**The Lord’s my shepherd… but who am I?**

Psalm 23 is perhaps the best known of the Psalms. Beautifully set to music by Jessie Seymour Irvine (1836 – 1887) it has offered encouragement and peace to Christians through the ages. The psalm offers great hope of the closeness of God and strength in the face of trouble.

However, last weekend it was suggested to me by a friend that the straight forward reading of Psalm 23 – that the ‘I’ is me, the reader – is not the main way we should interpret the Psalm. Instead, we should see Jesus as the primary singer. These thoughts were prompted by teaching from the preacher and writer Christopher Ash.

**Jesus as the lead singer**

We can see an example of Jesus as the lead singer of a Psalm if we flick back a page in our bible (or press the back arrow on our phones) to look at Psalm 22. In Psalm 22 we have a clear example of a Psalm which primarily should be read with Jesus as the singer – not us. We have Jesus quoting it on the cross, and the fulfilment of it during Christ’s crucifixion laid out in all 4 accounts. If we want to read Psalm 22 correctly we don’t place ourselves as the primary speaker, but understand the words to be the very words of Christ on the cross.

The arrangement of the Psalms is a discussion for another time, but for now it suffices to say their ordering is not random. It is important that Psalm 23 follows Psalm 22. Following the cross of Christ in Psalm 22, we have the comfort of Psalm 23. The hope and confidence that his death is not final. That though he feels he has been forsaken by his God, he knows he can still say “you are with me.” Psalm 22 and Psalm 23 go together, and so does their reading. If Psalm 22 is Jesus speaking, so is Psalm 23.

**Victory and Anointing**

Reading Psalm 23 with Jesus as the primary reader helps us to make sense of v5.

*You prepare a table before me*

*in the presence of my enemies.*

*You anoint my head with oil;*

*my cup overflows. (Psalm 23:5, NIV)*

The banquet is a victory meal (‘in the presence of my enemies’) in which the enemies can only look on while the King is anointed with oil (before the meal) and given an overflowing cup of blessing. If we insert ourselves into the Psalm we claim for ourselves promises which are not ours. We are not the ones who have won the victory, and are not God’s anointed one. David was when he wrote the Psalm, and Christ is as the primary singer. We are not David (just as we are not David in 1 Samuel 17), and we are not the singer of this Psalm. Christ is, as the one to whom David pointed.

**But isn’t Jesus the shepherd?**

In John 10:11-18 Jesus identifies himself as the ‘Good Shepherd’ and everybody who follows him as the sheep. Isn’t this a reference to Psalm 23, with Christ taking the role of ‘Lord’ and us as the singer? Sheep motifs are everywhere in the bible – Isaiah 11:6, Isaiah 40:10-11, Psalm 80:1, Psalm 100:3, Matthew 25:32-34, John 21:16, Revelation 7:17 just to name a few. This doesn’t mean they all have to be linked on a theological level – perhaps the connection is that sheep were common in Israel! While the bible is full of references to itself, we need to be careful of seeing links where there are none. Now that’s not to say there’s nothing for us in the old testament after we read John 10. However, the first place we should look is not Psalm 23, but Ezekiel 34. In Ezekiel 34 we have the contrast of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ shepherds. We have God identifying himself as the good shepherd – the one who ‘will search for my sheep and look after them’. Ezekiel 34 is a wonderful passage which deserves much greater attention that it receives.

**So how do we sing Psalm 23?**

‘The Lord’s my shepherd’ is one of my favourite hymns. If I’m not the primary singer of Psalm 23, should I stop singing it? Of course not! The psalter is the songbook God has provided for us, to expressing himself to us, and to equip us to come before him. When thinking about how to sing Psalm 23 with Christ as the lead, it’s useful to think about how it works with Psalm 22.

Psalms 22 and 23 are sung by Christ in a time of great suffering and pain. The poetry of the Psalms provides a way to evoke emotion within us in a way prose or narrative cannot. Psalms like 22 and 23 take this further by writing in the first person. When we read and sing these Psalms we begin to experience the tumult of emotions which Christ experienced on the cross. Through this we are able to glorify him more as we grow in our understanding of the greatness of all that Christ went through. When we see that the Psalm is not about our suffering, but the greatest suffering which any man has endured, we can do nothing but glorify him further. When we see that the comfort of knowing God is with you is not about getting through another day, but about an eternal hope of the victory won by Christ, our view of God is wonderfully and powerfully expanded. When we see Christ as the primary singer of Psalm 23 we are pointed to the redemption won at the cross, the ultimate thing of which we must always be reminded.

With all this being said, I hope it’s clear that there is still room to place ourselves in Psalm 23. I’ve tried to speak throughout of Christ being the ‘primary singer’. Yet even as we understand these Psalms for ourselves, we understand this through the lens of Christ as the singer. Before Christ died for us, he lived for us, and in that living for us he perfectly kept God’s law and provided for us the perfect example of how to live. In Psalms 22 and 23 we see Christ dealing with the greatest hardship, and we have a pattern for ourselves as we come against difficulties. We can follow Christ’s example of continuing to offer praise to God and speaking truths of God’s character to ourselves.

**Final Thoughts**

In thinking through this possible interpretation of Psalm 23, I find it quite convincing. It adds a beautiful depth to the song, and makes clear the testimony of the Psalm to Christ himself. It magnifies Christ and takes us off his throne. Praise the Lord.