

21st July 2024 – Morning Service

Sheep without a Shepherd

Megan Ashmore

Call to Worship

We rejoice in the One who leads us beside still waters and gives us refreshment of soul. Christ our Shepherd shows us the way we should go, so that the name of God will be glorified. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will not be afraid, for the Great Shepherd of our souls is with us. We are never away from the love and mercy of the Lord, and we shall be with him for ever and ever. Amen!

(Based on call to worship from Lectionary Sermons Worship Resources archive)

StF 94 – To God be the glory

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| 1) To God be the glory, great things he has done!
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,
Who yielded his life in atonement for sin,
And opened the life-gate that all may go in: | 2) O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
To every believer the promise of God!
And every offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives: |
| <i>Ch) Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!
Let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!
Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son;
And give him the glory –
great things he has done!</i> | 3) Great things he has taught us, great
things he has done,
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;
But purer, and higher, and greater will be
Our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see: |

Frances Jane van Alstyne

Prayer of Adoration, Thanks & Confession

Almighty, majestic, creator God, we praise and adore you.

How awesome is your power – for you created the heavens and the earth; the waters and the land; the seasons and the days; flora and fauna; providing us with all that we need to live.

How great is your wisdom – for you know exactly what we need before we know it ourselves. You lead us and guide us; provide shelter and rest; offer strength and comfort, and shepherd us all our lives until we are safe and finally home.

How deep is your love – for you sent your only son, our saviour, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our sins. You call us your children and allow us to call you Father.

How boundless is your mercy – for no matter how many times we stray away like lost sheep, stumbling and falling by the wayside, you will listen when we pray to you for forgiveness, and you will set us back on the path of righteousness.

And so we confess our wrongdoing and say sorry for the times we are stubborn, greedy, neglectful, lazy, envious, uncaring..... Holy God, hear our prayer. Sometimes our lives are a mess, because of choices we have made or because of choices others have made. Sometimes our lives are great, and we're kind and generous. Sometimes our lives are great and we forget to be to grateful and humble. We trust that in the jumble of all of this, you are present. We trust that you are with us, walking with us when we stray, nudging us back to the right path, slowing us down when we get ahead of you, and waiting for us when we lag behind. So we thank you, and ask for your forgiveness, and pray that you will stay with us throughout the journey. **Amen.**

StF 530 – To be in your presence

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| 1) To be in Your presence,
To sit at Your feet,
Where Your love surrounds me,
And makes me complete. | <i>Ch) This is my desire, O Lord,
This is my desire.
This is my desire, O Lord,
This is my desire.</i> | 2) To rest in Your presence,
Not rushing away,
To cherish each moment,
Here I would stay. |
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Introduction to the reading

The theme of our service this morning is “Shepherds and Sheep.” The following three readings are on this theme. Firstly a passage from the book of Jeremiah, where the prophet is speaking God’s words to the leaders of Judah; and then Psalm 23 intertwined with verses from our gospel reading today – Mark 6: verses 30 – 34 and 53 – 56.

Reading: Jeremiah 23: 1 – 6

‘Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: ‘Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,’ declares the Lord. ‘I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,’ declares the Lord. ‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Saviour.’

Reading: Psalm 23 and Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures;

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul.

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

But many who saw them leaving recognised them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me;

When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognised Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil;

And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Reflection

Do you know much about sheep? My knowledge is limited to black sheep who produce bags of wool for masters, dames and little boys; and I remember there was once a little lamb that followed its mistress to school one day. I know Old MacDonald had sheep on his farm and that Little Bo Peep wasn't a particularly good shepherdess!

The gospel writer Mark records Jesus as regarding the people as sheep without a shepherd. *"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."*

What did Jesus mean? Let's consider briefly what sheep without a shepherd might be like. Firstly, sheep without a shepherd are prone to wander off, to go astray. Seemingly, a number of factors can cause them to do this – curiosity, the grass being always greener on the other side; the sheep not paying attention to what is going on around them; or being spooked by something, causing them to run any which way to get to apparent safety. There is also the danger of them being deliberately led astray. Secondly, sheep are vulnerable creatures and without a shepherd are unprotected from the dangers of their surroundings, be that deep ravines, uneven paths, robbers, wild beasts, or wolves in sheep's clothing. And thirdly, sheep without a shepherd would not thrive as they should because they struggle to forage for themselves and need constant care and attention.

