

WHAT GOD DO YOU BELIEVE IN?

Psalm 23; John 10: 1-11; Revelation 7: 9-17

The bible is full of language to describe God. God is not like anything or anyone in the world, and yet how can we know anything about God unless God is like something or someone we know? How can we relate to God and identify any experience as an experience of God unless God is known in some way that's familiar?

And so, the bible's language for God is often what we call metaphor. A metaphor for God is a word that says something descriptive about God that is not literal. To say God is a shepherd, for example, is not a literal statement. God is like a shepherd in some way. In fact, even though the bible provides many metaphors for God like creator, almighty, king, mother or father, one of the most fascinating ones is that of 'shepherd'. In fact, to call God 'shepherd' in the way the bible does it is to say some pretty radical things about God. To call Christ 'shepherd' is even more radical still. And to call Christ 'lamb' is radical above all.

Let's begin with shepherd and the most popular of bible passages – the 23rd Psalm. At funerals, at weddings, in times of trouble and in times of joy, the 23rd psalm has been read, spoken, sung and prayed for thousands of years. What is it about this mere 6 verses of poetry that gives it such power? It's the beautiful metaphors that make the relationship with God come alive. God is one we can get close to and one who can get close to us. God is one we can access and one who can be there for us in our darkest moments, our most wondrous moments, our times of celebration and our times of despair. But throughout, the language about God is metaphor focused on God as shepherd.

What is it about a shepherd that makes God and the relationship with God so poignant? Well, unlike a king or queen who can be remote from their subjects, a shepherd is hands on close to their sheep. There is intimacy. There is a feeling of comfort and protection. But protection doesn't mean bad things won't happen. Life is not like that. There are valleys of the shadow of death as much as there are green pastures and still waters. There are enemies all around even as there is a wonderful table prepared for us.

The power of the psalm is not so much protection from harm but restoration, renewal, guidance, vindication and the empowerment of faith. I will fear no evil as I walk through the darkest valley because God is with me. God's shepherdly rod and staff are a comfort to me.

Obviously, God does not literally have a staff or rod. But just like a Shepherd uses these tools as means to guide and protect the sheep, so God will guide and protect me no matter what happens.

The language of this psalm is also powerfully personal. God is 'my shepherd' and God restores 'my soul' and it is 'I' who walk through the darkest valley. It is I who am surrounded by enemies of all kinds. It is also I whom God anoints with healing oil and whose goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.

Now if God is like that with me, and if I can connect with God, relate with God and experience God in such personal ways even as life can become really challenging, how does that shape the kinds of relationships I form with others? While many versions of Christianity may describe God and relationship with God in terms of almighty power and control, God as shepherd challenges us to purge our hearts desire of such ways of relating in favour of a more compassionate and down-to-earth way of connecting with others. We are inspired to connect with others as equals, sharing our vulnerability rather than imposing our way. The hunger for control and power in us is purged as we open ourselves to ways of relating that evoke freedom and trust.

And this brings us to our second reading from the gospel. If God as shepherd is language of comfort, guidance, protection and intimacy, this meaning is taken even further in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus refers to God as shepherd but himself as shepherd too. While sheep will fear and be intimidated by thieves and bandits who come only to steal, kill and destroy, the divine shepherd has an intimacy and familiarity with the sheep. Such intimacy and familiarity establish trust. The sheep can entrust their vulnerability to the shepherd, and it is they who are given the power to choose who they will follow. The power is given to the sheep. The authority of the shepherd is in his ability to build trust with the sheep, not impose his will upon them. The relationship is based on freedom, trust and love or it is no relationship worth having.

Even more, the sheep trust the love the shepherd has for them because he is ready to lay down his life for them. Someone who is prepared to give it all for you is someone whose love you can trust, someone who inspires you to give it your all to others too. You see, if the goal is to build the kinds of relationships that will change the world from domination, mistrust, animosity and indifference to mutuality of care and concern, then God as shepherd is the kind of God that inspires this kind of relationship. If the goal is love, the relationship has to be one of love. Love doesn't force, manipulate, humiliate or control others. Love

gives freedom to others so that they choose only if their hearts are in the choosing. They can agree or disagree, come or go away. Love must give that kind of freedom or it is not love.

And this brings us to our last reading from Revelation and the most radical of pastoral images for God – as lamb. What is the first and most obvious attribute of God that emerges in contemplating God in Christ as a lamb? - vulnerability. A lamb is vulnerable to predators of all kinds. And what about a slain lamb? In a world of animal sacrifice, a slain lamb is familiar. But the slain lamb in the account of Revelation is also alive, and not only that. This slain lamb, representing the crucified Jesus, is king and ruler over all. A slain lamb as king and ruler over all? What a contradiction!

So what's the meaning here? Well, what would the most popular image of king and ruler in the world of the New Testament be? - The Roman emperor Caesar. Caesar calls himself shepherd and king, but his kingdom is built on sheer violence and the dominating power of military strength. People obey out of fear, and there is a clear hierarchy of superiors and inferiors. Relationships are based on terror, and unless people are made to fear their rulers or crave some of their favour, they will not fall into line.

To declare that the true messiah who represents the true God is a shepherd of a vastly different kind, and a vulnerable lamb even more so, is to declare that the power of love rules, not the power of power. And love rules because it builds vastly different kinds of relationships. There is no place for fear, for compliance or obedience out of terror, force, violence, manipulation or threat. Not only does that not work, but it destroys relationships, and it destroys people. Only love can create the kingdom of God and only a God who is a lamb is the kind of ruler who opens hearts, not builds crosses.

And most importantly, only a lamb who represents the kind of love ready to lay down its life, to be slain for the sake of those it rules, only such a one is deserving of worship and praise. Such a lamb alone is trusted to wipe away tears, care to feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty.

So then, what does this mean for you and me? What kind of God do we believe in? A part of us may crave a God of power and control who can make things happen as we want them, helping us get this outcome or that compliance from a person, control this circumstance and that situation to our advantage. But will such power and control to make things happen as we want them give us what we truly need? No.

What we truly need if we are in touch with our deeper selves, is the kinds of relationships with others, with the world and with God rooted in love. To have love means we let go any power to control, to force, to manipulate, to impose. Even though there is a place for power and force to protect the vulnerable, building relationships means we have to let go that kind of power so that intimacy of trust, a freedom to be, heart-felt giving and grateful receiving happens. It means that conflict is dealt with by forgiving and repenting in order to work things out rather than threatening, punishing and retaliating.

Whether it's in our personal lives, our community lives, our work lives or our living in society, what kinds of relationships do we form? Are we prepared to embrace others as they are and as they choose to be, different than us? Or do we find ways to criticize them, pressure them, manipulate them and subtly control them to be as we want them to be? We don't have to be world emperors to be tyrants towards those around us, aggressive or passive aggressive, overtly judgemental or subtly guiltting and shaming others to our ways. If we are to genuinely worship God as Christ reveals and embodies God, then we have to let go our fear of not being in control and our perverse hunger to have things go our way in a relationship. We have to let go our desire that others conform to our way of seeing things and doing things. We must give up our narcissistic self-focus oblivious of what's happening to others around us.

God calls us to something radically different, to something we are truly made for. Once we begin to purge ourselves of the sin of domination power or the sin of self-focus, we will be free for something totally different: becoming creatures defined by love. Love is a word so familiar yet so little understood. God as shepherd and God as lamb will reorient us to the true meaning of love and to relationships grounded in love. It is this God we need to believe in, worship and pray to.

Let us pray: Come to us O Shepherd and guardian of our souls... feed us, O Lamb of God with your love, so that it is your love we have to share with others... Amen.