

A service for 25th April, 2021

Call to Worship: Isaiah chapter 40 verses 10 and 11

See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 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. Amen.

Our opening hymn was published in 1834 by Revd. Henry Lyte, the Rector of Lower Brixham in Devon. It is a fine paraphrase of Psalm 103 and was sung at the wedding of our Queen and the late Duke of Edinburgh. However, However, Henry Lyte was not satisfied, because he wanted to write something that he could leave behind to 'live to the glory of God'; a hymn that would not be ephemeral. In 1847, two months before his death, he wrote 'Abide with me'! Let us sing hymn number 83, 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven'.

1. Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;

To his feet thy tribute bring;

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,

Who like thee his praise shall sing?

Praise him! Praise him!

Praise the everlasting King!

2. Praise him for his grace and favour

To our fathers in distress;

Praise him still, the same for ever,

Slow to chide, and swift to bless.

Praise him! Praise him!

Glorious in his faithfulness.

3. Father-like, he tends and spares us;

Well our feeble frame he knows;

In His hands he gently bears us,

Rescues us from all our foes.

Praise him! Praise him!

Widely as his mercy flows.

4. Angels in the height, adore him,

Ye behold him face to face;

Sun and moon, bow down before him,

Dwellers all in time and space.

Praise him! Praise him!

Praise with us the God of grace!

© Henry Francis Lyte {1793 – 1847}

Let us pray.

Living God our heavenly Father, we come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the universe to life, but sustain all living beings and raised Jesus from the grave. By doing so, you have reconciled sinners like us to you and you have broken the power of death, offering us eternal life.

Lord Jesus Christ, you brought our salvation by suffering death on the cross at Calvary to break the hold of Satan over humankind, atoning for the sins of the world. All honour and glory are yours, faithful Son of the Father.

Sacred Spirit, you are our guide, courage, strength and inspiration in our discipleship. Without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come to us now and breathe new life into us.

Mighty Lord of life and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you have overcome the old order of sin and death through Jesus Christ. Because of him all things are made new and so we come to praise and glorify your holy name.

Almighty God, thank you for the many blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for people who guide, love and inspire us; for your undying love, despite our sinfulness. Forgive us when we have strayed from the path you set before us, when we are selfish and self-righteous, unforgiving and judgmental. Pardon us when our faith is weak and we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our pride and loveless-ness. Breathe new life into us, renew and restore us, so our lives may reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Re-kindle the embers of our faith into a mighty flame, so we may your kingdom.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more. May we serve our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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.

The theme of our service today is 'I am the Good Shepherd', so we shall sing Stuart Townend's version of the Twenty Third Psalm. Hymn number 481, 'The Lord's my Shepherd'.

1. The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;

He makes me lie in pastures green,

He leads me by the still, still waters,

His goodness restores my soul. *Chorus*

And I will trust in you alone,

And I will trust in you alone,

For your endless mercy follows me,

Your goodness will lead me home.

2. He guides my ways in righteousness,

And he anoints my head with oil;

And my cup – it overflows with joy,

I feast on his pure delights. *Chorus*

3. And though I walk the darkest path –

I will not fear the evil one,

For you art with me, and your rod and staff

Are the comfort I need to know. *Chorus*

© Stuart Townend (Born 1963)

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others.

Loving God, at Eastertide we recall how you sent your Son to heal our broken world and to offer everyone who would follow him sure hope of salvation and wholeness,

even amidst the world's brokenness. We believe that all things are possible for you, so whilst we offer ourselves to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of those around us, we turn to you in situations that are beyond our power, asking that you will reach out in mercy to rectify the results of mankind's cruelty, exploitation, pride and indifference which results in so much suffering around the globe.

We pray for the Church both local and the World Church. Unite us in the power of the Holy Spirit, so we may act as good shepherds and carry the gospel light to this conflicted and sin-darkened world. Bring us safely through this pandemic and renew our calling.

Lord, as we reflect upon our environment and all the issues it faces, such as pollution and diminishing resources, we ask you to inspire and guide those who are striving to keeping earth habitable for future generations; we pray for people who campaign for a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including the distribution of coronavirus vaccines to impoverished countries; We bring our concerns for those who strive for our wellbeing, thinking especially of members of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers at present, as they try to bring us through this time of trial and anguish. Keep them safe and grant them success in their endeavours.

Heavenly Father, reach out to those of us whose hearts are broken because of the COVID19 pandemic, those who have endured loneliness, those who are suffering from long-COVID and everybody who is afraid and can see no way forward. In the name of the risen Lord Jesus, enfold us with your love, comfort and strengthen us. Renew our flagging spirits and bring us through this time of spiritual darkness into the light of your salvation.