"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

What did Jesus see as he regarded the people? He saw a large crowd in danger of losing their way. A people oppressed and challenged; a people disheartened and tired; a people hungry and thirsty. He saw a large crowd at risk of being led astray by the temptations of the world; the enticing voices of corruption and the promises of a quick fix. He saw a large crowd exposed to the difficulties that life throws up. He saw a large crowd in need of love and care; comfort and healing. The people were flocking to Jesus having heard what he was doing and saying and he had compassion on them because they were curious. They were seeking relief, healing and comfort; guidance, sustenance and strength; safety, leadership and protection. And Jesus, as the Son of God could offer them that and so much more. *"So he began to teach them many things."*

We're not told what Jesus taught them but I'm sure the words and thoughts of Psalm 23 would have been foremost in his mind. Perhaps Jesus would have told them how as their shepherd he could provide them with everything that was needed to have life in all its fullness: rest in verdant places with an oasis of calm as he carried the burdens of life for them; restoration and renewal as sins were forgiven and relationships re-established; lives repurposed for God; the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and support daily living; the knowledge of the comfort of God's direction and presence; and the blessing of eternal life for all who believe. Perhaps Jesus told or reiterated the parable of the lost sheep – demonstrating how much God loves the children in His flock that He would search diligently until that sheep was brought back into the fold with much rejoicing. Maybe he reminded them that he is the Good Shepherd who would lay down his life for them; or perhaps this was the opportunity to share with them the kingdom values through the parable of the sheep and the goats. (I appreciate that according to our bibles these parables come later than our reading today, but if you've got a good story you tell it more than once!!)

Also in Jesus's mind would have been the words of Scripture, of the prophet Jeremiah, who admonished the leaders of the day for not being the shepherds they were expected to be. *"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the Lord.* God is lamenting the destructive effect of bad leadership of His chosen people. As He sees them scattered in all directions, confused and undisciplined, the promise is made to gather them back to their pasture under the care of shepherds who will tend them. *"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Saviour."*

Jesus, "The Lord Our Righteous Saviour," was offering to be a shepherd for the people in the gospel story. Jesus, "The Lord Our Righteous Saviour," is still offering to be a shepherd for us today. Are you needing to rest? Do you seek comfort, strength, forgiveness or renewal? Do you want someone to carry your burdens, protect and feed you? Or are you wanting guidance on the path you are following? Let Jesus be your shepherd.

In her book "The Smile of Love" Joyce Huggett includes a meditation by the Jesuit, Fintan Creavan:
As I walked one evening among the yellowing leaves, I met the Lord Jesus. And he looked at me. I asked him where he was going. His eyes said, "Come and See." I followed him then (Him whom my soul seeks) through hills and paths and gates, by fields and farms, hedges and streams. People flocked to him, crowded him in, willing his hands to open blinded eyes and clean leprous skin, to bless, caress, restore a withered soul. And stretching out to me he smooths my creasing cares away, removes the burden of guilt and fear; Howling winds cringe to his fingertips, my wildest storms mastered. No-one has spoken, cured, commanded, loved as has this man. My heart is stirred. Him, him alone would I follow. You turned and beckoned: "Come!"

The twenty third psalm has been sung in many different forms since David wrote it. The hymn "The King of Love My Shepherd Is" was written in 1868 by Henry Williams Baker, an Anglican clergyman. In this hymn we also catch glimpses of the Good Shepherd who carries the sheep on his shoulder as he brings it home. It is a hymn of commitment as we acknowledge our trust in God, who will lead us safely all the days of our lives.

StF 479 – The King of love my shepherd is

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| 1) The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
And he is mine for ever. | 4) In death's dark vale I fear no ill
With thee, dear Lord, beside me
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross before to guide me. |
| 2) Where streams of living water flow,
My ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow
With food celestial feedeth. | 5) Thou spread'st a table in my sight
Thy unction grace bestoweth;
And O what transport of delight
From thy pure chalice floweth! |
| 3) Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid,
And home rejoicing brought me | 6) And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never:
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
Within thy house for ever. |

Henry Williams Baker

Reflection

The events of the last few verses of our reading from Mark's gospel this morning happened after Jesus and his disciples had crossed back over the water. After their time spent teaching and feeding the crowds "Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray." But later that night, while still alone with God, Jesus saw the disciples struggling against the wind. So he went to them saying, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." With their storms calmed they were able to reach the other side.

Just read these two lines of the meditation again:

*And stretching out to me he smooths my creasing cares away, removes the burden of guilt and fear;
Howling winds cringe to his fingertips, my wildest storms mastered.*

Jesus, "The Lord Our Righteous Saviour," sees our struggles and takes them to himself.

And so they landed. The people recognised them and quickly brought to Jesus all those who were sick that he might heal them. Here we see another aspect of shepherding.

