

Christ Church, Ipswich

Sunday 25th April 2021

Fourth Sunday of Easter

with Neil

Hello, I hope all is well. This week, our readings are Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18.

Let us worship God together:

Call to worship

The Lord is my good shepherd – and yours.
The Shepherd knows you –and he knows me.
Come and walk with him beside still waters.
Come and have your soul restored.

A prayer of approach

Safe in the knowledge that we are loved,
we come to the Good Shepherd
seeking succour for our souls.
Let not the wolf snatch our thoughts and scatter them,
for our minds belong to Jesus,
and our hearts are open to him.

Amen

R&S 712 All people that on earth do dwell

All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
him serve with mirth his praise forth tell;
come ye before him and rejoice.

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make;
we are his folk, he doth us feed;
and for his sheep he doth us take.

O enter then his courts with praise,
approach with joy his courts unto;
praise, laud and bless his name always,
for it is seemly so to do.

For why: the Lord our God is good,
his mercy is for ever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

William Kethe (Publ. 1560-61) altd. Psalm 100

A prayer of adoration

Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd;
 always there, always watchful.
 Your fold is the space you hold for us,
 where we know we are loved.
 Although dangers surround us,
 and in foolishness we may stray,
 you have our back.
 So many sheep, yet you know us all by name.
 Lord, we adore you, our Good Shepherd. **Amen.**

A prayer of praise

Lord, a year ago your house was not a fold in which we could meet.
 Confined to our homes,
 we prayed as a silent wolf prowled the world,
 a pandemic that threatened us all.

We thank you for watching over us,
 and for those of us who were safely delivered.
 It was a testing time, Lord, but yet there was community.

We thank you for the proof that your Church has no walls,
 as we learned to reach out to one another
 and still to worship – but in different ways.
 We thank you for those in our communities who had been taken for granted,
 overlooked, not considered of great importance,
 but on whom we came to rely to save lives.

We thank you that our values were tested, and that we saw what really matters.
 Good Shepherd, who knows suffering and sacrifice beyond our imagining,
 we thank you that we are here today, enfolded in your love. **Amen.**

Old Testament Reading Psalm 23 (NRSV)

The Divine Shepherd

A Psalm of David.

¹The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
 for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff—
 they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 my whole life long.

Gospel Reading**John 10:11-18 (NRSV)***Jesus the Good Shepherd*

¹¹ 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

Reflection

In today's reading from John's Gospel, we find that Jesus makes his self-identification as the good shepherd crystal clear: '*I am the good shepherd*' (10:11). This positive image of Jesus as the good shepherd draws on the imagery of today's Psalm, Psalm 23 and other texts, and as we know, it is a familiar symbol for God and Jesus in both the Old and New Testaments. Here, Jesus makes a contrast between the shepherd and a hired hand, and the ways in which they care for the sheep. So in this phrase 'I am the good shepherd', Jesus applies the image of a shepherd which had long been in use to himself, and actually, he embodies the image and now this image speaks to the wonderful possibilities of relationships as he knows his sheep by name (10:3).

Thinking for a moment about the history of this image, in a pastoral society like ancient Israel, sheep and shepherds were often used to describe the relationship of God with his people. Our Psalm reading this morning is, of course, a perfect example of this: '*The Lord is my shepherd*'. Or we could mention another familiar Psalm, Psalm 100 where we read that '*we are his people, the sheep of his pasture*' (verse 3). Also in ancient Israel, good leaders, like David, were 'shepherds of the people' (2 Samuel 5:2). Jesus draws on these perspectives, along with on how the image is used by the prophets, and especially by Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 34, Israel's leaders, both good and bad, are depicted as shepherds. In fact, in John 10, Jesus' image is both pastoral/relational and political. We might then wonder who is it in his parable who are referred to as the 'hired hands' who care nothing for the sheep? With justification, we may well assert that many leaders, both then and now, could easily fit the bill! In Jesus' own context, while their identity remains a bit of a mystery, given the content of the previous chapter (especially 9:40), it might be the Pharisees, and/or perhaps other Jewish leaders who Jesus has in mind. In our own context, well, I'll leave you to discern who might be in sight if we are trying to contemporise this passage today!

More positively, we notice that Jesus is amazingly well qualified to be 'the good shepherd'? We see that he draws attention to his readiness to risk his own life to protect his flock on three occasions (10:11, 15, 17). When he mentions 'laying down' and 'taking up' his life, Jesus is speaking of the shepherd's daily habit of lying across the gate of the sheepfold at night to protect the flock and rising each morning to lead them to pasture (10:17-18). We might also reflect on the wider presentation of John's Jesus and think about the shape of God's grace that is sent into the world as the 'Word made flesh' before being exalted on the cross and drawing 'all people' towards Father God (John 1:1-18; 12:32). It is this kind of shepherd-like care that enables shepherd and sheep to know each other in a way that reflects Jesus' relationship with the God he calls 'Father'.

