

Despite being an unabashed Blues supporter, I've always had a high regard for the ex Queensland coach, Wayne Bennett. I've always thought he was a really top bloke.

A guy whose coaching record has been one of the best, if not the best, over the last 20 years in rugby league. Premierships with the Broncos, State of Origin titles with the Maroons and Best in the World status with the Kangaroos are proof of his coaching skills. He can work with the big names players and he can find undeveloped talent. By any measure he is obviously a great coach.

Yet he was on the ABC's Australian Story a few years back and watching that programme showed a great insight to the man behind the coach. He is a laconic Aussie with a great sense of humour. A loyal husband to his wife. A devoted Dad to his kids, one of whom has a severe handicap. And a mentor to the players under his care.

You see Bennett doesn't see his role, either as a parent or a coach, in just developing the young people under his care in terms of their football skills. He wants them to mature as people. He wants them to grow up with life skills. He wants to produce well rounded individuals who will make a wider impact on the Australian community, not just on the football community.

And so he reminds me of the shepherd figure in the most loved of the Psalms in the Bible, the 23rd Psalm.

1. The Shepherd. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.* This shepherd is the one who is there to be meet the sheep's needs. This shepherd is there so that they are not in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, means that is he will provide them with rest in the midst of a frantic world. *He leads them beside still water,* that is he will not just give them the green grass that they love to eat, he will provide them with the cool water they need to drink. He will satisfy their need for healthy food and drink so that they may grow fit and strong.

But he is not just about the physical. He wants to provide for their deeper needs as well. What's deep inside of them, what's in their spirit. So he also *restores my soul.* He cares about their spirit, and about their connection with Creator God.

He guides me in paths of righteousness, for his name's sake. This shepherd will provide guidance for his sheep. He will show them the right road to travel. He will point them in the right direction. So that *even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will feel no evil.* There is an element of protection there. There's a sense that nothing that you might meet on the path will overpower you. Nothing can defeat you. No enemy will win over you.

Thus you *may feel no evil, for you are with me, your rod and staff they comfort me.* There is a sense of security with this shepherd. There is a feeling of comfort in his presence, like those ugg boots you often slip on at the end of the day.

This then is the role of the shepherd, to meet the sheep's deepest needs. Their physical needs for food and drink. Their emotional needs for guidance, and protection. And their spiritual needs for peace within their soul, which comes from the presence of God himself & the cleansing of the sins that would drive us away from Gods presence

It's a lovely picture. Its peaceful, its serene. But if I'm honest, really honest, its not one that I can

relate to. In fact, I don't know whether its one that almost anyone in modern Australia can relate to.

For I'm a city boy, born and bred in Sydney. I don't normally think in sheep, shepherd terms. I don't see myself tagging along dutifully behind another who will show me where to go. Who will provide for my physical needs. Who will leads me to a spot of peace and serenity.

Don't I provide for my own needs & for those of my family? Don't I go to work & work hard to provide not the green grass and clear water for my family's table but the meat and vegies and fruits and juices and soft drinks and alcohol for our table as well. I don't sit and meditate beside a clear country stream, I try and grab a few moments when the kids go to bed to unwind and get myself ready for the next day.

To be honest I don't relate to the idea of anyone being my shepherd. And even if I was a country boy, which is extremely obvious that I am not, when I go and visit my father in laws apple orchard for the holidays. Even if I was from the country, shepherd's or jackaroos today use horses, four wheeler motorbikes, even choppers to gather their mobs nowadays. They have to cope with the dust, the flies and the drought if they are pastoralists today. Its an industry, with the aim of getting the mob fattened up and then selling them to the butcher. So its just so far different to what is going on in this Psalm today.

2. The Coach So that's why a propose a re-writing of the 23 rd Psalm to try and make it's message a bit more relevant to people like you and me. And this is my attempt.

The Lord is my Captain Coach, I shall lack nothing. He leads me out onto the green playing fields of life, He provides for my thirst, He restores my inner being. He guides me on how to play the game of life the right way, For the praise of God's name.

Even though I may be dropped, Even though my team may not make it to the finals, I will not be scared, For He is with me, His hand on my shoulder & his camaraderie, they comfort me.

Now to me that makes a whole lot more sense. Why not take the same message, but repackaged it into the terms of sport that we can relate to

The Lord is in a way like Wayne Bennett, or Mal Meninga or Graeme Murray. His aim is to develop my skills not just in football but in life. And to do that he will provide me with the nutritious food and drink that I need. He will show me how to play the game of life. He will be with me in the thrill of victory and in the desperation of defeat. He will not abandon me when injuries take over, when sadness or depression knock my self esteem, even when death means my days in this world are over. He will stand by always like a loyal coach.

But a coach is often an ex player, someone with a clip board & housed in a sound proof box. Surrounded by a myriad of other assistant coaches. Someone who has lost the ability to do it themselves but is still good at barking out instructions of what others should do.

So the picture is not just of a coach but a captain coach. Someone who will step in and defend his team mates like Wally Lewis did against Mark Gwyer. Someone like Tommy Ridonikus who will be out there doing the hard yards. Someone who will lead from the front, like Arthur Beetson used to do with the ball tucked under his arm.

