

Trinity United Reformed Church Wimbledon



Sunday 3 May 2020

Order of Service for Worship At Home

Gathering in God's presence *(If you have one, light a candle.)*

Call to Worship (adapted from Ezekiel chapter 34)

As sheep before the shepherd, let us gather in trust:
for God seeks the lost, and brings back those who have strayed;
God tends the injured, and strengthens the weak.
We are God's flock, and the Lord God is our shepherd. Thanks be to God.

Hymn

Jesus, our mighty Lord,
our strength in sadness,
the Father's conquering Word,
true source of gladness;
your Name we glorify,
O Jesus, throned on high;
you gave yourself to die
for our salvation.

Good Shepherd of your sheep,
your own defending,
in love your children keep
to life unending.
You are yourself the Way:
lead us then day by day
in your own steps, we pray,
O Lord most holy.

Glorious their life who sing,
with glad thanksgiving,
true hymns to Christ the King
in all their living:
all who confess his name,
come then with hearts aflame;
the God of peace acclaim
as Lord and Saviour.

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Praying our Praise & Thanksgiving

*Pause to make a note (mentally or on paper!) of three things for which to be thankful.
If you're sharing in this act of worship with others in your household, you might like
to talk about and identify these three things together. Then recite the following
prayer.*

Lord God, we are your people, the sheep of your pasture.
We thank you that you are not a distant God,
silently putting us to the test and judging us from afar,
but that in Jesus you have come to us and called to us;

And still you come to us, still you call to us.
In the pages of the Bible;
in the wise words of friends;
in the silence of our hearts.

You come to us, and you call us to follow you.

And as we seek to respond to this call, you yourself sustain us.
We thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit,
the promised Comforter and guide,
bringing life and truth to every believer.

Lord God, we are your people, the sheep of your pasture.

We praise you for the shepherd-care with which you watch over us -
as today we bring our thanks
for the blessings which we each now name before you.... (*offer your 3 thanksgivings*)

But Holy Lord, we bring to you not only our praise and thanksgiving;
we bring also our confession.
Only you know the depth of our shortcomings.
Only you know how far we have wandered from your way.

Come, Lord,
Renew us, forgive us, and strengthen us to walk in your service.
Give to us now the assurance
that the words of Jesus, spoken long ago, are for us also:
"Your sins are forgiven... your faith has made it well for you... now come, follow me."

Lord God, we are your people, the sheep of your pasture. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Use either of these forms, or a different version/language if you prefer:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive
those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

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.

Listening for God's Word

Bible Reading: Psalm 23

- 1** The 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.
- 4** 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.
- 5** You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6** Surely 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.

Theme Introduction

Imagine that you're with a group of colleagues or friends, just chatting informally, and you find yourself talking about someone who isn't there... and you're complaining about that person, you're criticising them. Then gradually you notice a slightly awkward expression on the faces of the people you're with, and the penny drops: "he's standing right behind me, isn't he?" - that person you were just slagging off, has heard every word you've said about them.

A pretty embarrassing scenario, and it's not just hypothetical – I can think of at least a couple of times that it's happened to me; maybe it's happened to you too.

Fortunately there's none of that embarrassment in the reading we've heard just now from the Bible – the 23rd Psalm, one of the most well-known and beloved passages in the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, it's almost the reverse: instead of griping, there's gratitude; instead of awkwardness, there's assurance.

Perhaps the only thing it has in common is that sense of starting out by talking ABOUT someone, and then realising that this someone is actually present. And it's a beautiful moment. The Psalmist begins with testimony, telling us all about the shepherd-care of the LORD... but pretty soon, the 'he' has become a 'you'. I fear no evil, for YOU are with me... YOU comfort me, protect me, provide for me...

And the best thing about this description, is that it's not just presented to us for

someone else's sake. It's as if the writer is inviting us in – telling us about their own experience of God's shepherd-care, then speaking to God in our presence, so that we in turn may come to know God's love, and enter in to that same relationship of peaceful trust.

So even if, right now, it feels like we're in a bit of a valley of shadows – God's invitation to us, is that we need not fear. Because the goodness of our Good Shepherd is hot on our heels; and soon enough God's mercy will overtake us in blessing.

[In the video of the service, Junior Church activities will be introduced here]

Hymn

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 I will trust...

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.

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Bible Reading: John 10.1-10, 14-16

10 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. **2** The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. **3** The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4** When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. **5** They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' **6** Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. **8** All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. **9** I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

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.'

Reflection

The shepherd and the sheep – you don't have to be living in a remote rural village for this to be a powerful metaphor, with overtones of skill and care and dedication on the part of the shepherd, and peaceful trust on the part of the sheep.

And yet for all our familiarity with the Biblical imagery, there's something about describing the people of God in terms of a flock of sheep that perhaps isn't altogether flattering for us. After all, we say that someone is sheepish if they're too shy or embarrassed to assert themselves. If we've been overcharged for something, we call it being fleeced. We even describe ideas or policies that we don't like as woolly.

And I'm conscious that the analogy also goes against the grain of much that's said in churches about 'putting faith into action'. Isn't discipleship meant to be about living positively for God? Aren't we called to be, as it were, the hands and feet of Christ – empowered by the Holy Spirit for service in the world?

