

A service for 21st April, 2024 – Easter 3 (StF)

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 loved by our late Queen. 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, so in 1847, two months before his death, he wrote 'Abide with me'! 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.

Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we have come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the universe to life, but sustain all living beings in your grace. We come in awe that throughout our history you have given us stewardship over the world and have sought to draw us into a relationship in which we are your earthly children, a holy priesthood.

Heavenly Father, you sent Jesus to share our mortal flesh so he could be the pattern of how you want us to live. He came as the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and when you raised Jesus from the grave you reconciled sinners like us to you and you broke 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 our sins. 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, 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. Amen.

When I say ‘Lord, in your mercy,’ please respond, ‘Hear our prayer’.

Almighty God, hear and accept our thanks for the many blessings we receive from you, for your undying love and faithfulness. Lord, forgive us when we have yielded to hopelessness and fear, for surrendering to despair when the path of discipleship is challenging. Pardon us when our faith is weak and we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Merciful God, forgive us when our love for you and our neighbours is marred by our selfishness and pride. Forgive us for words and deeds that wound, rather than heal and for our indifference to the needs of other people. Breathe new life into us, renew and restore us so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer**

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 its needs. When I say, 'Your kingdom come', please respond, 'Your will be done'. Let us pray.

Most gracious and amazing God, we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live as well as in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the world's brokenness, more often than not as a result of human pride, selfishness, cruelty, avarice or indifference. We recognize that you have blessed us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part in heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that while our powers are limited, no situation is beyond yours, so we ask you to intervene by warming the hearts of people who possess power and influence to act for the wellbeing of all.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

We pray for our church, the churches in our Circuit, neighbouring Circuits and, indeed, the World Church. In the name of the risen Lord, guide us how best to serve our communities and help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day; to be a light of hope in a self-centred, sin-darkened world. Remember, in your mercy, our leadership teams, granting them vision, good judgment and courage in taking our churches forward in a sustainable way. Grant all of us faith to face the future with confidence and to serve you steadfastly, following your Son's example.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done**

Heavenly Father, we pray for peace to be established in the world, for an end to fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza / Palestine, Haiti and Somalia and for peaceful resolutions to disputes between other countries before they escalate into warfare. Teach national leaders to seek the ways of mercy and justice through which lasting peace may be established, to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression. Grant them all the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives. Grant them healing in body, mind and spirit.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit, for all who are who are living with a dementia and those who care for them. We pray for everybody who is in any kind of need or trouble. May they receive the care and support they require and may they also experience your presence in their suffering. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help.....
Lord, may we be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we offer friendship and practical support to them, but we pray that you will enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they receive healing, hope, courage and enduring peace.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

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.

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.

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}

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

The Brierley Hill – based 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. Instead, he called on his Father to forgive his killers. Amazing grace indeed!

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. 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 not only in worship, but in our pastoral care, too. You might think it ought to be simple to love fellow Christians, but the history of the Church is littered with divisions and heinous cruelty, so we have no room for complacency. If divisions occur, we must try to heal them through prayerful conversations.

However, our calling is not just to love our church here, but to take Good News to people of different backgrounds, attitudes, politics, creed and gender, for Christ's arms are wide open to embrace all who will turn to him, not just those we approve of. John Wesley and early Methodists around here may well have despaired about the lifestyles of Black Country folk in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, but thank heavens they recalled Jesus' words, **'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.'** Their patient, faithful ministries transformed the lives of many here and worldwide and we are heirs to their mission. **Therefore, our Good Shepherd calls us to love and serve all-comers 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.