

A service for 22nd November, 2020

Call to worship: Psalm 100

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. Amen.

The author of our first hymn, Brian Doerksen is a Canadian singer-songwriter and worship leader. He wrote this hymn at the end of the darkest and lowest season of his life in the summer of 1977, shortly after moving to London. We shall sing hymn number 24, 'Come, now is the time for worship'.

Come, now is the time to worship.

Come, now is the time to give your heart.

Come, just as you are to worship.

Come, just as you are before your God, come.

One day every tongue

Will confess you are God,

One day every knee will bow.

Still, the greatest treasure remains

For those who gladly choose You now.

Come, now is the time to worship © Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

Let us pray.

Creator God, Living Word, the Ancient of Time, we are here to offer our worship and adoration, for you are holy, gracious and compassionate. You formed heaven and earth and made every living thing. You have blessed us from our earliest days, giving us the wisdom to use the earth's resources and the awareness of what is good and bad, so we may fulfil our responsibility to act as stewards of this planet.

However, your love for us is so great that, when we failed to honour our duties to you and our stewardship, set ourselves against you, instead of punishing us as we deserved, you took our mortal form and lived among us as Jesus Christ. His life, death and resurrection have not only showed us in words and deeds how we should live, but redeemed us from enslavement to sin and offered us everlasting life through faith in him. Hear us, O Lord, as we sing your praises joyfully and pray to you in faith.

Thank you, Lord, for all that you give us and do for us, for we know how you have blessed us from our earliest days. Thank you, too, for the good things we enjoy, for experiences and opportunities that have fulfilled and enriched us and for people who have brought guidance, light, love and joy into our lives, but most of all thank you for your amazing grace that sent your Son, Jesus Christ, as our Saviour, guide and friend.

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you and our neighbours in thought and word and deed, that our lives are marred by things that we have said and done which have hurt others and angered you. We recall, too, times when we have failed to help people who were in distress, trouble, or need and, even though we seek to justify doing nothing, we know how hard-hearted we have been. Merciful God, help us change our ways and forgive us in the beautiful name of Jesus.

Loving God, we believe that through your grace our sins have been forgiven and we may follow you, freed from the burden of our guilt. May we serve our neighbours with faithful and caring hearts, so that our lives bring honour to your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we say:

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.

Today is the Feast of Christ the King, so it seems appropriate to include a favourite hymn of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey. We shall sing hymn number 319, 'Christ triumphant, ever reigning!'

**1. Christ triumphant, ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King,
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,**

Hear us as we sing: *Chorus*

*Yours the glory and the crown,
The High renown, the eternal name.*

**2. Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of Man on earth!**

Power and majesty concealing

By your humble birth: *Chorus*

**3. Suffering Servant, scorned, ill-treated,
Victim crucified!**

Death is through the cross defeated,

Sinners justified: *Chorus*

**4. Priestly King, enthroned for ever
High in heaven above!**

Sin and death and hell shall never

Stifle hymns of love: *Chorus*

**5. So, our hearts and voices raising
Through the ages long,**

Ceaselessly upon you gazing,

This shall be our song: *Chorus*

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We come to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Faithful God, most gracious and holy, we thank you for your redemptive love that has sustained us throughout our lives and which we are confident will bring us through these trying times. Help us to reveal the light of your love by the way in which we care for neighbours both nearby and far away, so we can bring the light of hope and comfort to drive away some of the darkness that has enveloped the world for the last eight months. Grant us all we need to answer your call, but in situations where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

Spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness, we pray for an end to warfare, terrorism and persecution that result in death, injury, destruction and displacement of people in so many countries. Guide and inspire national leaders to negotiate agreements that helps

people co-exist in harmony and reach out to victims of man's inhumanity to man. Guide us all in the way of peace, so our lives reflect what we ask for the world, for we know that peace begins with us.

Lord of all, we pray for the churches in our Circuit, in neighbouring circuits, and indeed the World Church. Help us to continue sharing the gospel message throughout lockdown by whatever means are available and help us to address any issues that have arisen during the last eight months. Unite us in spirit, love and truth, so our words and actions reveal Christ as the risen Lord and Saviour of the world.