The whole 'sheep' comparison seems rather passive, rather dismissive. So what are we to make of this image in John's Gospel?

Well, as always, it's helpful to consider the context of the passage. It comes in a section of the Gospel narrative that's full of disputes over the identity and authority of Jesus. At the time, different sects and groupings in the region were vying for the hearts and minds of the people – so it's not too surprising after all, to encounter here the language of sheep and shepherd. Jesus speaks of himself as the one who exercises rightful control of the flock – as opposed to the 'thieves and bandits' who by implication are those who are opposing him, seeking to tear people away from him.

(Incidentally in our passage this morning Jesus seems to describe himself as 'the gate' as well as the shepherd. It can be quite hard to pin down exactly what he means. But it's been suggested that sheep enclosures in those days would have been horseshoe shaped and made of stone; and that the shepherd himself would lie across the open entrance to form a sentry or fence. So the shepherd and the gate are one.)

And there's another aspect of the context that's helpful to us. Deep in the first-century Judean psyche, was the conviction that the role of the King was to be a 'shepherd' for the people.

It's an association that stems from the Hebrew Scriptures, from what we know as the Old Testament. It's hinted at in Psalm 23, our first Bible reading today – that psalm in which, according to longstanding tradition, we see David the shepherd-boy-turned-king reflecting upon and learning from the shepherd-care of God. For just as a shepherd both leads and protects the flock, it was understood that the King was mandated by God both to rule and to save.

So when Jesus speaks of himself as a Shepherd, he's emphasising the AUTHORITY which God has given him over the people – but also the TASK which God has given him, to care for and protect the people, to set people free from fear or danger.

And as for the sheep... well, I think the key message here is: if we, for all our faults and limitations, matter so much to God that God's own Son is given for our salvation – then maybe in being called sheep we're not being looked down upon after all.

But beyond that, perhaps there are three questions for us to ponder in the days ahead:

- 1. Jesus said "the sheep know the shepherd's voice". How do we hear and discern the voice of Jesus in our lives – in the dilemmas we face, and in the joys too – so that we can follow where Jesus is calling us?*
- 2. Jesus said "whoever enters by me will be saved". How do we witness to the gift of life that Jesus has made possible for us, and emulate his self-emptying love?*
- 3. And Jesus said "I am the gate for the sheep". In a world where subjective opinion is supreme and people are skeptical of anyone's claim to possess the truth, how are we to proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord and King?*

Whether in the smallness of our enclosures now, or in the months ahead when gates and doors are opened again, perhaps these three questions lie at the heart of what it is to be God's people, to be within the one flock, under one shepherd.

Responding to God's grace

Praying for Needs & Concerns (written by Sam Elliot)

Lord, from behind our closed doors, we pray.

For a world in danger, bring hope.
For those who are ill, bring healing and comfort.
For those who are anxious, bring reassurance.
For those who are afraid, bring strength.
For those who are grieving, bring consolation.

For children and young people, out of school, missing exams and missing friends,
bring new promise and new adventures together soon.

For a church scattered,
bring us bonds of fellowship that persist in these disconnected times.

For leaders and public authorities,
bring wisdom, judgement and compassion.
For all those volunteering to help others,
bring resilience, and the knowledge of your eternal support.
For all local mutual aid groups, food banks and other support networks,
bring the resources they need.
For all in the NHS and social care sector,
and those dealing with the impact on our lives and livelihoods in essential jobs,
bring your grace and love.

For those for whom staying at home means further insecurity,
those suffering from domestic violence,
those in poverty,

those facing mental ill-health,
those who are displaced or refugees,
those who are in prison,
bring safety and calm.

May you guide us through this wilderness,
protect us through this storm.
May you bring us home rejoicing
once again through our doors.
Be with us in the days ahead, for as long as it takes.
In Jesus's name,
Amen.

Offertory

This is an opportunity to set aside your regular financial contribution to Trinity's ongoing work and witness. You might like to put it in a jar for now, ready to be brought in person when circumstances allow. Then say the prayer below (if you already participate in Trinity's Planned Giving scheme via direct bank transfer, then simply recite the prayer – no need for a jar!).

Generous God, your gift to me
is life, and sustenance, and hope.
I bring to you my gift, and myself.
Receive, Lord, and bless:
so that both gift and giver
may bring blessing to others,
and glory to your name. Amen.

Hymn

O God of mercy, God of might,
in love and pity infinite,
teach us, as ever in your sight
to live our life for you.

For all are kindred, far and wide,
since you, O Lord, for all have died;
so may our love be magnified
by love that's found in you.

All sickness, sorrow, want, despair;
each circumstance calls us to care;
may we, when help is needed, share
ourselves, and thus serve you.

And may your Holy Spirit move
all those who live, to live in love,
until you greet in heaven above
all who belong to you.

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Blessing

May God make us attentive and responsive
to the voice of the Shepherd, in whom we may trust.
So may we rest in green pastures
and come to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be upon us, and among all who are dear to us,
whether near or far,
today and always.
Amen.