What I really love about Jesus' parable here is the way that this shepherd is good enough to see further than his beloved flock: *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd* (10:16). '*Other sheep*' here clearly refers to those which graze on pastures that lie beyond the boundaries of respectability and race. In John's Gospel, they are represented by the Samaritan woman, the critically ill, the disabled poor and the woman caught committing adultery. Praise God that there is room for them too in the '*one flock*'!

As we seek today to live meaningfully in relationship with God and in community with others, which as we know can be difficult and more lately, this has been especially so, may we remember the blessings of belonging to God and one another and may we rebuild relationships where necessary so that others might experience the security and joy that flows from being known and loved and cared for. May we deeply value our relationships with God, with one another and also with those around us today who might be regarded as the *'other sheep'*. Safe and secure in the love of the Good Shepherd, may we live loving and caring for others, as we have opportunity, so that they might also be drawn towards our good and gracious God. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord, we do not know what it is like to be a sheep
 but we do know what it is like to need a shepherd:
 to feel that someone cares,
 to know there is someone who will listen to us –
 someone we can trust;
 someone who understands us
 and wants the best for us.
 Lord, we can be stubborn like sheep
 and we can be afraid and vulnerable.
 Please meet us where we are today
 in all our hopes and longings
 and be our Good Shepherd.
 Amen.

Hymn The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want

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.

*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.*

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.

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.

Stuart Townend
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Our prayers of intercession

As we entwine our hands in prayer,
 so we entwine our love, our care, our thoughts,
 our concerns for those whose names and situations we pray for.

As our hands entwine, we see the world is linked,
so our prayers are for the world and all its people.

O Lord our God you are the shepherd of your sheep;
of those who are faithful and stay near,
of those who wander and are far off,
of those who know you and those who don't,
of those who have heard your name
and those for whom your name is a mystery yet to be revealed.
Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

For those who are lost or alone or lonely,
struggling through life with no one to guide them,
to protect and shelter them, to care for and sustain them;
for those without family, without friends, without roots, without homes.
Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

For those with no food and no money to buy it,
for those who day to day struggle to feed themselves and their family
and who feel they have nowhere to turn and no one to turn too;
praying especially for those in our own country who need to use food banks,
that they may find there the support they need and life line in these times;
praying too for the people of Brazil,
especially those in the favelas where over half have barely enough food for one meal a day.
Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

For those who follow you in peril of their lives,
fearful of arrest and persecution,
and thinking at this time especially of those in China for whom worship is not easy.
Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

For peoples of all faith who seek peace and harmony
but are challenged with sectarian views and violent extremists,
who fear for their lives and their communities and their very existence.
Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

For those who struggle with damaged relationships and domestic violence,
those who feel trapped and who see little option but the life they have and the path it has taken;
that someone somewhere, will show them a better way, a safety net,
a safe house and home and way of life.
Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

For those whose lives have been turned upside down by the Covid pandemic,
through illness itself,
through isolation, fear, hardship, unemployment, debt, overwork, stress or grief;
may the world pull together to help and support and vaccinate
and may all see and know that until the world is vaccinated none of us are safe.
Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

We pray for the people and situations whose images and pictures and words
 have imprinted themselves on our lives this last week,
 we see them now in our minds eye and for them all in a moment of quiet we pray.
 Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

We pray for those close to us who are in any kind of need,
 remembering especially those who mourn and those who are unwell.
 We think of those who have recently received medical care and for those waiting for treatment.
 We pray for Irene and Bill Gale, thankful that Irene is now back at home, for Netty Waters as she has her
 cataract surgery next Wednesday, for Phyllis Davies, currently in residential care, and for Joan, Chikondi
 and all those among us with health concerns.
 Shepherd of the sheep,
we bring our prayers for them all.

O Lord our God, you are the shepherd of your sheep,
 bless all those for whom we have prayed
 and bless us, each one of us as we seek to help those we can,
 those we encounter as we live out our lives.
 May our feet walk for you, may our hands touch for you,
 may our voices speak for you
 and may our ears hear the needs of those who speak. **Amen.**

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. 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.**

A sending out prayer

Response after each bidding: Help us to follow the 'good shepherd'.

Lord, when we feel lost and confused...
 When we are tired by caring for others...
 When we're tempted by the wolves...
 When we're enjoying good pasture and rest...
 Send us out to be faithful sheep and... **Amen.**

The Blessing

May the blessing of the Lord, who is our good and gracious Shepherd, be upon us and all those we love,
 this day and always. **Amen.**

The Grace

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
 be with us all, for evermore. Amen.**

With love and best wishes,
Neil