

Worship intended for Providence / St John's Methodist Church (StF)

3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2020 - Easter 4

**Call to Worship: John Ch. 10 vs. 14 & 15**

"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. Amen.

*We shall sing our first hymn which was a favourite of George Carey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, though we are using "Guiting Power", rather than his preferred setting, "Christ Triumphant". We shall sing hymn number 319, 'Christ triumphant, ever reigning,'*

**Let us pray.**

Glorious God our Redeemer and Good Shepherd, we offer you our worship with joyful hearts, as we continue to celebrate the resurrection of your Son Christ Jesus. Jesus came into the world to share our lives bringing us Good News in both words and deeds, but more than this, he was willing to become the one perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world and break Satan's power over us. His resurrection offers us eternal life through his grace alone, not by what we deserve or our good works. Amazing God, you are wonderful and amazing, so may your Name be praised and glorified for evermore.

Thank you, O Lord, for this beautiful, self-sustaining world, for all the good things that we enjoy and which give value and meaning to our lives; thank you for people who have guided us, inspired us and loved us, as well as challenges that have tested us and helped fashion our characters. Yet, as we praise you for your transformative, boundless love, we, we feel ashamed of our failings and sinfulness, for we know what a terrible price Christ Jesus paid at Calvary for our sinfulness.

Therefore, merciful God, we reflect upon our hard-heartedness, our unwillingness to forgive and to seek reconciliation, our expectation of being loved by others, even when we don't show love in our dealings with neighbours. For our words and actions that have caused upset and pain we are truly sorry and pray that you will help us to change our ways. Forgive us, Heavenly Father and help us to exchange our self-centred lives to Christ-centred service.

God, our Good Shepherd, you hear our prayers and we believe you have forgiven your stray sheep and have returned us to your fold. May your Holy Spirit help us to serve you and our neighbours joyfully and faithfully from now onward, in the beautiful name of Jesus, our risen Lord. 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.

**Offertory**

*We shall sing on of Charles Wesley's great hymns, written in 1749 and amended by older brother John, who omitted the first two verses, which implied that Charles was encountering a time of uncertainty and depression – you see it is not just a modern phenomenon! Hymn number 661, 'Give me the faith which can remove'.*

***We shall now bring to the Lord our God our concerns for neighbours nearby and far away in our prayers of intercession.***

Living Lord, we offer our praise and thanksgiving to you, the Good Shepherd and our Saviour. Whilst we celebrate the beauty of the world, we also recognize its brokenness, much of which stems from humankind straying from the path you want us to walk, through our pride, foolishness, greed, spite and cruelty. In response to your boundless love for us, help us to serve our neighbours as your earthly hands, so we may answer Jesus' call to service.

Lord, we pray for the peace of the world, real peace, in which a spirit of respect and understanding is created among the nations and peoples. We pray that the governments of the nations learn the value of negotiation and compromise when disputes arise, so they can resist the temptation to take up arms. We pray for our enemies and those who wrong us that we may bear a Christian witness and offer them peace for hostility and kindness for hatred. We remember, too, all who suffer as a result of warfare, terrorism and persecution throughout the earth: people whose lives have been changed by injuries to body, mind or spirit; those who have lost loved ones and especially refugees forced from their homes and whose search for safety often leads to them being exploited, or put in harm's way. Grant all for whom we pray practical support and encouragement so they may rebuild their lives and find both security and hope for the future..

We pray for everybody who ministers to and cares for the suffering, the friendless and the needy, that they may fulfil the Lord's purposes in their work and outreach. We pray for the deliverance of victims of the coronavirus COVID 19 and we grieve with families who have lost loved ones in this pandemic. Heavenly Father, many of us are filled with anguish about the suffering of people here and abroad that we hear about in the Media. Our courage and faith are being tested by the bleakness of both the gloomy news and the strains of the lockdown. In your mercy, take away our doubts and fears. Reassure us that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we all may face an uncertain, even threatening future, with grounded hope.

We certainly remember with gratitude all doctors, nurses, ancillary staff, care workers, key-workers and kind-hearted volunteers in the United Kingdom who are potentially putting themselves in harm's way as they seek to help Coronavirus patients and vulnerable members of society. Lord, guide, protect and bless them in their work.

Loving Lord, hear our prayer for the NHS which we know is under immense pressure. May it receive the support and equipment it needs to heal the sick and to grow to meet the changing needs of our society. We offer our thanks for the healing rendered at our local hospitals, especially New Cross, Russells Hall and The Corbett, as well as for our GPs and health workers in the community. Give them the determination and courage to cope with the pressures they are facing and may they find blessing and safety in their work.

