

Mint Sauce!

Acts 9^{36-end}; Psalm 23; Revelation 7^{9-end}; John 10²²⁻³⁰

*These are they who have come out of the great ordeal;
they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb [Revelation 7¹⁴]*

I have always been of the mind that if you fed lambs mint rather than grass it would save you having to add it when you serve lamb for dinner!

We have arrived at 'Sheep Sunday!' when we join together the 23rd Psalm and John 10 and celebrate the fact that we are sheep, God's sheep.

I am not quite sure how the reading from Acts fits in other than as a reminder in this Easter Season that resurrection is still our focus - because Jesus conquered death, death is conquered for all Christian people.

However, I am quite certain that the reading from Revelation belongs with the sheep theme!

How easily we forget the mint sauce and get carried away with some romantic notion of fluffy cuddly creature springing around the green fields.

We forget that lambs and sheep alike exist to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the shepherd - and God hasn't called us to the life of an over-grown pet but to the life of costly discipleship.

That is why in heaven (according to Revelation):

- ✦ **the Lamb** is the focus of the worship in heaven. This is Jesus who had given his life and regained it at the resurrection. The imagery is rich in its Old Testament connections about the sacrificial lamb of the Passover and of the altar in the Temple, where the sin from the human is transferred to the lamb as the atonement.
- ✦ In the drama of the Revelation of St John we move the focus from God the Father in Ch 4 around whom the heavenly host sing **Holy, Holy, Holy** to Jesus in Ch 5, **the Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered** and to whom all of heaven responds **To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honour and glory and might**. This accords with Jesus saying in John **The Father and I are one!**
- ✦ God the Father is the Shepherd and God the Son is *the* Lamb - so we can expect the same care and the same demands (as outlined in the Psalm):

- ✦ It is a personal relationship between God and ourselves - **The Lord is my shepherd**.
- ✦ It is a relationship in which the sheep are provided for - **pasture and water**.
- ✦ It is a spiritually refreshing adventure - **he restores my soul** and we are led in the **right paths for his names sake** - because God ties up his honour with ours!
- ✦ There are no guarantees of personal comfort but we can say with confidence **I will fear no evil for you are with me**. The **rod and staff** are instruments of guidance and correction, but used for our benefit.
- ✦ Whatever is happening to us or around us we are chosen by God, **you anoint my head with oil**, and life is better than it could be under any other rule, **my cup overflows** (not that I have seen many sheep using a cup!).
- ✦ In life we will know **goodness and mercy** and after this life a place **in the house of the Lord**.

Without God at the centre of the relationship the Psalm is meaningless, but with God it is the assurance of life itself.

- ✦ So, Revelation makes it clear about the community of sheep that some will have the 'mint sauce' moments in life and looking round the community in heaven John says, **these are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb**. That's what sheep can expect. Some statistics:
 - ✦ In 2013, there were some 2,100 Christians killed for faith-related reasons across the globe. Last year, that number rose to at least 7,100
 - ✦ anti-Christian persecution reached a new peak in 2015, with thousands more people killed for faith-related reasons. About 4,000 Christians were killed in Nigeria, over 1,200 in the Central African and over 700 in Chad throughout 2015.
 - ✦ In addition, over 2,400 churches were attacked or shut down for faith-related reasons
 - ✦ The worst 10 countries on the 2016 list are North Korea, Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Libya.
 - ✦ In Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Christians have fled their homes for fear of violence, especially from ISIS.
- ✦ The consolation is this, that in God's presence there will be freedom to worship, no hunger, no thirst, no sunburn **for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes**.

Discipleship is more mint sauce than woolly jumpers - that's the truth of sheep Sunday and that is the heart of Christian discipleship!