
- 24 He [Christ] Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.
25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 1 Peter 2:24-25

Who cares for you? How do they care for you? If you were to answer these questions, what would you say?

Who cares for you? If you were to draw up a list of names of ‘people who care’, who would be on your list? We can approach this question in a number of ways. One way is to think of those people with whom we have personal contact, and in whom when their names are mentioned, we have a ‘good feeling’. For many people, such ‘caring people’ may include close members of family, or special friends. Who cares for you?

We may also think of this question more broadly. Think about your day from when you wake till when you go to sleep. You wake, and maybe you wash your face. This requires water from a tap. So someone has made your home, and someone is working at a water authority, and someone is working in a water supply company, and others are in government and local councils ensuring there is appropriate legislation and compliance regimes – all to ensure you can switch on a tap without really thinking about it. You don’t have to get a bucket and go to a well. So many people are involved in you simply washing your face. And if you extrapolate that out into other ‘everyday things’ there are a lot of people actually involved in your everyday life.

Who cares for you? Of course, we may also speak of a deeper level of care. We may ask in those times, “Does anybody care? ...really care?” As a marriage dissolves, a person may ask, "Who cares anyway?" Voicing the same question is a drug addict, unable to escape the trap of addiction. An elderly widower, living out his last years alone in a rest home may ask, "Who cares anyway?" A person sitting at a kidney dialysis machine several days a week, whilst other seem to be ‘getting on with their life’, may ask, “Who cares?” And we could come up with a large list of situations where people – whilst still surrounded by many people who are actually caring for them –may still ask, "Who really cares for me?" And this is a not a question of a lack of people surrounding one’s life. This is a question about how a person feels in the depths of their soul.

Have you felt disappointed in life? There is a story of a schoolgirl in Britain in the early 1900s when the King was visiting a new hospital. Thousands of school-children were present to greet him and to sing for him. Following the ceremony, the King walked past the excited youngsters. After he was gone, a teacher saw one of her students crying. She asked her, “Why are you crying? Did you not see the King?” “Yes,” the young girl sobbed, “but the King did not see me.” The King couldn’t have noticed every child in the crowd—but that didn’t help her. She thought the King would have noticed her. It’s a simple story but has a great truth.

We all like to be noticed. But how shall we respond when we feel quite alone?

A long time ago, David in the Old Testament was hiding in a cave in fear of his life. Here was the great David of Goliath, now hiding and afraid. And we read in Psalm 142, verse 4: "Who cares enough to walk beside me? There is no place to hide, and no-one who cares".

You may be thinking, "I don't know how I could ever get through this." Or you may be battling powerful feelings of despair, suffering, confusion, fear, worry, and even anger. These are all normal responses to tragedy. But as difficult as this life storm may be, you are not alone.

In our Scripture Reading for this day (1 Peter 2:19-25) the Apostle Peter was speaking to people who faced a really difficult situation. What is overlooked in the Lectionary Reading for this days is verse 18 which says, "Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh." These are radical words to a people in a difficult situation, often wondering who really cares for them... And these words about enduring 'pain' and 'suffering' has a real world context – of people in very difficult situations – wondering how they will cope, and what they should do. And Peter says these words (1 Peter 2:21): "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps."

We may rejoice indeed that Christ "suffered for us". But we may also ask, "What does it mean that He left as an example?" Is this the word of 'keep a stiff upper lip'? Is this a word encouraging you to 'smile and be happy'? Is this the word of the pop-psychologist writing a simple article about how 'you too can be happy'? A clue is in the word 'example'.

The Greek for "example" is ὑπογραμμός—a word which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It means a copy set by a writing or drawing master, which was to be exactly reproduced by his pupils. The idea behind the word 'example' is that of the one copying the other, as of a child tracing characters on tracing paper. The picture is of laying oneself on the One who has completed the picture. And we are to 'trace over' that 'pattern'. And so, whilst this does involve our 'doing something', it first begins in realising that someone else has actually completed the picture first. That 'someone', of course, is Jesus. And so 'following the example' is not about the activity of the power of positive thinking' in a difficult situation. It is first simply realising that someone else has already endured the suffering we face – and in an even more profound way – and He has 'completed the picture for us'. And so we are called to rest in His completed work.

This is also why Peter says (1 Peter 2:24-25), "He [Christ] Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. *By His wounds you have been healed.* For you were straying like sheep, but *you have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*"

God is the Shepherd of our souls. 'Shepherd' is one of the oldest descriptions of God. The Psalmist has it in the best-loved of all the Psalms: "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalms 23:1). Isaiah has it: " He tends His flock like a shepherd: He

gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He gently leads those that have young." (Isaiah 40:11). Ezekiel hears the promise of God: "And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and He shall feed them; He shall feed them, and be their shepherd" (Ezekiel 34:23; 37:24). This was the title which Jesus took to Himself when He called Himself the Good Shepherd and when He said that the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:1-18).

