

Hymn 387

Sermon for Weem and Tenandry - 30th April 2023

John 10:1-11

In the mid-1970s, Monktonhall Crematorium on the South Side of Edinburgh made an interesting offer to local Churches. The crematorium for a large section of the city's population as well as for the industrial complexes of East Lothian - not least the miners of Monktonhall Colliery - at that time one of the largest collieries in the whole of Europe.

The offer was this.

The Crematorium were offering 100s of copies of the words edition of the Church Hymnary Third Edition - CH3 as it is more often known - to local Churches at an absolute cut price. There was only one slight problem.

The hymnbooks were largely immaculate, the pages white and clean, with one exception.

The page containing hymn number 387 in every single book was smudged, muddied, the ink had run, the thread was barely holding the page in place, the corners were folded over, the words barely legible.

Does anyone want to guess what hymn, number 387 was?

Yes - of course - CH3 387 was the 23rd Psalm, the Lord's my shepherd.

Actually if I had been a minister back then, as my Father was which is how I know this story, I may well have been tempted to accept the offer of cheap hymn books, because the fact that CH3 387 was smudged and illegible and torn and stained would have been no problem at all, since it was likely that CH3 387 was the hymn in the hymnbook that nobody actually needed the words for.

Even today in nursing homes, with people who are suffering from memory loss, and with whom I would not introduce a new song, with men and women today, if I say the words "The Lord's my...." And leave a pause, the whole room will say as one "SHEPHERD" "I'll not..." "WANT" says everyone together "He makes me lie drow in green... " ... "PASTURES!"

This is a song that is ingrained in the Scottish psyche.

"The Lord's my shepherd"

Even in industrial 1970s Scotland, where people worked in mines or shops or on roads, and very few were farmers, and if they were farmers, they were dairy farmers in that part of Scotland, but still. This is an image that they relate to... My Shepherd.

It's not just the tune, because the tune Crimond is relatively modern.

And Stuart Townend's contemporary version "The Lord's my shepherd" is one of the most popular of modern worship songs.

In the 1990s a survey was done of sex-workers in Glasgow's harbour district by the Glasgow City Mission, they were asked which image from the psalms most spoke to them, still the reply came "Shepherd".

Why is it that people in the city? People far away from the supposed romantic pictures of hills and lambs and green grass and streams, still relate to this psalm?

Or when I lived in India, with a Church full of quarry workers, and banana cutters, and bank clerks and teachers and Auto-rickshaw drivers and cleaners, once again the psalm that people sang in Church every Sunday was "The Lord's my shepherd".

Just why is this image so popular?

I think it's this.

This life is too difficult to do by ourselves.

We need to know that someone is with us.

If we are like sheep, then we want someone with the skills and knowledge and commitment and experience and eye of a shepherd.

We want to know that we are in the right place

We want a shepherd

We want to know where we can be fed, where the life is

We want green shepherds

We want a shepherd

We want places of rest, away from the tumult and the stress
We want still waters
We want a shepherd

We want to be protected from forces beyond us,
In the valley of the shadow of death
Or in the image that Jesus uses here
We want to be protected from the bandits and robbers
We want a shepherd

This life is too difficult to do by ourselves
We want a shepherd.

And Jesus knows this,
So many years after the 23rd Psalm was written
He says something quite radical

He doesn't just say
"The Lord is my shepherd"
He says
"I am the good shepherd".

And this image has a number of ideas to it

It has the idea of the sheep following the voice of the shepherd,
Which they recognise.

In Jesus Israel, there were only a few wells for all the fields which they were
So Shepherds of different flocks would gather at the same well.
This meant that there were lots of flocks
But when the time came for moving on, how was the shepherd to lead the sheep
Some had wooden pipes, which only they had, and the sheep could recognise and follow
But the good ones, the ones that built up a bond with the sheep
They could use their voice and the sheep would follow.

Jesus saw this

And he knew that his disciples could learn to listen for him
To discern him
To understand what voice was his, and what voice was an imposter
This means learning to move towards the voice which leads us to life and growth
And grace and wholeness

I have a belief that this is a gift of the Spirit
To be given to us all
To teach us to listen for the voice of Jesus
So I ask... what is the voice saying to us now... keep listening for him... where is he
leading you?

And notice the place the shepherd leads to - two places - the pasture where you can
feed - note that the shepherd doesn't feed you, you feed yourself but the shepherd finds
the place where you can be nourished

And the pen, the place where you are safe, the place that is home, that is the place that
the shepherd leads you to - the place of nourishment and the place of belonging.

That is why Jesus says this wonderful phrase - I have come that they may have life, and
have it in all its fullness.

And the shepherd leads you to safety, to protect you from the thieves, to protect you
from anything that harms you. That is what the shepherd does.

But there is this great twist here, this great surprise, something quite startling.

Have you ever heard something so remarkable as a shepherd giving up their life for their
sheep

It is of course normally the other way around... the sheep have to be slaughtered, in
order that the shepherd can have a livelihood

But this is completely the other way around

This is the picture of the shepherd who gives up everything for the sheep.

Just think about the picture you thought about at the start, of the shepherd who is beside
you

And then imagine that shepherd not just being present
But giving up his very life in order that you could live

What a picture that gives us of God

Of Jesus

How does this change us now that we know we have that kind of shepherd beside us...

Does it make us braver

Does it make us more loving

Does it make us want to be the very best we can be for the shepherd

He is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep

And he is with us now

AMEN