (Of course, Charlie Brown ends with the gripping realization that the day inevitably comes when "you grow up and can never ride in the backseat again." But that's another sermon.)

Sheep still have a lot of independence and freedom. In our independence we sometimes get lost. We sometimes fall into danger. But God is till with us. May we listen for His voice.