

A service for 8th May, 2022 – Easter 4 (StF)

Call to worship: Isaiah chapter 40 verse 11

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 written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and is set to a Gaelic melody, like many of their hymns. We sing the first three verses of hymn number 28, 'Jesus calls us here to meet him'.

1. Jesus calls us here to meet him

As, through word and song and prayer,
We affirm God's promised presence
Where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise;
Praise the Son who calls us friends;
Praise the Spirit who, among us,
To our hopes and fears attends.

2. Jesus calls us to confess him

Word of life and Lord of all,
Sharer of our flesh and frailness,
Saving all who fail or fall,
Tell his holy human story;
Tell his tales that all may hear;
Tell the world that Christ in glory
Came to earth to meet us here.

**3, Jesus calls us to each other,
Vastly different though we are;
Creed and colour, class and gender
Neither limit nor debar.**

**Join the hand of friend and stranger;
Join the hands of age and youth;
Join the faithful and the doubter
In their common search for truth.**

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

Let us pray.

Glorious heavenly Father, Lord of all creation, whose Word created our universe and whose compassion sustains life, you entered our world as Christ Jesus, to share our lives and experiences, to bring Good News to all peoples in words and deeds. He died upon a cross of agony and shame to reconcile fallen humanity to you, the Father of all, by breaking the power of sin and death. Through his resurrection, Jesus offers us everlasting life through his grace, not by anything we deserve, or can do to earn it. We come to offer you all our praise, adoration and thanksgiving in our worship today, for all honour and glory are yours by right.

Loving Lord, accept our wholehearted thanksgiving for this beautiful, self-sustaining world that you made for us, for all the good things that we enjoy: for people who have guided, inspired and loved us, but most of all we thank you for redeeming us at such a tremendous cost. Thank you for Jesus. Amen.

Let us set ourselves right with our Lord by confessing and seeking forgiveness of our sins. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.

Merciful God, we confess our failure to live as you want us to, for we know we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly and we sometimes we disregard your call to serve others in Jesus' name, particularly the distressed and needy. In a time of reflection we bring to mind occasions when we have failed to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, by unkind words or actions that hurt them, shames us and fills you with grief and anger.

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

Lord of righteousness, help us turn away from wrongdoing and back to you.

Soften our hearts and guide us with your truth. Bring us into the light of your love as we seek your forgiveness for the sins we have committed and the good we have neglected to do.

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 call us to follow Christ Jesus as his disciples, freed from the burden of guilt. May the power of the Holy Spirit guide and perfect our service, so our lives may we be a beacon to draw others to know, love and serve our risen Saviour. Amen.

We shall say 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.

We shall sing 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 never set out to write a new musical version of this psalm – it seems very brave, or very arrogant, to think you can improve on the existing hymn version, which has been loved and sung by millions of people for so long! 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 481. '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)*

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

Loving God, Jesus' passion, death and resurrection remind us that you care for us with boundless, unconditional, redemptive love. Grant us faith, wisdom, compassion and steadfastness to serve you as you desire. Do not let us not close our eyes and hearts to injustice, prejudice or neglect, but instead bid us strive courageously for the wellbeing of everyone. Teach us to share your love with our neighbours, nearby and far away.

Almighty God, our Saviour commanded us to love one another as we love ourselves, yet our failure to live in peace is heart-breaking, especially as we witness the suffering of Ukraine as the country faces intensive attacks by Russia. Lord, we pray for an end to the fighting, for a negotiated peace that will endure in which Ukraine will be able to remain a free democracy and the Kremlin's plans are frustrated.

In your mercy Lord, reach out to the Ukrainian people, from President Zelenskyy and his advisors, the armed forces and militia, the civilians, mainly women, children, the elderly and disabled, who are trapped in cities that are being bombarded by Russian forces and those who are seeking refuge beyond Ukraine. May they remain courageous and undaunted, so they will be able to resist Russia's might. We pray that friendly countries will provide support not only during the war, but for the time it takes to rebuild Ukraine from the ashes of destruction. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees, who are fleeing to friendly countries. Bless those who offer shelter and support for as long as it is needed and may their compassion ease the trauma of the refugees.

God of truth and righteousness, Guide the rulers of all nations in the ways of mercy and justice, so we may live in peace. We pray for victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice. May they receive the help, resources and encouragement they need to be healed in body, mind and spirit, so they can face the future with hope.

We pray for organizations like All We Can and Christian Aid that are working to provide desperately-needed aid to Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen, where millions are facing starvation, because of famine. May governments also reach out to offer support, even if they disapprove of the regimes in those stricken lands.

Lord of healing, we pray for who are sick, infirm, troubled or lonely, in particular all whose conditions have deteriorated during the past two years because of the restricted treatments during the pandemic. May they begin to receive the help and support they need to be returned to health and strength. Reach out to them in mercy, offering them comfort, hope and peace in their time of need.

We remember, too, all who have lost loved-ones during the past two years, particularly all who have been unable either to mark their passing or to mourn because of restrictions at funerals and gatherings. We pray for you to reach out to neighbours who are suffering from the physical, social, psychological and economic effects of the pandemic, not least of all, for children whose education and general wellbeing have been seriously harmed during the past two years. In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them in loving-kindness:

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as our sympathy, but we ask you to embrace everybody for whom we pray with the warmth of your love, from which flows healing, courage, comfort and lasting peace.

