

A service for 26th April, 2026 Easter 4 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 150

Praise the LORD! Praise God in his Temple; praise him in his mighty heaven. Praise him for his strength; praise him for his greatness. Praise him with trumpet blasts; praise him with harps and lyres. Praise him with tambourines and dancing; praise him with stringed instruments and flutes. Praise him with loud cymbals; praise him with crashing cymbals. Let everything that breathes praise the LORD. Praise the LORD! Amen.

Our opening hymn is number 302, 'He has risen', by Noel and Trish Richards and the late Gerald Coates, who founded Pioneer, a network of evangelical churches here and abroad.

He has risen,

He has risen,

He has risen,

Jesus is alive. (twice to begin)

**1. When the life flowed from his body
Seemed like Jesus' mission failed.**

**But his sacrifice accomplished
Victory over sin and hell. (Chorus)**

**2. In the grave God did not leave him,
For his body to decay;
Raised to life – the great awakening
Satan's power he overcame. (Chorus)**

**3. If there were no resurrection,
We ourselves could not be raised;
But the Son of God is living,
So our hope is not in vain. (Chorus)**

**4. When the Lord rides out of heaven,
Mighty angels at his side,
They will sound the final trumpet,
From the grave we shall arise. (Chorus)**

Let us pray.

God our Redeemer, you are the source and maintainer of life throughout the universe, so come to worship you with awe and joy as we remember and celebrate the resurrection of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who triumphed over sin and death for our sakes. For love of sinners like us, Jesus came into the world to share our lives and to bring Good News in both words and deeds. He also came as the Paschal Lamb to atone for the sins of the world at Calvary. By means of his resurrection, Jesus offers us eternal life through his grace alone, by faith in him, not by anything we can do, nor anything deserve. Amazing God, may your Holy Name be praised for evermore. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.

Loving Lord, thank you for this beautiful, self-sustaining planet that you set us on, for all the good things that we enjoy: for opportunities to enrich our lives as we serve you and our neighbours and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all we thank you for continuing to love us even when we know we are faithless, loveless and disobedient.

Merciful God, we confess that we don't live as you want us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly. We certainly do not always love our neighbours as we love ourselves and, although we often try to excuse our faithlessness and disobedience, we know how deeply we grieve you and add to the world's brokenness. Forgive us, Lord and help us change our ways.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Loving Lord, warm and mould our hearts and guide us to lead Christ-centred lives, rather than self-centred ones. Help us obey your call to serve our neighbours with compassion and generosity of spirit.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that you have not only pardoned us but invite us to follow Christ Jesus, unburdened by guilt. May the Holy Spirit enable us to love and serve you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully, so our lives honour you in the beautiful name of our risen Lord Jesus. 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.

Our second hymn was written in 1987 by Noel and Trish Richards, Noel's career being inspired by Graham Kendrick when the latter performed a concert at Colston Hall, Bristol when Noel was a teenager. We shall sing 'All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord', hymn number 293.

**1. All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord;
Who can compare with the beauty of the Lord?
For ever he will be the Lamb upon the throne:
I gladly bow the knee and worship him alone.**

**2. I will proclaim the glory of the risen Lord,
Who once was slain to reconcile us to God.
For ever you will be the Lamb upon the throne:
I gladly bow the knee and worship you alone.**

© Noel (b 1955) & Trish Richards (b 1960)

We come to our prayer of intercession which I am going to base on the 23rd Psalm. Let us pray

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

God the Good Shepherd, thank you for giving us this wonderful, fruitful and self-sustaining world and for blessing our lives in so many ways. Help us to share our blessings by serving our neighbours as your earthly hands, doing good as often as we can to as many people as we can for as long as we can. However, sometimes the situations we face are far beyond our powers, but not yours, for nothing is impossible to you. Therefore, when the best we can offer is inadequate, warm the hearts of people who possess such wisdom and power, so they may bring about healing in our broken world.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters

Lord, thank you for the peace and security we enjoy, for we know that so many countries are troubled and needy. We pray for aid to reach the victims of natural disasters and where global warming has led to shortages of food. We ask a special

blessing upon work being done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide our neighbours with desperately-needed aid.

He restores my soul; he leads me in right paths for his name's sake.....

We remember people who are sick, lonely, bowed down by the pressures of life, failed relationships and bereavement, for all who live with a dementia, their families, friends and everybody who cares for their needs. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns for them to you, the Good Shepherd, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know their needs and reach out to them.

Gracious Lord, where it is possible let us be part of the answer to our prayer, by being sensitive to their needs and offering them practical support. Enfold them in the warmth of your love that they be healed, comforted and receive hope, courage and a lasting peace.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me: your rod and your staff – they comfort me.....

Lord, thank you for the peace and security we enjoy, for we know that so many countries are riven with conflict. We pray for the peace of the world, particularly in Ukraine, Palestine and Iran, asking that a spirit of respect and understanding may grow among all nations and all peoples, so peace and justice may be established and prevail. We pray for the governments of the world's nations, that they may govern justly and with mercy for without justice and compassion there can be no real peace. In your loving-kindness remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice, that they find justice and healing and can rebuild their lives in hope and security. May peace begin in our hearts, so we may bear a Christian witness and offer peace for hostility and loving-kindness for hatred.

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

Lord, you provide us with a feast of love that we may share its abundance with our neighbours. Therefore, we pray for this church, churches in our Circuit, neighbouring circuits and, indeed the whole Church of Christ, that we learn to live in the unity of the One Spirit and take Good News to all peoples in words and deeds of love. Unite us in outreach and help us bear the gospel light to a world darkened by materialism, sin and want. Grant us the faith we need to answer our call to serve the risen Lord.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care, help us lead Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant love with friends and strangers alike, so we glorify the name of our risen Lord Jesus.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Amen.