Redeemer God, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit. Let them feel your presence throughout their time of need and may they find healing, renewed strength, comfort and hope. We pray for people living with a dementia, their families and carers for whom the current pandemic has added greatly to the problems they face. Bring them support, comfort, reassurance and help.

We remember, too, neighbours both in care homes and the community who are lonely, or troubled by depression and anxiety, for people who are in debt, or who are worried about losing their jobs, or businesses. We pray for everybody whose relationships have broken down and for others who mourn the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will fully understand their needs.

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship, although that is difficult at a time of social distancing, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love and comfort.

Heavenly Father, grant national leaders the wisdom to adopt policies to protect their peoples until COVID19 is brought under control. May we be given the common sense to follow the guidance we receive, even though it may not suit our inclinations, so that we all play our part in ending the spread of this virus.

We offer our blessing upon the NHS, scientists and keyworkers as they continue their struggle to bring an end to this threat to humankind, accepting the risks they face daily. Keep them safe in their duties and help them to find ways of preventing or treating this virus. Let us feel that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can find comfort in your saving grace.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us not only to lead Christ-centred lives but to share the abundance of your love with a broken world, that sorely needs it. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

We continue our worship as we sing a version of the Twenty-third Psalm by Revd. Sir Henry Williams Baker, vicar of Monkland in Herefordshire. 'The King of love' first appeared in the appendix of 'Hymns Ancient & Modern' in 1868, but although Revd. Baker was the chairman of the hymnal's compilers, the hymn appeared by merit alone. Hymn number 479, 'The King of Love my Shepherd is'.

**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.**

**2. Where streams of living water flow,
My ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow
With food celestial feedeth.**

**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.**

**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.**

**5. Thou spread'st a table in my sight;
Thy unction grace bestoweth;
And O what transport of delight
From thy pure chalice floweth!**

**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 {1821 – 1877}*

The Old Testament reading is Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 11 to 16 and 20 to 24 For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

'I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.'

Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them:

'See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.' Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 25 verses 31 to 46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right,

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited

me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Then the righteous will answer him,
'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

The King will reply,
'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left,
'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

They also will answer,
'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

He will reply,
'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Sydney Carter in 1965 to be the theme song of Christian Aid's Beat and Folk Festival and it was recorded on a single by Sydney Carter and the Notting Hill Folk Group. Although it was not intended to be a hymn, its sentiments have led it to be adopted as one. Hymn number 256, 'When I needed a neighbour, were you there?'

1. When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a neighbour, were you there? Chorus:

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

2. I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty, were you there? Chorus:

3. I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there? Chorus:

4. When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a shelter, were you there? Chorus:

5. When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there? Chorus:

6. Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there,

Wherever you travel, I'll be there, Chorus:

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,
I'll be there?*

© Sydney Carter {1915 -2004}

Sermon: 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.' Matt 25:40

From ancient times, rulers in the Near East often styled themselves as shepherds of their people, for in agricultural societies, the image of a shepherd tending his sheep was

a powerful one, emphasising the strength, courage and wisdom of the king against the relative helplessness of his people. Unfortunately for the Jews of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdom, their kings were a very mixed bunch, with pitifully few following God's ways and caring for ordinary people. This explains why Ezekiel wrote critically of the weak rule of the kings of Judah and their disastrous effects on his fellow-citizens. Six hundred years later, Jesus used the same imagery in John chapter 10, because of the rule of corrupt Herodians and religious establishment, the Sanhedrin.

The prophet Ezekiel was born during the reign of King Josiah, after whose rule the land went into decline as neighbouring powers threatened. The Assyrian Empire collapsed, but was replaced by the mighty Babylonian Empire that threatened Judah and conquered much of it before Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed in 597 B.C.. Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah and also preached of the need for Judeans to turn once more to God, or face the consequences. He was deported to Babylon with King Jehoiachin and the last group of Jews from the Holy City. However, Ezekiel did not just predict the destruction of a faithless people, he also preached that God would restore the remnant himself and would establish a just society under a new David. The fat sheep would no longer dominate the thin sheep in the new order, for God's Chosen One would tend them and be their shepherd.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us how he will separate the good from the bad when he comes in glory, as a shepherd distinguishes between sheep and goats – it was not such an easy thing to do in the Near East at the time of Jesus, for the native sheep of Judah bore a striking resemblance to goats, unlike the fluffy ones we see in this country. The criterion on which judgement will be made has nothing to do with status, or scholarship, or being religious, or self-righteousness: people will be judged by the way they honour the second part of the Greatest Commandment: 'to love your neighbour as you love yourself'. It is clear that the truly righteous may not even know that they have served Jesus by helping those in need, but that is precisely what Jesus is asking his followers to do.