Holy God, we pray our church and other churches in our district and, indeed for the World Church. Unite us in spirit, love and truth as we emerge from the dark shadow of coronavirus. Help us learn new, effective ways of meeting the needs of our communities, ways that demonstrate the goodness and grace of Jesus, our risen Lord.

Abba, Father God, may the news that neither sin nor death has the final word inspire us in our discipleship. Keep our hearts warm and teach us to share the abundance of love with which you bless us, so our lives glorify your name through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The New Testament reading is Acts chapter 9 verses 36 to 43

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him,

“Please come at once!”

Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said,

“Tabitha, get up.”

She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 10 verses 22 to 30

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. The Jews gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

Jesus answered,

“I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Pastor Francis Rowley, during a religious revival in 1886, when he was in his third year as 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 Bilhorn would set to music. That same night the words, ‘Can’t you sing the wondrous story?’ came to the pastor’s mind. The opening was later changed and we don’t usually sing Peter Bilhorn’s melody in this country, but we have a fine hymn to sing: ‘I will sing the wondrous story’, number 323.

**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: “*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*” **John 10:27**
The first two books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha tell of the struggle of a small group of Jews to preserve their identity and faith a hundred and seventy-five years before Christ was born. I don't know how many of you have read these books, but their stories are probably the bloodiest in the Bible. It is not for anyone with a rich imagination and a weak stomach! King Antiochus IV Epiphanes was of Greek descent, but ruled Syria and was determined that Jews should cease to worship God – at the pain of torture and death. All symbols and worship was prohibited and in 168BC Antiochus desecrated the Temple by entering the Holy of Holies and carrying off silver and gold vessels used in worship. The Maccabee family led a successful revolt that eventually freed the Jewish nation from Syrian tyranny and allowed the Temple to be re-consecrated by Judas Maccabeus in 165BC. Indeed, the Temple's rededication is still celebrated by Jews at Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights, every December.

Our reading from John relates how Jesus went to Temple to celebrate Hannukkah, not because it was an obligation of faith, but because it represented a new beginning for those who'd remained faithful to God throughout prohibition and persecution. Two months earlier, during the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus had clashed with Pharisees in Temple. Consequently, he had barely arrived before he was surrounded by leading Jews, who

demanded he declare himself as the Messiah, or not. Their hostility was compounded by their failure to see he is indeed God's Son, because he didn't match their image of what Christ should be: in their opinion Jesus was certainly neither a Judas Maccabeus, nor a King David, who would free them from Roman occupation; nor was he another Moses who would minister to God's elect, as they considered themselves. After all, he not only ate with sinners and tax-collectors, but healed Gentiles and Samaritans, whom Jews hated with a passion.

Jesus replied he had already told them, but they didn't believe in him. Even his miracles had not been accepted as signs of Messiahship, because the Jewish establishment lacked the faith to accept Jesus' challenge of Good News. Jesus used an image of himself as the Good Shepherd, as he accepted he would never gain their approval, declaring, 'but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.'

However, he added words of reassurance to those who had accepted him. 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.' Notice how Christ uses the present tense: the promise is for the present, not just the future. When John wrote his gospel, the Church was starting to feel the weight of Roman persecution, so readers of his gospel would have taken comfort that they had already received Jesus' blessings. It is important for all of us to remember we share this assurance. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who will bring us through life's trials, if only we trust in him and listen to him when he calls us by name.

Never forget how precious we human beings are to God. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote that we were bought at a price: a truly grievous price. Would God let us down or abandon us after making such an investment for our redemption? As disciples, we are journeying with Jesus and have his assurance that nothing shall snatch us from his grasp.

The reading about Peter and Dorcas / Tabitha (which is Aramaic for gazelle) shows how Peter, who'd denied Jesus three times in his weakness, performed a similar miracle to when Christ raised Jairus' daughter. As Jesus had done before, Peter prayed and used almost identical words, 'Tabitha cumi!', not 'Talitha cumi' and Tabitha made a complete recovery. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter gained faith to truly follow Jesus and triumphed over his earlier failures and weakness. Through this story, we may also share the hope that, with the Spirit's power and warmed by divine love, we'll journey in faith from the fallible beings we are now to what Jesus would have us be.

Christ didn't promise that anybody who followed him would receive preferential treatment in life, nor that our route would be smooth. However, I know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who will guide us until we reach green pastures and quiet waters at our journey's end. It is evident that we

not only share the Shepherd's love, but many have a deep desire to find ways of serving him, by serving our neighbours faithfully and joyfully. Whatever problems life throws at us, let us maintain our faith in the Good Shepherd and his promises, for this is the Good News of Paul to the Roman churches:

'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Amen.

Our closing hymn is Charles Wesley's 'Give me the faith which can remove' which is number 661.

**1. Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the child-like praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,
And all my simple soul devour.**

**2. I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this alone;
To spend, and to be spent, for them
Who have not yet my Saviour known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.**

**3. My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinners' friend.**

**4. Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine;
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a zeal like thine;
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.** © Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Benediction

Heavenly Father, by whose glory our Saviour Christ was raised from the dead, strengthen us to walk with him in his risen life; and may the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit be with us now and evermore. **Amen.**