We bring a prayer for people who suffer: the victims of prejudice, oppression, injustice, terrorism and conflict. As we recall how Jesus Christ suffered persecution, injustice, torture and execution for our sakes, teach us and our leaders to act justly and to care for our neighbours, especially those whom we find it difficult to like. In Jesus' name, may the whole earth be transformed by mercy and rejoice in hope.

Lord, we remember people whose memories and faculties are diminishing because of a dementia, their families, friends and carers who find this time of pandemic is adding to their distress. Grant them the support and hope they need to keep going. Have compassion on people whom we know who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in need or any kind of trouble; neighbours who live with depression or whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. In a time of reflection we bring you names of people for whom we are especially concerned

Help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but enfold them with your love, so they may find comfort, healing, courage and peace.

Abba, Father God, bless us all, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us to lead good lives. Above all, teach us to share your abundant love with all-comers, so we may act as good shepherds, in the name of our risen Lord, to whom be glory for evermore. Amen.

Francis Rowley was in his third year as pastor of First Baptist Church, North Adams during a revival of faith in 1886 when at the end of an evening service, his assistant, the remarkable young Swiss singer and musician, Peter Bilhorn suggested that the pastor ought to write a hymn which he would set to music. That same night the words, 'Can't you sing the wondrous story?' came to the pastor's mind. Peter Bilhorn was as good as his word and composed a tune. Ira Sankey

modified the Pastor's words and added a chorus, though the usual setting nowadays is 'Calon lan' or 'Hyfrydol', not 'Wondrous story'. Hymn number 323, 'I will sing the wondrous story'.

**1. I will sing the wondrous story
Of the Christ who died for me,
How He left the realms of glory
For the cross on Calvary: *Chorus:*
*Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story
Of the Christ who died for me,
Sing it with his saints in glory,
Gathered by the crystal sea.***

**2. I was lost; but Jesus found me,
Found the sheep that went astray,
Raised me up, and gently led me,
Back into the narrow way: *Chorus:***

**3. Faint was I, and fears possessed me,
Bruised was I from many a fall;
Hope was gone, and shame distressed me;
But his love has pardoned all: *Chorus:***

**4. Days of darkness still come o'er me;
Sorrow's paths I often tread;
But the Saviour still is with me,
By his hand I'm safely led: *Chorus:***

**5. He will keep me till the river
Rolls its waters at my feet;
Then he'll bear me safely over,
Where the loved ones I shall meet: *Chorus:***

© Francis Harold Rowley {1854 – 1952}

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 10 verses 11 to 18

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Robert Walmsley, a Mancunian jeweller and a Sunday School teacher at a Congregational church. It speaks of agape, God's boundless, amazing love for all-comers, sinful though we are. Hymn number 443, 'Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,'

**1. Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
Tender and true;**

**Out of the heart of the Father above,
Streaming to me and to you;
Wonderful love
Dwells in the heart of the Father above.**

**2. Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,
Joyfully came;
Came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
Sharing their sorrow and shame;
Seeking the lost,
Saving, redeeming at measureless cost.**

**3. Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
Why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
Home, weary wanderer, home!
Wonderful love
Dwells in the heart of the Father above.**

**4. Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,
Come and abide,
Lifting my life, till it rises above
Envy and falsehood and pride,
Seeking to be
Lowly and humble, a learner of thee.**

© *Robert Walmsley {1831 – 1905}*

Sermon: “I am the Good Shepherd” John 10: 11

Marsh and Baxter’s used to claim they used every part of the pig, except its squeal. In a similar way, Jews relied on sheep almost as extensively: for meat, lanolin and wool; for temple sacrifices and even rams’ horns found their way into liturgical practice: they are hollowed out to make a horn, called a shofar. Shofarim are blown in synagogues to celebrate Rosh Hashanah – Jewish New Year. Therefore, sheep were a very important part of the Jewish economy from the days of Abraham to the time of Jesus.

It is interesting, therefore, that, even though in Psalm 23 King David described God as our Shepherd, and several important Biblical figures began as shepherds, or keepers of sheep, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David, in Jewish society at the time of Jesus shepherds were considered unimportant and were at the bottom of the social heap. Why then were shepherds held in low esteem? To begin with, their occupation made them unable either to observe the Jewish hygiene and food laws, which meant that they were ceremonially unclean. Consequently, even had their work allowed them to go to a synagogue, let alone to the Temple, they would not have been admitted. Naturally, the Pharisees and the middle classes in Judah looked down on shepherds as outsiders. Their standing was further diminished by the tendency of some shepherds to consider other people’s sheep as their own and also because they were deemed to be such unreliable witnesses at Jewish courts of law that their evidence had to be corroborated by somebody else. However, it is worth noting that, in Luke’s nativity story, the shepherds were the first to receive the Good News that the Messiah had been born, so God had clearly not rejected them, however humble their standing in society.