Now the sheep have become the shepherds as they lead others to Jesus. Are you blessed with good health? Do you have sufficient time to rest? Are you in a position to share your resources with others? Do you know the joy of living life with Jesus as your friend and Saviour? If the answer is yes, then consider that God might be calling you to be a shepherd for someone else. Is there someone you could lead to Jesus that they might feel his gentle touch on their lives?

Let us pray: **Like Sheep Without a Shepherd (Sarah Geringer)**

When we are like sheep without a shepherd, you are still watching over us, Lord, though we are scattered, vulnerable, confused and helpless, as easy prey for the enemy of our souls. You gather us back to you and lead us into battle against evil you have already overcome. Jesus, when you looked at the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd, you had compassion on them, and told your disciples the harvest is great, but the workers are few, and you asked them to pray for the Father to send more workers into his fields. May you guide us in our own humble journeys of dependence that we may be sent out as workers in the fields of so many who need to be gently guided back to you. **Amen.**

After Jesus had sent the disciples away in the boat, he went up on a mountainside to pray. Jesus needed time to be shepherded by God, his father. As sheep and shepherds, we can come to God in prayer through Jesus and bring to him the concerns of our hearts. But as we do we need to be aware that we may well be a part of God's answer and that He may lead us out of our comfortable pasture and along a more rugged path. Before we pray, we will sing a hymn that reminds us that we are not to seek an easy life but strive to do God's will, knowing that in His love and by His strength we can walk His way rejoicingly.

StF 518 – Father hear the prayer we offer

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| 1) Father, hear the prayer we offer:
Not for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength that we may ever
Live our lives courageously. | 3) Not for ever by still waters
Would we idly rest and stay;
But would strike the living fountains
From the rocks along our way. |
| 2) Not for ever in green pastures
Do we ask our way to be;
But the steep and rugged pathway
May we tread rejoicingly. | 4) Be our strength in hours of weakness,
In our wanderings be our guide;
Through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be there at our side. |

Love Maria Willis

Prayers of Intercession

God who lovingly shepherds all you have created, we bring to you those of your flock in need, trusting that you will be present in every place of pain and suffering, offering opportunities for transformation and wholeness.

We pray for the world-wide church, seeking to be workers of the harvest, yet sometimes struggling against apathy; hostility and persecution. We pray for all who act as shepherds of your flock in our nation; our country; our district; circuit, and in our community. Grant them peace and rest; patience and strength as they seek to serve you. We pray for our worshipping congregations. Draw us all closer to one another as we draw closer to you. May we have that same compassion for others that you demonstrated wherever you went and however you were feeling.

We pray for the earth, confessing the relentless demands we place on its resources. We lament the green pastures given over to urbanisation; the still waters polluted by rubbish and sewage; the paths, fields and woodland lost to the ravages of human want. Show us how to begin to restore your beautifully created world, that all may live in harmony.

We pray for our nation as we move forward with a new Prime Minister and leading party. May all in authority be mindful of you, Lord God, that your people may be led in ways that promote unity, love, respect, tolerance, understanding and grace. For we are – one and all – the Shepherd’s flock.

We pray for ourselves and for those we know who are in need: for those who are ill in body, mind or spirit; for those who are stressed and overburdened; overworked or unemployed; for the lonely, hungry, tired sheep of your flock. And in a moment’s silence, we bring our concerns to God...

With the crowds of Galilee our hearts are lifted with joy at your presence among us, for we know you have the words of eternal life. May we join with you in acts of shepherding, loving as you love, tending as you tend, ready always to expand the boundaries of the fold, so that all may find a place in your flock. In the name of Christ, The Lord Our Righteous Saviour, **Amen.**

The Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

The rousing hymn “Guide me O thou great Jehovah” was written by the Welsh hymnwriter William Williams. He compared the Christian life to the Israelite’s trek through the wilderness. We may not know the route by which God is leading us, but we humbly count on His guidance. (*The One Year book of hymns*)

StF 465 – Guide me O thou great Jehovah

- 1) Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
Hold me with thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven,
Feed me now and evermore.
Feed me now and evermore.
- 2) Open thou the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream shall flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer, Strong Deliverer,
Be thou still my strength and shield.
Be thou still my strength and shield.
- 3) When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, Songs of praises
I will ever give to thee.
I will ever give to thee.

William Williams

Offering Prayer and Blessing

Father, we bring you the gift of our lives, the offering of our service and our commitment to love. We bring you gifts from what you have given us and ask that you help us to live our lives for Jesus, to lead others to you. In Jesus’ name, we pray. **Amen**

“The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame.” May we all know the presence of God the Father; the love of Jesus our righteous Saviour; and the strength of the Holy Spirit, today and forever. **Amen.**