God our inspiration and guide, bless, inspire and aid governments, scientists, researchers and authorities as they seek to deal with the effects of COVID 19 and to protect their populations by their policies. May those policies prove effective in controlling the disease. Hear our prayer for countries that lack welfare systems to combat this virus, and grant that international support will soon be forthcoming, despite the needs of better equipped nations that are preoccupied with COVID 19 at home.

We remember people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit, those bowed down by the pressures of life, failed relationships and bereavement, for all who live with a dementia and everybody who cares for their needs. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns to you, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know their needs and reach out to them. ....Gracious God, where it is possible, let us be part of the answer of our prayer for those around us, by being sensitive to their needs and offering practical support, but hold everybody for whom we pray in your loving arms so they may find comfort, courage, healing, hope and above all else your peace which passes all understanding.

Lord hear our prayer for the whole Church of Christ, that professing one Lord, one faith and one baptism, all whom Christ has called may learn to live in the unity of the one Spirit and take Good News to all peoples. May our lives display the redemptive power of Christ's Good News, so that we are beacons of generous love in a world darkened by individualism and self-interest.

We thank you and praise you for all your saints in this world and the next. Grant them the fullness of your eternal joy. Strengthen us by their fellowship, so we may follow their examples and guide other people to know and love Jesus the risen Lord.

Abba, heavenly Father, keep us, our friends and families safe in your care. Bring us through these troubled times, trusting in your grace and sharing the love you give us in such abundance with our neighbours, thereby honouring you in all we do and say. Amen.

*We shall continue our worship as we sing Stuart Townend's lovely version of the Twenty-Third Psalm. Hymn number 481, 'The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;'*

## **The first reading is Acts chapter 2 verses 42 to 47**

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Amen.

## **Our Gospel reading is John chapter 10 verses 1 to 10**

"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 are using the words of our next hymn from "Hymns and Psalms", as the "Singing the Faith" version omits the Shepherd, which I only discovered the first time I used it during a service on the same theme! It amused the congregation at least. We shall sing, "Jesus the Lord said, 'I am the Bread,'" the text of which follows:*

**Address: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full," John 10:10**

It is interesting that, even though King David described God as our Shepherd in Psalm 23, and although 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. Sheep were a vital part of the economy at the time, yet those who tended them were at the bottom of the social heap. Why were shepherds held in such low esteem? To begin with, their occupation made them unable to observe either the Jewish hygiene or 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 to be their own and also because they were usually deemed to be unreliable witnesses at Jewish courts of law. 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 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.

***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.

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. Perhaps he was indicating that they would be freed from scrupulously observing the 613 rules of the Torah, that Pharisees insisted were essential for one to be righteous, but which made ordinary Jew's lives very difficult. 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 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 the irony of 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 that 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. He also told his 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."** The reading from Acts chapter 2 tells us how open-hearted and generous the early members of the Church were, even though some cynical commentators suggest that it was more an idealized picture than reality. I would argue that, had they not demonstrated the qualities listed by Dr. Luke, then the early Church would have died at birth, for without generous, even sacrificial love what is our faith all about? Thus, if we want to follow Jesus, we must be active in our pastoral care, one for another, 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, as our Good Shepherd indicated that he would extend salvation to Gentiles as well as Jews, ***Christ calls us to love and serve all people in his holy name, for only by doing so can we start to heal our broken world and to fulfil Christ's Great Commandment – to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself. Amen.***

*We close our worship with a hymn which I wrote for a service at Amblecote Wordsley in 2004, 'Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord of heav'n,'.*

1. Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord of heav'n,  
Good Shepherd ever lead us:  
You died, so we might be forgiv'n –  
And, raised, from death you've freed us.
2. Good Shepherd, call us by our name  
And lead us in your kindness;  
O Lord, who healed the dumb and lame,  
Now cure our inner-blindness!
3. You gave your life to save your sheep –  
Redeemed us from our sinning:  
Good Shepherd, this great hope we keep;  
From death comes new beginning.
4. O feed us with the Living Bread,  
Your love, like wine, outpouring:  
Good Shepherd, with you at our head,  
We'll follow on, adoring.
5. Good Shepherd, we shall trust you still,  
However life may treat us.  
Though worldly powers may seek us ill,  
Yet nothing can defeat us.
6. All praise be yours, Almighty Lord,  
The Three-in-One, all-glorious.  
On earth – in heav'n – you are adored:  
Lead us through life victorious!

*{M. Rider 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2004 for Amblecote Methodist Church on 2<sup>nd</sup> May. Sung to "Dominus regit me" StF479}*

***Benediction***

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.