Our next hymn is a version of the 23rd Psalm, which was written and composed by Stuart Townend in 1996. This is how it happened in his own words: 'I was actually working on a different song at the time, which after several hours' hard work was not going well... I happened to flick to this psalm in my Bible while taking a break, a simple melody popped into my head, and the whole thing was written in ten minutes (something I wish as a writer would happen more often to me!). Hymn number 1008, 'The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want'.

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 are with me, and your rod and staff
Are the comfort I need to know. *Chorus***

© Stuart Townend (Born 1963)

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 10 verses 1 to 10

Jesus said,

“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore, Jesus said again,

“I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn written in 1886, when Francis Rowley was pastor of First Baptist Church, North Adams. He was assisted by a remarkable young Swiss singer and musician, Peter Bilhorn who, after a Sunday evening service, suggested that Pastor Rowley 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, entitled ‘Wondrous Story’. We, however, are going to sing it to “Hyfrydol” / “Calon Lan”, a Welsh melody! 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}

Sermon: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full,” John 10:10

John was the latest of the gospels and was believed to have been written in Ephesus at the end of the First Century A.D., possibly as late as the nineties. It gives a much clearer statement that Jesus is God's Son and Messiah and has the seven “I am” declarations: ‘I am the Bread of life’; ‘the Light of the world’; ‘the Gate’; ‘the Good Shepherd’; ‘the Resurrection and the Life’; ‘the Way and the Truth and the Life’ and, finally, ‘I am the True Vine’. All of these are significant truths, but it is worth noting that the “I am” is also a claim, for when Moses asked God's name, he was told, ‘I am who I am’ – ‘Jah Weh’, so Jesus was pointing to his divine Sonship.

Our passage is set in Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus restored sight to a man who had been born blind. The Pharisees' opposition and demands that he should declare who and what he was clearly frustrated Jesus, so he not only indicted them for their spiritual blindness, but for being bogus leaders of the Jews. Their insistence that salvation could only be achieved by scrupulously observing all 613 Rules of Righteousness – the letter of the Law – without considering its spirit actually led people away from what God wanted. He told what is usually described as a ‘parable’, but which is really a ‘proverb’ that expresses a compressed thought rather than a simple comparison.

David, the greatest of Israel's Kings, described God as the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23, and indeed, he was a shepherd for his father Jesse when Samuel anointed him King. Several important Biblical figures began as shepherds, or keepers of sheep, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. As a result, Jewish kings often styled themselves as shepherds of the people and prophets such as **Isaiah**, **Jeremiah** and **Ezekiel** used the term ‘**bad shepherds**’ for corrupt 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. Jesus described himself as the ‘**Good Shepherd**’, as compared with the Pharisees, the ‘bad shepherds’ who were leading Jews away from God.

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. These pens had high walls of impenetrable and often prickly branches with a single entrance or gate. Shepherds had a watch rota in which some would sit around a fire at the entrance to keep watch and see off any predators, whilst their companions and the sheep rested. 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.

His claim, **'I am the gate for the sheep'**, is highly significant. The sheep pen represents God's kingdom where people live in security, unity and rest peacefully, that is they experience the full blessing carried in the word 'Shalom'. The thieves and robbers who try to enter the pen by scaling the walls represent false prophets, bogus messiahs and the religious leaders who would not accept Jesus' good news. What our Lord is saying is that only through him can we enter God's kingdom and we do so through faith not by observing the Rules of Righteousness and 'works'. We are made righteous through faith in Jesus that results in our sins being forgiven, so our response will be to serve God freely out of gratitude for his grace, rather than under compulsion to pay for our misdeeds, a kind of penal service.

When Jesus said, **'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full,'** he did not mean they would gain materially, nor live longer but would live in the abundance of God's shalom. Certainly, during his earthly ministry, Jesus fed and healed many people, both of which are essential for full - living. Unlike 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 offered his flock life in God's grace and 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. Christ loves us so much that he offered no resistance to his executioners – even though he could have called down an army of angels to save himself.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has become the gateway to God's kingdom, offering shelter to all-comers. 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. Thus, if we want to follow Jesus, we must be active in pastoral care, but lest, like the Pharisees, 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.'** Through Jesus salvation has been extended to Gentiles as well as Jews. Christ calls us to love and serve everybody in all their diversity in his holy name. **Only by doing so can we start to heal our broken world and fulfil Christ's Great Commandment – to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves. Amen.**

We shall conclude our worship with a hymn written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Their hymns are usually set to old Scots ballads, but this is sung to a French carol melody, 'Noel Nouvelet'. We sing hymn number 251, 'Jesus Christ is waiting'.

**1. Jesus Christ is waiting,
Waiting in the streets;
No one is his neighbour,**

All alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am lonely, too:
Make me, friend or stranger,
Fit to wait on you.

2. Jesus Christ is raging,
Raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals
And real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry, too:
In the kingdom's causes,
Let me rage with you.

3. Jesus Christ is healing,
Healing in the streets,
Curing those who suffer,
Touching those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I have pity, too:
Let my care be active,
Healing, just like you.

4. Jesus Christ is dancing,
Dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred
He, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I should triumph, too:
Where good conquers evil,
Let me dance with you.

5. Jesus Christ is calling,
Calling in the streets,
'Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet.'
Listen, Lord Jesus,
Let my fears be few:
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.

© *John L. Bell (B 1949) & Graham Maule (B 1958)*

Benediction

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