Shepherds often led chaotic family lives, as they would sometimes need to lead their flocks to remote areas where the pasture or water was good, or they would have to spend much time caring for sick animals, or seeking strays, because they were held to

account for any missing sheep. They had to accept simple food, harsh weather and primitive lodging as part of their working conditions – added to which they often faced danger from wild animals or attacks from shepherds in other areas. They travelled light, using a heavy cloak to protect them from the elements, a staff to control the movements of their sheep, a rod or sling-shot to ward off predators and a bag with food for the journey.

Despite their lowly status, shepherds featured much in the Hebrew Bible, so Jesus used them in the allegory in John's gospel. He compared the **'bad shepherds'** from **Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel** with himself, **'the Good Shepherd'**. The bad shepherds were most of the kings and spiritual rulers of Israel and Judah before the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians and until the time when the peoples of Judah were exiled in Babylon. They were self-serving, luxury-seekers, who ignored the condition of those whom they were supposed to be in charge of. They even allowed rich land-owners to steal the land of peasant farmers, or even to kill them. The prophets said that their faithlessness had led the Jews, God's flock, to disaster – slavery in Babylon, as a result of which the bad shepherds would be severely punished.

How, then, is Jesus the Good Shepherd? At the time of Jesus, shepherds in the Middle East usually led their sheep into a communal pen at night, where several flocks would be gathered, so that they could be protected by as many shepherds as possible. In the morning each shepherd would call to his flock by name and they would respond to their master's voice. Jesus said he would call his flock by name and they, recognising his voice would follow him. John's gospel records that, among others, ***Jesus called Philip, Mary Magdalene, Thomas and Simon Peter by name – after which their lives were transformed.*** The very fact that Christ calls us individually by name means that we are not just part of the flock, but each of us is precious to him.

Certainly, during his earthly ministry, Jesus fed and healed many people, both of which are essential for living life to the full. Unlike many former kings and high priests, he was concerned for the poor, the marginalized and rejected – the stray and tainted sheep of the flock. Unlike the bad shepherds, he shunned comforts and possessed little. Jesus said that his flock will live in God's grace and will receive eternal life. However, the price of this full life was high indeed: the Good Shepherd would have to lay down his life, which Jesus did at Calvary. Other, would-be-Messiahs, balked at such a step, but Jesus loves us so much that he gave his life for us. ***The Greek word for lay down, 'tithemi',*** tells us that the laying down was voluntary – God did not constrain Jesus to die – hence his agony of mind in the Garden of Gethsemane. Consider Isaiah's imagery as he described the fate of the Messiah in chapter 53: ***'We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.'*** The Good Shepherd loves us so much he offered no resistance to his executioners – even though he could have called down an army of angels to save him.

In ***John chapter 21***, the risen Lord commanded Peter with these words: ***'Take care of my sheep'***. In other words, Peter was to copy the example of Jesus, so that he could become the Shepherd of the Church. Our reading from Acts showed how Peter was transformed by the Holy Spirit from the one who denied Jesus three times to a fearless evangelist. He and John had healed a lame man at the Beautiful Gate in the temple in Jesus' name, so they had been taken for questioning by the Sanhedrin. Far from denying Jesus, Peter declared that he had healed the man in Christ's name and

boldly declared that the Sanhedrin had killed him, yet God had raised him from the tomb. He added, **‘Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.’** He wasn’t exactly hiding his light under a bushel was he? As a result, the Sanhedrin was astonished, perplexed about how to deal with him and, ultimately found themselves powerless to stop him spreading the Good News.

Besides calling Peter to be the shepherd of the Church, Christ told the disciples, **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** Thus, if we want to follow Jesus, we must be active in our pastoral care, but lest we fall into the trap of exclusivity, he also said, **‘I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.’** *Therefore, our Good Shepherd calls us to love and serve all people in his holy name, for only by doing so can we heal our broken world and fulfil the Great Commandment – to love God wholeheartedly and our neighbour as ourselves. Amen.*

We shall conclude our worship with a clarion call to evangelize by Canon Edward Burns. It was written in 1968 as part of a challenge to write evangelical hymns in the diocese of Blackburn. Hymn number 418, ‘We have a gospel to proclaim,’

1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour’s name:
We sing his story, tell his worth.
2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
Not in a royal house or hall,
But in a stable, dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.
3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,
For all he loved his life he gave.
4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.
5. Tell of his reign at God’s right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.
6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.

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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.