When Jesus as Shepherd said, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me', they asked when they had done anything to him. His reply is illuminating: "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.'" In effect, we are called to continue what Jesus had declared he had come to fulfil: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Fine words are not enough; we are Christ's earthly hands and, just as he brought practical love, so we are called to do the same.

The wonderful thing is that we are free to choose to serve as Jesus did, for we enjoy God's favour through grace. Be assured, God loves us to the uttermost, despite our failings and sinfulness. We do not have to try to win God's love, but instead can respond to the knowledge that God loves us enough to have sacrificed his Only Son, whom he loved, to restore us to him. When we experience such love, how can we not love in return? It was practical love that inspired early Methodists, sending them among the 'rude masses' in the shambling squalid towns of the early Industrial Revolution, with a gospel of hope.

Notice how the Shepherd image does not only involve caring for the helpless, hurt, stray and weak, but shows strong leadership. The Church is called, therefore, not only to look to the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized of this country and further afield, but to be a voice to the world. We are challenged to stand up for a world where justice and mercy are extended to all, which means courting unpopularity at times. Jesus willingly did so, because he cared for all-comers, particularly the poor, foreigners, social rejects and downtrodden. Sometimes, it is tempting to remain silent, to nothing, just so we may have a quiet life, but that's not Christ's way. Only by standing up for our beliefs can we make a change. Here is how one man did just that.

John Pounds was born in Portsmouth in 1766. His father worked in the Royal Dockyards, so it was natural that John should have been apprenticed to a shipwright on his twelfth birthday. A promising career ended three years later when John fell from high on a ship in dry dock and broke nearly every bone in his body. He was taken home in a wheelbarrow, because the family could not afford medical fees. The boy took three years to make some kind of recovery, though he was bent almost double from his injuries. During those years he taught himself to read, write and to do mathematics so, although he was no longer able to work at the dockyard, he learned to make shoes.

In 1803, he bought a shop with a living room above the workshop and made a good living, even though the shop measured five by two and a half metres. When John's brother, a sailor, was unable to look after his crippled son, John took him in. He made special boots for the boy that – in time – cured his crippled feet. However, that wasn't enough for John, who taught him the trade and made him a partner.

This experience led John to consider the plight of the street urchins who begged and stole in Portsmouth's streets. He decided that they needed more than the basics of life, so he enticed them into his workshop with the promise of a baked apple or a baked potato, so that he could teach them. Despite the size of his shop, John taught up to forty of these rough children at a time, without recourse to corporal punishment and no child was said to have left unable to read, write, or do simple sums. In addition, he taught them nature study, history and the Scriptures. He nursed them when they were ill and begged respectable clothes, so that some could accompany him to church. He put a sign above the shop door, 'Little vagabonds preferred' and accepted only children whose parents could not afford to pay for their education.

Others heard of his 'Ragged School' and the idea spread. By the mid-1800s there were more than six hundred Ragged Schools in England and Wales and the President of the Ragged School Union was no less than Lord Shaftesbury, through whom universal education became law in 1871. He must have seen value in the Ragged School movement, for he remained President for thirty-nine years. By the time John Pounds died, on 31st December, 1839, he must have rejoiced that from such a small beginning a mighty movement had grown. Despite all the restrictions of lockdown, let us seek to find ways to help the vulnerable and lonely. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written in 1993 by Bernadette Farrell a Catholic hymn-writer whose works are ecumenical and profound. Hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness.'

**1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
Light for the world to see. Chorus:**

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice. *Chorus:*

3. Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others,

Shared until all are fed. *Chorus:*

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of living stone. *Chorus:*

5. Many the gifts, many the people,

Many the hearts that yearn to belong.

Let us be servants to one another,

Making your kingdom come. *Chorus:*

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.