You see that is what the Lord, that is what our God is like. Yes in the beginning he made you and I. He helped put us together in our mother's wombs. Yes he does know about our physical, emotional and spiritual needs. Yes he has the power to bring about the right things along our path.

But he not distant. He is not trapped in the sound proof box in heaven. Yelling out instructions to us from the Bible and hearing our troubles as we communicate them back to him in prayer. That is not the full story when it comes to God.

God came down and became one of us. God in the form of his Son Jesus entered the playing fields of life. He put aside his majesty, his glory, his power and took up flesh, put on our jersey and was born into a peasant existence. He learnt a trade, carpentry and worked in it and provided for his family when his Dad passed on. He knew what it was like to be hungry and tired and rejected and depressed and lonely.

And so the Lord is both the perfect coach and the perfect captain. He knows what's best for us and he knows what works and what doesn't. He is aware of what is around the corner and he is willing to travel around that corner with you. He understands the physical demands of life but he knows that we also have a spiritual side as well. And the biggest issue in the spiritual realm is our sins, is our wrongdoing, is our disobedience to God.

And so to do something about that he defeated these opposition forces. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. He was willing to sacrifice his life, his glory, his victory lap, so that we could have our sins forgiven & would no longer be stuck in the mud of sin.

So the Lord is my Shepherd, he is my captain coach, but the Psalm ends with the declaration that he can also be my friend.

For he prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. He will look after me, even when I get in the tightest corner. He will make sure my head gets what it needs as well as the fact that my glass is now never empty. He will not let me down. He will continually give me the good things in life that I need. And he promises to be close, not just for a few moments, or a few years, he promises to be there for ever and ever.

You might put it this way. God, *You prepare a presentation dinner for me, In the presence of my opponents. You give me the trophy of life, & my stubbie overflows. Surely goodness & love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in God's clubhouse forever.*

God is making that offer to us tonight. God is saying that if you want you can have this sort of relationship with me. Not just in the bad times, but in the good times. Not just when your old and grey but when you are young and fit. Not just as some good moral grounding for your kids, but now when you are married and are parents and are grandparents or when you are divorced or single or alone.

3. My Shepherd, Coach & Friend. For that is what this Psalm is all about the Lord being not *a* shepherd, or *the* shepherd, or even a *good* shepherd, but *my* shepherd. The Lord not being a coach, or a captain, but my Captain Coach. The Lord not just a friend but my friend.

This is not some abstract force we are talking about but a relationship, a close relationship. This is not just some concept that affects our mind, it affects our heart and our will and our hands and our lives. This is not just for someone else, this is for me.

The Lord is my Captain Coach. The Lord wants to provide for your needs, physical, emotional, spiritual. The Lord wants to live with you. He wants to join your team. No, no, no. He wants you to join His team. God's team. The winning team.

Because this is God's world. He is the one who started the game of life. He is the one who understands the rules of how it works. He is the one who knows the game plan. And he is the one who sends Jesus to us as our Captain Coach. Along with the instructions, follow him, no matter how tight the situation gets.

For ultimately Jesus plays the game of life to a higher standard than the rest of us. Just read again one of the accounts of his life in the Bible. He taught, but he taught with down to earth illustrations. He lived perfectly, but always seem to attract those who had made a muck of things. He was able to walk on water, heal the sick, reach out to the hurting, care for the lonely.

But ultimately he came to defeat mankind's biggest fiercest opposition, the all black combination of death, sin and the Devil. He came to lead us to life, eternal life. And he did that by dying on the cross to take my sins and your sins on his shoulders. And just when his enemies looked like overpowering him, he came back from death in overtime. Defeating evil once and for all. And ensuring victory for us by leading us to the very gates of heaven.

Thus we need to remember to make Jesus our Captain Coach. We need to be dedicated to following his training schedule, we need keep close to his instructions which we find in the Bible, we need to make him the boss of our lives. For then he will lead us to victory over death

Friends we live in a world full of uncertainty, in a place where planes fly into buildings, where bombs go off in night clubs and restaurants, where war destroys many countries and where cancer & sickness strike at those we love. And tonight God says, you don't have to live that life alone.

So let us remember today to make Jesus our Captain coach. For that is what midweekchurch is all about. We are ordinary men and women who want to be on God's team. Normal guys and gals who don't have all the answers to all of our questions but who think that the Creator of this world probably does have the answers to the really important questions in life.

So we look to him as our shepherd, as our Captain, as our coach, as our friend. Our hope and prayer is that you too might one day be able to say with us, *The Lord is my Captain Coach, I shall lack nothing. He leads me out onto the green playing fields of life, He provides for my thirst, He restores my inner being. He guides me on how to play the game of life the right way For the praise of Gods name. Even though I may be dropped, Even though my team may not make it to the finals, I will not be scared, For He is with me His hand on my shoulder & his camaraderie, they comfort me. You prepare a presentation dinner for me, In the presence of my opponents, You give me the trophy of life, & my stubbie overflows. Surely goodness & love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in God's clubhouse forever.*