It may be difficult for those of us who live in an industrial civilization to grasp the greatness of this picture; but in the East the picture would be very vivid, particularly in Judea, where there was a narrow central plateau which held danger on either side. It was on this narrow tableland that the sheep grazed. Grass was sparse; there were no protecting walls; and the sheep wandered. The shepherd, therefore, had to be ceaselessly and sleeplessly on the watch lest harm should come to his flock.

God is the true Shepherd and Guardian of our Souls. And "to this you were called". The word "called" here is in a 'passive mood', and so Peter us that we have been called by God. We are called by God's grace (Galatians 1:15) for salvation—that we might obtain "the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

Four times in the text for today from 1 Peter, we hear that we are to share in Christ's suffering; that we are to suffer with Jesus Christ. He says, "Let the same experience of suffering be required of all your brothers and sisters throughout the world."

What is this Christian suffering required of all Christians throughout the world? We have references to suffering in the New Testament: 1 Peter 2:19, "Christians are to endure pain while suffering unjustly." 1 Peter 3:17, "For it is better to suffering from doing what is right than for doing wrong." 2 Timothy 2:3, "Take your share of suffering as a soldier for Christ." 2 Timothy 1:8, "Do not be ashamed of testifying to the Lord, but take your share of suffering for the gospel." But what does this mean? On the face of it (and it is true), we are to take up the cross of faith and be bold in our confession of Jesus. And we are called to enter into the suffering of those around us. But Christ's death is more than just a blueprint to endure suffering. Christ's death is to proclaim to us that we are healed through Christ suffering. In the midst of unjust suffering that might cause us to lose faith, we are reminded that Christ suffered so that we might be healed, that resurrection and new life will happen in our lives.

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations and wonder if God is paying attention. We may feel so alone and even depressed. We can't feel God's presence, and we need His guidance and help. And we may feel that friends, spouses, and parents don't really understand what we are going through. But God does understand, and He really cares.

Peter says (1 Peter 2:25), "For you were going astray like sheep, but are now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." There is a reference here to Isaiah 53 'you were going astray like sheep'. But Isaiah also has those great words which highlight that all our iniquity was laid on Jesus (see Isaiah 53:6). Jesus is indeed our 'Good Shepherd' and the Guardian our souls. And this something only

made possible by the cross (compare John 10:11; John 10:15; John 10:17). And thus, being watched over by such a Shepherd and Overseer we can have confidence in whatever befalls us.

In real life, every time we face unfortunate events such as setbacks and illnesses, we may think that God has forsaken us and no longer protects us. In our lives there are times when we feel all alone. But this loneliness can be a doorway to the deepening one's faith in Jesus, who said, "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18). If past hurts, disappointments and/or abuse hinder your ability to trust your loving Heavenly Father, please take the time to get to know Him as He really is.

Scripture tells us that God cares about all things, and is not a God that loves us from afar. We know this to be true because of His incarnation in Christ Jesus who "suffered for us" and "left us an example". And this is not something you 'have to do or follow' (although there is a call for this). But at its heart is the gift God has given us in Jesus.

Sometimes we think God only cares about the big things. Yet, God has shown time and time again that He cares about the little things, like breakfast. Picture this: After His resurrection Jesus – the Son of God, the One by whom everything was made (Colossians 1:16) – is on a beach making breakfast for a bunch of tired, smelly fishermen (John 21). This may seem such a small thing, but it is such a big thing given that it is God who is doing the cooking. And it made an impact because John chose to record it in his biography of Jesus. The man who was known for His extraordinary teaching, for His powerful miracles, and for His death and resurrection, is also remembered for His fresh fish and bread breakfast! This tells us something about Jesus our Good Shepherd: He cares deeply about each of us and at His core is the nature of a servant. Our needs, even the smallest ones, are important to Him. "And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." Matthew 10:30

There are a lot of people who do care for us. And just like we don't always actually 'see' the people who care (who make our everyday life even possible), so it is that the divine Creator of all things cares for you in your everyday life as well. Today as you go about your day, think of Jesus on that beach making breakfast and remember how much He cares about your needs, even the smallest ones. What a wonderful God we serve!

May you drink deeply of the living waters of God's love today as you rest in the presence of your loving Shepherd.

Prayer: LORD God, loving heavenly Father: we thank You so much that You watch over and care about us every moment of our lives. Forgive us for the times we push You aside and are not attentive to that still small voice which guides us through our daily decisions and actions. In those times when we do feel alone, remind us that You are close to us today and every day, and that we never step out from under the protection of Your covering; in Jesus' name. Amen.